

# **Is God Leading Your Congregation To Become a House Church or a Fellowship?**

## **A Guideline for the Discernment Process**

The Committee on Ministry and the Board of Trustees of Albany Presbytery  
provide this guideline for information  
at the stated meeting of Albany Presbytery on June 9, 2009



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<b>Shared Staff Cluster</b>	Two or more congregations cooperate to employ and utilize the same pastor(s) and other staff	+ Congregations enjoy the services of pastors and other staff with different skills; pastors spend more time using their best skills; staff and church boards can plan parish-wide ministry jointly; rotating “on call” system can ensure that a pastor is always available. - Pastor-congregation relationship can be less personal; congregations may not have a pastor who is exclusively theirs.
<b>Larger Cooperative or Collegiate Parish</b>	Two or more congregations employ pastors and any other staff jointly, and function together administratively and programmatically within a parish-wide organization.	+ All pastors, other staff and programs are available to all the congregations; program planning and implementation engages the entire parish; may lead to greater efficiency and effectiveness. - Congregations are part of a large organization which may become cumbersome and challenge local identity.
<b>Transformation Strategies</b>	The congregation employs one or more strategies to transform and revitalize its current ministry and mission	+ The church re-invents itself for a new day, and discovers new, effective outreach and ministry for 21 <sup>st</sup> century - Change takes a lot of time, energy, and perseverance, and is never “done.” It is not for the fainthearted!
<b>Merger with PCUSA Church(es)</b>	Two or more PCUSA congregations merge to form one congregation	+ Combining assets creates new energy and increases the # of leaders and people to do ministry together - Combining two cultures can create conflict and jealousies as some must give up their building, tradition, or power.
<b>Merger with Church(es) of Other Denomination(s)</b>	Two or more congregations, PCUSA and other denominations, merge to form one congregation	+ Combining assets creates new energy and increases the # of leaders and people to do ministry together - More than just combining two or more congregational cultures, combining two or more denominational traditions can be difficult and confusing.

## I Introduction

What alternatives do congregations have when they find their building maintenance outstrips congregational finances and creates paralysis within the congregation? What alternatives do congregations have when they have little or no energy to do anything beyond the minimal effort to attend worship? What alternatives do congregations have when their leadership team is failing to work together in healthy ways due to burnout among the leaders?

These are among the issues many congregations are facing in Albany Presbytery and the paths for addressing these issues have been limited. The options have been to attempt to engage in a transformation of the congregation, continue as they had been doing, or close and disband the congregation. Often, for many congregations these choices have been undesirable or impractical.

Sensing something different was needed a Fellowship Task Force was created to create a new path, which might prove to lead to a healthier and more vital ministry. The Fellowship Task Force has created a discernment process for congregations to use in deciding whether or not to become a house church or a fellowship.

**Before outlining the discernment process, it will be helpful to offer the following definitions of a fellowship and a congregation:**

*A congregation is a group of people gathered together by God, who voluntarily request to be formally accepted as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) according to Chapter 7 of the Book of Order and who meet all the criteria set forth in the Book of Order for being a congregation. “The particular church carries a vital responsibility in the mission of the church. There God’s people perform especially the ministries of worship, proclamation, sharing the Sacraments, evangelism, nurture, counseling, personal and social healing, and service. Congregations serve as essential mission arms of the presbytery and of the larger church.”<sup>1</sup>*

*A congregation may or may not have a traditional church building. For a congregation to become a house church the members must be willing to give up their building, which they may rent, sell, or give back to the presbytery. They then meet in a home or rented space which meets their needs. What are important are the vitality, ministries, and witness of the congregation, as well as its connection to the other congregations which make up the PCUSA.*

*A fellowship is a group of people gathered together by God, who wish to meet for worship, mission, education and fellowship without the structure and requirements of being a formal congregation.*

<sup>1</sup> from G-7.0102

*For a congregation to become a fellowship the members must be willing to unincorporate and decommission the church. Their membership is then transferred to the rolls of the presbytery. The buildings and assets revert to the presbytery. The church is closed, but the members continue to worship together and enjoy one another's fellowship.*

Keeping in mind the above definitions, it is important to note that the discernment process developed by the Fellowship Task Force is not quick or easy. Rather, it is a process designed to allow a congregation to come to terms with its present life together, listen for God calling them to embark upon a new future as a new community of faith, answer deep questions about disposition of property and endowments, and to be both intentional about the path they will take and mindful of the outcomes flowing from the choices they will make.

