

# CHPC/PCUSA/ECO

## Frequently Asked Questions

### A. College Hill Presbyterian Church (CHPC) and the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA)

#### 1. Why are we changing denominations?

The congregation voted to enter into a discernment process with the Presbytery of Cincinnati to seek God's guidance on if it would be best for CHPC to leave the PCUSA. After much prayer, work and conversation with the members at CHPC, the Presbytery Discernment Team concluded that the identity of CHPC does not engage at a significant level with the PCUSA. Where there should be high alignment and interconnections there actually exists a malaise and some levels of distrust. This does not describe a healthy, supportive relationship. The Discernment Team surmised that the energy it takes to keep CHPC and PCUSA together takes away from the mission of CHPC and the Presbytery. The effort necessary to bring the two institutions into a healthy, vibrant relationship would be greater than the effort to dismiss CHPC to another Reformed Body.

#### 2. What are the differences between CHPC and the PCUSA?

The Discernment team did a great job of identifying and explaining these differences. Their full report can be found at [chpc.org](http://chpc.org) under denomination resources dated 1/16/2013 Listed below are the main differences:

**Authority** of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, the PCUSA Book of Confessions, and the PCUSA Book of Order – How do we recognize and obey these authorities?

**Interpretation** – How do we interpret the written documents?

**Divinity of Christ** - Is Jesus the only way to salvation?

**Lordship of Christ** – What do we believe about Christ's exclusive claims on our lives and on the Church?

**Accountability & Discipline** – Does the current model of community develop accountability toward discipleship of Christ?

**Ordination Standards** - How do we join together with different ordination standards?

**The Doctrine of Sin** - What is God's design for human sexuality? How do we know this design?

#### 3. If we are free to exercise our faith and shape our church as we desire, why should we seek dismissal?

As the Discernment Team recognized, our current relationship between CHPC and the PCUSA is not characterized by excitement, encouragement, and collaboration for evangelism, ministry, and worship. The session does not desire a place to be free but a place to sharpen, challenge, and catalyze one another in sharing the good news of God's love with the world. Just getting along is not good enough anymore – the mission is too important.

## **B. COVENANT ORDER OF EVANGELICAL PRESBYTERIANS (ECO)**

### **4. What is the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO)?**

ECO is a new Presbyterian denominational entity that formed in January 2012. It presents a viable, evangelical option for churches that wish to leave the PCUSA. It seeks to be less driven by form, structure, and institutions, and more missional, creative, and united.

### **5. How many churches are in ECO?**

As of April 2013 there are 49 churches in ECO. Based on inquiries and other communications, ECO predicts its membership to be 200 churches in 2014, and possibly 500 churches in 2015. Most churches in the process of leaving PCUSA will undergo a one to three year process with their presbyteries so it may take time for other churches to move into ECO. We can be grateful that we are in a more understanding presbytery.

### **6. Are there any local churches in ECO?**

Currently one other ECO church is in Ohio and nine are in Pennsylvania with most in the western part of the state. We do not know about other churches that are in the discernment process. As members of ECO, we will also be part of the Fellowship of Presbyterians, keeping active connections and mission partnerships with local Fellowship churches in PCUSA, ECO, and EPC.

### **7. Is there concern over the “newness” of ECO?**

There are always questions about organizations that are considered new or untested. However, ECO is already comprised of very strong Christian leaders who are deeply rooted in Presbyterian heritage and committed to engaging their communities and the world at large through Scripturally-driven mission and outreach. ECO has developed tremendous momentum in a short time and will undoubtedly gain significant membership in the coming months. The essential tenets to which ECO leaders must subscribe are directly in line with CHPC's core values.

## **8. What are ECO's goals and mission?**

ECO's mission is "To build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ."

## **9. How is ECO similar to the PCUSA?**

ECO adopts the same Book of Confessions, a collection of nine creeds and confessions that have historically guided the church. ECO has a similar, though streamlined, polity. The local church is governed by a board of elders (the Session) and local churches unite for mission, encouragement, and accountability to form a Presbytery. ECO fully affirms the ordination of women. ECO is Presbyterian and Reformed. ECO has a health plan and a retirement plan for Pastors and staff.

## **10. How is ECO different from the PCUSA?**

ECO is evangelical in its theology, affirming the indisputable Lordship of Jesus, naming that his atoning death on the cross is the only means of salvation for humanity. ECO clearly expresses the essential tenets of our faith. By contrast, the PCUSA does not list essential tenets and a majority of leaders believe that theological essentials cannot be named with any certainty or agreement. ECO is built around the idea of covenant and requires supporting relationships between pastors and sessions that build one another in faith, mission, and integrity. ECO is less institutional, less bureaucratic, and is gathered around a shared mission and relationships rather than rules and regulations. As ECO develops, presbyteries are expected to be no larger than 10 churches. In the PCUSA, presbyteries often cover 50-80 churches or more. ECO is not mired in years of conflict and is not characterized by division, distrust, and discord. ECO affirms property is owned and controlled by the local church.