While this discernment process is a journey though uncharted territory for Albany Presbytery and the congregations within the presbytery, it is an exciting journey, which may empower a congregation to take the first step toward a re-orientation of their community life that leads them into a new beginning of vitality and health.

## II Conditions for Moving a Congregation to A House Church or Fellowship

1. When building maintenance outstrips congregational finances and creates paralysis within the congregation.
2. When the congregation has little or no energy to do anything beyond the minimal effort to attend worship.
3. When a congregation feels overwhelmed by obligations to Presbytery that seem based upon unrealistic or arbitrary expectations, such as per capita or participation in Presbytery meetings, committees, and events.
4. When the congregation no longer understands its identity and/or no longer discerns a purpose or meaning for its life.
5. When Sessions and Deacons are failing to function in healthy ways due to burnout of the small cadre of leaders who are continually putting forth energy to keep the structure of the institution together
6. When congregational health as a whole is deteriorating.
7. When the congregation is not ready to close, but rather to seek a reorientation of their community life that can lead them to a new beginning of vitality and health

## VIII The Larger Context – Other Options for Churches Seeking a New Way Forward

This Manual provides a process for discernment for congregations who have become so small or so financially challenged that they can no longer fully function as a traditional church. It offers two options which will allow a congregation to continue to meet together:

- a) becoming a House Church, thus giving up their church building and either meeting in members' homes or renting appropriate sized/equipped rooms
- b) becoming a Fellowship, and thus dissolving the corporation, but continuing to meet together for worship and fellowship, either in members' homes or renting appropriate sized/equipped rooms

**There are a variety of other options, not fully developed here, which are available to congregations who seek new ways to live and work together.** The following chart shows some of these options, which the Committee on Ministry is ready to help any congregation explore more fully if they so desire.

Ways Congregations Can Work Together in Ministry

Name	Description	Some +'s and -'s
<b>Yoke</b>	One pastor serves two or more congregations.* * Pastors in this description and the others listed below may serve full or part time; congregations can be of various sizes – large and/or small.	+ Congregations have a quality pastor at less cost, more \$ is available for other program. - Pastor is the only connection between congregations, has to negotiate any tensions, disagreements
<b>Team Ministry</b>	Two or more pastors are employed by their own congregation (s) but also agree to provide some services to other congregations.	+ Congregations retain their own pastor and also enjoy the services of pastors with different skills; pastors spend more time using their best skills. - Pastors' time and attention are spread across several congregations.
<b>Shared Program Cluster</b>	Two or more congregations support programs and any staff that implement these programs, e.g. food pantry, youth ministry, housing ministry, shared church office and/or administrator	+ Congregations can offer programs jointly that none of them could provide alone. - The program ministries can lose their roots in the congregations and take on a life of their own; those who execute and/or benefit from a program may have no connection with the supporting congregations.

*(The following is addressed to the representatives of Albany Presbytery)*

Do you members of Albany Presbytery confirm the call of God to our brothers and sisters as a fellowship in the service of Jesus Christ?

**We do.**

Will you support and encourage them in this ministry?

**We will.**

Prayer of Commissioning

Closing Response

***WE BEAR GOD’S WORD INTO THE WORLD***

\*Hymn 430           “Come Sing, O Church, in Joy!”

\*Benediction

\*Organ Voluntary

\*For those who are able, please stand.

**VIII Order of Worship**  
**When a Congregation Vacates a Building, Becoming a House Church**

Congregations are encouraged to use the service outlined in the Book of Occasional Services, pg. 257, Vacating of a Church Building, amending it and shaping it according to their circumstance.

**III A Discernment Process**

**1. Beginning**

A session or congregation decides to explore the option of becoming a Fellowship or House Church, or a particular congregation is invited by the Committee on Ministry to consider becoming a Fellowship or House Church.

This informational booklet is sent to provide information about the process. This booklet contains an outline of the process, steps to follow, guidelines, and contact information. It also has the six conditions for assessing congregational life in considering such a move.

An informational meeting is held for the congregation with representatives from the Committee on Ministry, Trustees, and the General Presbyter. The process is reviewed with church members being encouraged to ask questions about the process and the consequences of becoming a Fellowship or House Church.

**2. Discerning**

If there is a consensus to continue the process, a two month (minimum) period of discernment follows.

At least two congregational gatherings will be held to help consider the decision. These meetings will begin with Bible study and are to help congregations address what might be different, what might be better or worse, the advantages and disadvantages, and how each member feels about becoming a Fellowship or House Church.

A third meeting is held with the Presbytery representatives to begin to assess the next steps needed including issues about the building, pastoral coverage, relationships with other congregations and the presbytery itself.

**3. Planning to Become a House Church**

A plan is developed to assess the options for divesting the congregation of its building(s). Is it unencumbered if it is to be sold? How will it be maintained if it is not sold?

**4. Planning to Become a Fellowship**

A plan is developed on how the congregation will move toward becoming a Fellowship. All issues should be addressed and all contingencies answered regarding:

Membership: Do members transfer to the rolls of the Presbytery, a near by church? How do we ensure that all members are cared for and continue as active Presbyterians? (there are a number of good options)

Building(s): Is it unencumbered if it is to be sold? How will it be maintained if it is not sold?

Finances: How monies will be handled in the Fellowship.

Pastoral coverage: Frequency, duties, obligations, payment.

Connections: To Presbytery and other congregations

Leadership: The Fellowship will elect a leadership team of at least three people per the description of a task force in the Presbytery's Standing Rules.

## 5. Seeking Approval from Presbytery

**House Churches:** The plan is reviewed on the Presbytery level by COM and Trustees. If approved, a congregational meeting is held to vote on how to dispose of the property. If the congregation decides to sell, mortgage, or otherwise encumber any of its real property it must have the permission of the Presbytery (see G-8.0500).

**Fellowships:** The plan is reviewed on the Presbytery level by COM and Trustees. If approved, a congregational meeting is held to vote on becoming a Fellowship. Consensus is preferred, but at least 90% must vote in favor in order for the process to continue. If approved by the congregation, Presbytery discusses and votes on the proposal; if Presbytery approves, a one year covenant is established and a date is set at least two months into the future for the official change.

## 6. Implementing

The plan is implemented.

A service of "commissioning into a new call" and new beginnings is held with members of presbytery participating.

**House Churches:** Since the House Church continues to be an active congregation and member of Albany Presbytery, all the rights and responsibilities of active membership are maintained.

**Fellowships:** the covenant is reviewed annually by Committee on Ministry and the Presbytery, using criteria to measure the life and functioning of the Fellowship. The covenant may be renewed or terminated based on the review.

## ***WE RESPOND TO GOD'S WORD***

Celebration of Eucharist

Commissioning of Fellowship

Sentences of Scripture

Call to Discipleship

We are called by God to be the church of Jesus Christ, a sign in the world today of what God intends for all humankind.

**The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of heaven to the world.**

The call of Christ is to a willing, dedicated discipleship. Our discipleship is a manifestation of the new life we enter through baptism. Discipleship is a gift and a commitment, an offering and a responsibility.

*(The fellowship being commissioned stands)*

Brothers and sisters of [name of the church] the grace bestowed upon you in baptism empower you for this calling because it is God's grace. By God's grace alone we are saved, and mentored to grow in faith while committing our lives to serving Christ. Show your affirmation of this call by answering these questions:

Who is your Lord and Savior?

**Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.**

Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?

**I will, with God's help.**

Do you welcome the responsibility of this service because you are determined to follow Jesus, to love neighbors, and to work for the reconciliation of the world?

**I do.**

### Prayer for Leaving

O Lord, we stand on the shore peering at the ocean of the world and know that it is so large and we pray that you, O Lord, keep these brothers and sisters in Christ for they are your people. On this day, O Lord, we ask that you be with them as they go from this place to be the body of Christ in the new and vibrantly different way of fellowship. Leaving this place with their memories and the joyful hope for tomorrow they go.

**God of green life and good news, we go from this place to begin a journey as pilgrims seeking your way for life. As we prepare to leave, we give away the symbol of being settled in one place, the keys to this building to the care of Albany Presbytery and receive from them the walking stick of the pilgrim and sojourner.**

O God be ahead, God be behind, God be on your path that winds. Christ be above, Christ be below, Christ be everywhere you go. Holy Spirit be in warm breeze, Holy Spirit be in the shade trees. Holy Trinity be with you to keep you safe and to bring you joy and peace. Amen.