### **11. What does evangelical mean?**

In this context, it means making disciples of Jesus Christ, renewing of faith and returning to Scripture. It is not the media definition of narrow-minded fundamentalism. CHPC is and has been an evangelical congregation. The ECO website states the following items related to why “evangelical” is in their name:

- Plant new missional communities
- Advance the gospel of Jesus Christ
- Develop gospel-centered leaders

### **12. Has Session looked at other denominational options?**

Yes. As we moved through this discernment period it became clear that either the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) or the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) would be a good choice for CHPC. Both denominations are Reformed, Christ-centered and Scripturally-based. In the end, we feel that ECO is the better choice.

### **13. Why did Session choose ECO?**

We believe ECO best fits the flavor and spirit of our congregation. There is an energy and passion for spreading the gospel at all levels of their leadership that has excited all the leaders of CHPC. The core values of ECO reflect values that have been important for decades here at CHPC. ECO is designed to express our Reformed faith heritage while at the same time taking a fresh look at the realities of today and the needs of the future. ECO is based on the understanding that the local church is the central and most important expression of Christ’s mission and Kingdom community.

Some of the attributes of ECO are listed below.

- a commitment to biblical fidelity reflected in their theological essentials
- a stated aim of intentionally making disciples of Jesus Christ
- the same confessional standards as we currently have
- a missional mindset at the congregational and presbytery level
- a proactive approach to the mentoring of newer and younger leaders
- their emphasis on smaller, less bureaucratic presbyteries
- their celebration of both men and women being called to serve as ministers and elders
- the right of a congregation to own its property

#### **14. How has the Holy Spirit led the Session through this process?**

Your Session is constantly challenged to test its positions and decisions against Scripture, and this process has been no different. For nearly two years, denominational issues have been at the forefront of countless Session meetings, with open discussion among all elders. We have prayed, studied, and pored over letters and position statements that reflect our collective concern about the direction of PCUSA along with our unified commitment to a new direction with ECO. We have listened to CHPC members in both personal and group settings. We have sought advice from leaders in other Christ-centered churches. We have adopted a deliberate course even in the face of rapid change within PCUSA. In the end, we reached a point of agreement that can only be described as Spirit-driven.

#### **15. ECO has been described as entrepreneurial; what does this mean?**

This describes a character that defines the perspective and work of the church. In practice, it means ECO will endeavor to be more about relationships and less about rules, more about trust and respect than regulations and mandates. And it means the church wants to be creative and bold in how it reaches the lost and does ministry. Some denominations are like huge established corporations: there is a fixed and large corporate structure and huge infrastructure. ECO desires to be different. It has no desire or intention to create sizable denominational headquarters or function with a top-heavy structure. Instead it will work to encourage churches to creatively and boldly explore how they may be church and do the work of the church in the 21st century.

#### **16. What will keep ECO grounded in the core teachings of the Christian Church?**

ECO is firmly rooted in Scripture and has set up several mechanisms to prevent a drift from the core teachings of the church:

The constitution of ECO includes Essential Tenets to which all officers must adhere. This limits the spectrum of theological interpretations that are considered appropriate in the new denomination. The PCUSA does not have clarifying essential tenets of faith.

ECO's Form of Government and Rules of Discipline can be changed only by a two-thirds vote of presbyteries. This makes changes very difficult to achieve and ensures that the theology and polity that we see today in ECO will likely be in place for a long time to come.

Within each ECO presbytery there is a requirement for a 1-1 voting parity between elders and pastors. Pastors are only eligible to vote if they are connected to a local congregation holding them accountable to their congregation and the denomination's Essential Tenets. In the PCUSA, many votes are cast by ministers not serving local congregations (academics, staff, etc.) and therefore not held directly accountable in any tangible way.

**17. Will there be any changes to our Sunday morning worship, Foundational Hour, mission partners or other programs by joining ECO?**

Not for those items mentioned but we hope there will be other changes. We hope that CHPC is excited about our denominational affiliation. We believe that ECO will provide a structure for more significant relationships with other churches, training opportunities for elders, and more creative challenges of evangelism and outreach. We hope we are better equipped to communicate the Good News of Jesus' love in an ever-changing world around us.

**18. Will our current pastors and staff move with us? Will they lose any pension or benefits?**

The current pastors and paid staff will continue with CHPC. Drew will not lose pension credits he has accrued but will move from the Presbyterian Board of Pensions into a new retirement & benefits plan. Chappie and Mary Belle will continue to receive their pension from the PCUSA. The intention of the session is to continue to compensate our pastors and staff with benefits equal to their current contracts, or "calls."