\*Hymn (Iona) “Christ Be Beside Me”

### ***WE LISTEN TO GOD’S WORD***

### Prayer for Illumination

### Old Testament Lesson

Hymn (Iona) “The Summons”

### Gospel Lesson

### Sermon

*(The focus of the sermon will be on God’s call and how the commissioning of the congregation now becoming a fellowship is a call to a new ministry)*

Hymn 377 “Lord, You Have Come to the Lakeshore”

### **7. Reversing**

If the Fellowship wishes to “re-commission,” the members must address the six conditions and how they have changed. If there is agreement between the fellowship and the presbytery, the Fellowship will be treated as a new church development as it seeks to return to being a congregation.

## IV Bible Studies For Discernment

### The Call of Abraham and Sarah

*Genesis 12:1-9*

Abraham and Sarah are called to leave their home and to travel to a new land. Leaving the familiar and going into the unknown, they are promised great things if they will obey God and move into this new future.

- What do you imagine Abraham and Sarah felt as they thought about this change in their lives?
- What would be frightening about such a change? What would be exciting?
- Do you see any parallels in their story and the decisions you are now facing?
- What is scary for you right now? What is exciting?
- What does this “new land” look like to you?
- What blessings might happen in this change?
- What does it mean to answer God’s call?

### The Exodus

*Exodus 16 and 17*

The people of Israel are in bondage in Egypt. Freed from slavery, they escape into the wilderness where they wander for forty years, following Moses as he seeks to form them into a new nation. At long last, they reach the promised land, where the transformation from slaves to nation is complete.

- What difficulties did the people of Israel face on their journey?
- Answering God’s call was difficult—how did they respond?
- How is your present situation similar to that of Israel?
  - Are you facing the wilderness?
  - Have you been “in bondage” to circumstances beyond your control?
  - What does freedom from those circumstances mean for your fellowship?
  - What will the promised land look like for you?
- What does it mean to trust God on the journey?

## VII Outline Order of Worship For Commissioning a Congregation to Become a Fellowship

*WE GATHER IN GOD’S NAME*

Instrumental Voluntary

Silent Centering Prayer

God of Green Life, whom we glorify and celebrate, we praise you for the many blessings you have showered upon those who worship you and we pray that all who seek you may find you in this place and all the places of our lives and being filled with the Holy Spirit we may become a living sanctuary for you.

Call To Worship

Anthem

Prayer of Intention

Procession and Hymn 276 “Great is Thy Faithfulness”

*(People from the congregation bring forward Bibles, Communion Ware, cross, candles, and hymnals; placing them on the communion table. This will be the preparation for beginning to tell the congregation’s story.)*

Telling the Congregation’s Story

*(This is a time to remember how the congregation was called into being by God in this place and what important missions and ministries God called this congregation to do throughout their life. By focusing upon the congregation’s call up to this moment, opportunity exists for congregation to hearing Abraham and Sarah’s call, the disciple’s call, and the apostle’s call as their story. This weaves the congregational story into the larger story of God’s people that is positive and affirms their new call to being a fellowship).*

## VI Annual Review of Fellowships

The leadership of each Fellowship will meet with the Committee on Ministry each year to:

- Assess previous year in the life of the Fellowship.
- Ascertain whether or not the Fellowship wishes to covenant for another year.
- Envision where the next year may lead the fellowship.

The review process should center on the following areas of the Fellowship's life together:

- Is worship being maintained on a regular basis for the members of the Fellowship?
- Do the members of the Fellowship have a sense of connectedness with the Fellowship and the presbytery?
- Do the members of the Fellowship find their spiritual needs are being met?
- Is there sufficient leadership for the Fellowship to continue?
- Is the Fellowship meeting whatever financial obligations it has?
- Does the Fellowship have a focus beyond worship (service, mission, e.g.)?
- Are there any issues facing the Fellowship that will make it difficult to continue for another year (loss of members, lack of meeting space, lack of financial commitment, etc.)?
- Is there a desire on the part of the members to covenant for another year?
- What plans are in place for the coming year in the life of the Fellowship?

In order to covenant for another year, the Fellowship should:

- Have a regular schedule for worship
- Have sufficient leadership to fill out the leadership team
- Be able to meet its financial obligations and needs
- Be connected in some way with another congregation or the presbytery

The Committee on Ministry makes a recommendation to the presbytery as to whether or not the covenant should be renewed for another year.

## The Annunciation

*Luke 1:26-38*

The angel Gabriel extends an invitation from God to Mary to be a part of something new and wonderful. Mary accepts this call, and her life is never again the same.