**19. Does everyone who is a member of CHPC automatically get transferred to ECO?**

Yes, current members would automatically become affiliated with the new denomination. Individuals are members of the local church, and the church is a member of a denomination.

**20. Can members opt out of joining ECO?**

Current members who do not wish to affiliate with ECO can ask Session to remove their names from CHPC's membership roll. These individuals could still attend CHPC if they like, just as many current attendees participate in our church without officially joining.

**21. What happens if I'm an ordained Elder or a Deacon in PCUSA? Will I be an Elder/Deacon in ECO?**

Yes, ECO "grandfathers in" any PCUSA ordained Elder/Deacon as an Elder/Deacon in ECO. Officers will not have to be re-examined or re-ordained into ECO. Current inactive Elders/Deacons will be contacted by the Clerk of Session at the appropriate time to verify if they do or do not want to become an Elder/Deacon in ECO.

**22. Where can I find out more about ECO?**

The ECO website is [www.fellowship-pres.org/eco](http://www.fellowship-pres.org/eco). We cannot overstate the importance of being fully informed about this process. We urge you take time during the coming weeks to study these resources and prayerfully consider how we might be most faithful to God's will and gospel.

### **C. DISMISSAL FROM THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)**

#### **23. What are my responsibilities in this dismissal process?**

As an active member, you need to understand the basics of ECO and the rationale of the session decision. Your responsibility is to attend the congregational meeting on Sunday, June 2, 2013 at 11:30am as an informed member of the congregation. If you are not an active member who has officially been received by the session then you cannot vote but you will have voice at the meeting.

#### **24. Can a church leave the PCUSA for ECO?**

Yes. The Book of Order gives the power to dismiss congregations to other reformed bodies exclusively to the presbyteries. Each presbytery must determine if the requested dismissal denomination is doctrinally consistent with the essentials of Reformed theology as understood by the presbytery, is governed by a polity that is consistent in form and structure with that of the PCUSA, and of sufficient permanence to offer reasonable assurance that the congregation is not being dismissed to de facto independence. We believe ECO meets these requirements. To date, 49 churches across the nation have been dismissed to ECO from more than eight different PCUSA presbyteries.

#### **25. What are the next steps in this process?**

A congregational meeting has been called for Sunday, June 2 at 11:30. The meeting will follow a 10am combined worship service. At the meeting the congregation will vote on the session recommendation to seek dismissal from the PCUSA and affiliate with ECO.

#### **26. What is required to be granted dismissal from the PCUSA?**

For the meeting to be official, 50% of the active members must attend the meeting. Please make every effort to attend the meeting. To satisfy the requirements of the Presbytery dismissal policy, the congregation must approve the session recommendation to join the ECO by a 66% vote.

#### **27. What if the congregation does not approve the session recommendation by a 66% vote?**

Then CHPC will remain a church in the PCUSA.

#### **28. What if some members want to stay in the PCUSA?**

They can either join another PCUSA church or form a new church.

#### **29. What does it take for a group from CHPC to form a new PCUSA church?**

If less than 90% of the vote is affirmative then the Presbytery will hold a separate meeting to gauge interest. If 25 active members of CHPC attend the meeting and agree to start a new church then CHPC and the Presbytery will work together to resource and support this new church. This new PCUSA church will have a different name and different building location than CHPC.

#### **30. Is there a financial cost to leaving?**

Yes, over the next five years we will pay the Presbytery approximately \$39, 800 in order to help gradually remove our financial resource from the Presbytery budget.

### **31. Is there risk?**

Yes, change always includes risk but the New Testament church was always moving into risky places because the church valued boldness in ministry over safety. We seek to make this change because we believe it will propel CHPC into new avenues of sharing God's love with the world and helping us all become followers of Jesus. We do not enter this stage of the process in blind faith. Our core values are so firmly in line with the essential tenets of ECO that our work and mission will surely benefit from the new affiliation. There is some risk that members of CHPC will be divided on the question of departure, but all discussions up to this point have pointed towards very strong church-wide support for this change.

### **32. Will some leave the church over this decision?**

Yes. The session wants all who are a part of CHPC to stay but realizes some will not. Of course, people would leave the church no matter what decision was made. Not all will agree. However, the leadership of the church works very hard to be sure all voices are heard and respected. The session has been reaching out to those who do not agree with this decision to affirm their value at CHPC.