- What does it mean to accept God's call?
- How do we decide if it is God calling us—or just wishful thinking?
- Mary's call involved both joy and pain—are we ready to face them on our new journey?

## The Call of the Disciples

*Matthew 4:18-22*

Jesus calls his disciples from their everyday lives, inviting them to come and be his disciples. It is a call to leave behind the familiar and enter into a new relationship.

- What do you think the disciples were feeling when Jesus invites them to follow?
- How did they decide to follow Jesus?
- Do you have a sense of God calling you to something new?
  - What is frightening about that call? What is energizing?
  - What will you miss about the familiar? What will you not miss?
  - What new relationships or ways of being are you hoping for?

Note: Additional Bible Studies might include Acts 9: 1-20, Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17

## V Legal and Property Issues

Congregations who choose to become House Churches must have the permission of the Presbytery to sell, mortgage, or otherwise encumber any of their real property (see G-8.0500). But in all other respects the decisions that are made as congregations move from meeting in a traditional church building to meeting in a home or rented space are the responsibility of the Session and do not require Presbytery approval.

Congregations who choose to become Fellowships must take the necessary step of formal dissolution of the congregation's corporate existence<sup>2</sup>. Corporate dissolution is a final, irreversible legal step that should only be undertaken after extensive exploration of all other possibilities, including possible merger with another congregation.

Under both ecclesiastical and state law, upon dissolution of a church's corporate existence, the assets of the religious corporation become the property of Presbytery. This is subject, however, to possible legal restrictions on church property, which should be carefully researched prior to commencing the dissolution process. For example, deeds to church real property should be carefully examined. Some church properties have been donated with a reversionary clause which provides that upon the cessation of the church's existence the church property reverts to the heirs of the donor. A deed might also contain a "gift over," which provides that if a church ceases to exist, the property must be transferred to another organization named in the conveyance. Accordingly, a church contemplating dissolution should obtain and review copies of all pertinent deeds or bequests.

Similarly, many congregations hold endowment funds which are restricted as to their use. The original wills or instruments should be carefully reviewed by legal counsel, to determine if they can properly be conveyed to Presbytery. **Any ambiguity or situation requiring interpretation must be submitted to a court of appropriate jurisdiction for interpretation and instruction, which usually will require an attorney and the involvement of the Attorney General's office.**

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<sup>2</sup> It is possible to avoid dissolution by appealing to the Presbytery to appoint an Administrative Commission, as per G-9.0503 of the Book of Order. The AC would then assume the fiduciary responsibilities of the corporation. However the Fellowship Task Force believes it is impractical, given the amount of time and effort that would be required of those serving on the AC, the concern about how long an AC might have to be commissioned, and the shrinking pool of volunteers in the Presbytery.

Once a determination has been made to dissolve, the procedures to be followed are governed by the New York Religious Corporations Law (RCL). Section 18 of the RCL provides that dissolution shall require a petition to the state Supreme Court setting forth the reasons for the action and the value of the church's assets. The petition must be made by a majority of the trustees of the church, or if there are no trustees, must be authorized by a vote of the majority of the members of the church residing in the county in which the church is located. The statute also provides that notice of the application must be published in a newspaper published in the county. The court will want to be satisfied that provisions are made for the payment of the church's debts and the necessary costs of dissolution.

The manner in which corporate meetings are called, conducted, and who may vote in the Presbyterian denomination are set forth in sections 65 and 66 of the RCL, which essentially incorporate by reference the provisions of the Book of Order.

Upon the filing of a decree by a Supreme Court justice, the corporation's existence is dissolved. The process cannot be reversed at that point and if there is a change of heart, an entirely new corporation must be formed under section 63 of the RCL.

An alternative process for dissolving a Religious Corporation is set forth in Section 17-b of the Religious Corporations Law. This Section permits a Presbytery to dissolve a corporation upon its own petition to the Supreme or County Court, as opposed to a petition by the corporation itself. In this case, the court has the authority to vest title to church property in the Presbytery, and Presbytery can file a copy of the resolution and order in the office of the County Clerk in which the church is located, thereby vesting title to property in Presbytery.

Obviously, an effective dialogue with Presbytery as to the future use of church assets after dissolution, including such matters as who might occupy church buildings and upon what terms, is most desirable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Other concerns that should be addressed include the preservation or distribution of "sacred" items like pulpit, font, communion table, dedicated stained glass windows, plaques, etc.