## Introduction to ECO Polity

Here is a helpful guide to the major ecclesiastical, substantive, and philosophical characteristics of ECO polity:

- 1. Defined core theology and behavioral expectations** – One of the main concerns for many individuals and congregations considering ECO is that the PC(USA) has not defined essential theology and behavior requirements and will not allow congregations and presbyteries to define these requirements either. In the theology section of the ECO constitution the behavioral and theological core is established and all officers must “receive, adopt, and be bound by” these essentials.
- 2. ECO is concerned with ecclesiastical matters and therefore property is not held in trust** – There are a couple of reasons for this. First, as we have seen, when property is held in trust it can be used as leverage against congregations wishing to maintain theological integrity. Secondly, when presbyteries have interests in property an inordinate amount of time can be spent in property management.
- 3. Voting is done in parity at all levels and only when people are connected with a local congregation.** – ECO polity does not see mission and ministry happening primarily as a result of voting. When there is the need for voting at the presbytery and synod councils, within each council there is a requirement for a 1-1 parity between elders and pastors. Only pastors connected to a local congregation are eligible to vote. A pastor in validated service or honorably retired will only vote if they are an “assistant pastor” connected to an ECO congregation. In this instance the “assistant pastor” would be equivalent to what the PC(USA) calls a “parish associate”.
- 4. Church is redefined.** – ECO polity defines “church” wherever believers are gathered in the name of Jesus. Church can be lived out in small groups, accountability groups, ministry teams, house churches, and mission teams to name just a few.
- 5. Elders and deacons can be deployed for greater ministry** – Because “church” is considered to be the gathering of believers in the name of Jesus in a variety of contexts it is appropriate for the sacraments to be administered in these contexts. Elders and deacons who have been properly trained can be authorized to celebrate the sacraments in various settings. Therefore, not only can communion be celebrated in these various expressions of church but, if someone comes to faith through these expressions of church, they can be baptized by the officers who are charged with shepherding these groups. Elders and deacons can also be commissioned by the presbytery to serve as the pastors of congregations and new church developments for the mission and ministry of the presbytery.
- 6. Emphasis on the role of members as covenant partners** – ECO polity now names members as “covenant partners.” Congregations may choose to use different language if they wish, but this designation is designed to emphasize that individuals aren’t joining an organization. When they say yes to membership in ECO, individuals are covenanting with one another in God’s redemptive mission as expressed in, through, and beyond the congregation.

7. **Greater local flexibility** – There is much within the PC(USA) Book of Order that congregations may wish to continue to affirm, but there will be significant flexibility in these areas. Here are a few examples:

- **Deacons** – Deacons may serve as part of a board or be commissioned on an annual basis. Since deacons do not have oversight within a congregation, a congregation may choose to continue to elect deacons in congregational meetings or can choose to have the session appoint deacons.
- **Elders** – Elders in the PC(USA) serve three-year terms and can serve no more than two consecutive terms. Many ECO congregations may wish to continue this practice. But a congregation may choose to redesign their elder election and rotation. For example, they may wish to have elders serve only one 4 year term. In some cultures it is shameful for a person to be rotated off of the elders' board. Congregations may wish to allow elders to serve an unlimited number of terms. The local ECO congregation continues to be governed by elders and the congregation must elect them, but their terms of service can have flexibility.
- **Pastors** – A few different categories of pastors are defined. For example, ECO polity has reinstated the office of assistant pastor, hired by the session rather than called by the congregation. This again allows for greater flexibility in pastoral leadership.

8. **Presbyteries also have greater freedom** – In ECO polity, the role of the presbytery is to support, encourage, and resource local congregations. ECO presbyteries are required to have three committees; the Committee on Ministry which can include oversight of candidates, a Permanent Judicial Commission, and a governing council which has the same role and responsibilities of most PC(USA) presbytery councils. Other committees and task forces may be formed as they are necessary for the mission of the presbytery. Presbyteries also have flexibility as they guide congregations in the call process. A typical PNC may be established or a congregation may allow the session to serve this function. However they are called, the congregation must ultimately elect installed pastors.

9. **Missional Affinity Network** – Missional Affinity Networks are networks of congregations in similar ministry settings and facing similar challenges and opportunities. These networks are outside the presbyteries. They could be comprised of congregations near universities or colleges, congregations in urban settings, multiethnic congregations, those who are actively planting worshipping communities, congregations of various sizes, etc. These Missional Affinity Networks have no judicial authority but can be beneficial in a variety of important ways.

10. **Accountability, support, and encouragement** – ECO polity affirms that accountability between congregations is vitally important. Pastors should share with one another where they have seen God most visibly at work as well as what they are discerning as their part in God's future mission. ECO pastors are expected to covenant to be accountable to one another, ensuring they are living balanced lives and being good stewards of the multiple responsibilities God has given them. Accountable relationships, called "peer reviews," can take place within the presbytery or within the Missional Affinity Networks.

11. **Flatter structure with an emphasis on God's work within the local congregation** – There are three layers to the ECO polity structure; session, presbytery and synod. Synod is the widest council in ECO. Each council is designed to have a significantly smaller staff with significantly smaller numbers of congregations comprising a presbytery. The primary role of staff will be mission and ministry in local congregations, facilitating the multiplication of worshipping communities and expansion of the gospel.

