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3 **PRESBYTERY OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE**  
4 **POLICY GOVERNING DISMISSAL OF CONGREGATIONS**

5 *“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord.” Isaiah 1:18*

6 I. Principles and Overview

7 A. Presbytery’s Authority

8 The Book of Order authorizes presbyteries “to divide, dismiss, or dissolve congregations in  
9 consultation with their members” G-3.0303. See also G-3.0301a (presbyteries are responsible for  
10 “merging, dismissing, and dissolving congregations in consultation with their members”). The Presbytery  
11 of Middle Tennessee has adopted this dismissal policy to guide the exercise of its constitutional  
12 responsibilities under G-3.0303 and G-3.0301a.

13  
14 B. Presbytery’s Responsibility

15 Presbytery has a pastoral responsibility for its congregations and their members that extends to  
16 those seeking to leave its fellowship. Our role is to be a shepherd, not an adversary. In the case of  
17 disaffected congregations, this means helping them discern where God is leading them to continue their  
18 ministry. Presbytery also has fiduciary obligations with respect to a departing church’s property.

19  
20 C. Reconciliation or Gracious Separation

21 Our first priority is reconciliation. By reasoning together we hope to overcome grievances and  
22 find creative solutions that will allow us to continue a ministry partnership. If that is not possible, our  
23 goal is to work collaboratively with the congregation toward a gracious separation. We do not seek to  
24 retain congregations or their property when the bonds of fellowship have been irretrievably broken.

25  
26 D. Discernment and Dialogue

27 Before seeking separation, congregations will be asked to engage in a time of prayer, reflection,  
28 and spiritual discernment. They will also be asked to meet with teaching and ruling elders from other  
29 churches (an “Isaiah 1:18 team”) who will provide information, answer questions, address concerns, and  
30 explore options for continuing to work together. These discussions should be structured in a way that  
31 ensures all voices will be heard and the interests of all members of the congregation will be considered.

32  
33 E. Resolution

34 If discernment and dialogue produce a consensus in favor of reconciliation, the parties can move  
35 on to repairing (and perhaps restructuring) their relationship. If not, the congregation must decide whether  
36 to request dismissal. This policy specifies procedural safeguards to ensure the fairness of that process.  
37 This is particularly important when churches are not of one mind. Presbytery has a duty to protect the  
38 interests of all the church’s members. Our objective is to find a solution that enables the majority but also  
39 protects the minority.

40  
41 F. Gracious Separation

42 If a congregation follows this process and resolves to leave the denomination, this presbytery will  
43 honor that decision and dismiss the congregation, subject to the terms and conditions set forth in this  
44 policy. Insofar as it depends on us, we will avoid litigation.

45  
46 G. Continuation or Relocation

47 We will assist members of a departing congregation who wish to remain within this presbytery to  
48 continue the church’s ministry or to find new church homes.

1 H. Mutual Respect

2 The church witnesses to the world by its actions. That witness is diminished when we fail to treat  
3 each other with love and respect. It is the goal of this policy that no matter the outcome, we will have  
4 furthered our Christian witness to the world.

5  
6 II. Initiating the Dismissal Process

7 A session may initiate the dismissal process by sending a letter to the stated clerk requesting  
8 appointment of an Isaiah 1:18 team. Alternatively, presbytery's coordinating committee, if it becomes  
9 aware of substantial sentiment favoring separation in a congregation, may start the process on its own  
10 initiative. The coordinating committee shall inform the committee on ministry\* of the formation of an  
11 Isaiah 1:18 team.

12  
13 If the committee on ministry becomes aware of discord within a congregation that includes issues  
14 of discontent with the denomination, it shall inform the coordinating committee. Working together, the  
15 coordinating committee and committee on ministry shall attempt to determine the primary source of  
16 discord. If the discontent is primarily related to the congregation's differences with the denomination,  
17 this policy applies and an Isaiah 1:18 team shall have primary responsibility for working with the  
18 congregation. The Isaiah 1:18 team shall keep the committee on ministry informed of its progress and  
19 may call on the committee on ministry for assistance in dealing with issues that would normally be that  
20 committee's responsibility. If the primary discord within the congregation is not related to the  
21 denomination, the committee on ministry will take the lead in attempting to resolve the situation.

22  
23 III. The Isaiah 1:18 Team

24 A. Appointment and Composition

25 Once this policy has been invoked, the coordinating committee shall appoint an Isaiah 1:18 team  
26 to represent presbytery in dealing with the disaffected congregation. The team shall consist of no fewer  
27 than three teaching and ruling elders from churches other than the one with which the team will be dealing.  
28 It is desirable but not essential that the team members be from different churches.

29 The coordinating committee shall select members who are best able (1) to assist the congregation  
30 in spiritual discernment, (2) to respond effectively to the concerns and grievances of the congregation, and  
31 (3) to oversee the procedures required for reconciliation or separation, giving due regard to the qualities  
32 of wisdom, loving kindness, compassion, proximity, availability, and diversity. It is desirable but not  
33 essential that at least one member of the coordinating committee be part of each team.

34 Once the team has been named, the coordinating committee shall report the composition of the team  
35 to the next meeting of presbytery.

36 B. Responsibilities and Authority

37 The Isaiah 1:18 team is authorized to act for presbytery in performing the following duties and  
38 responsibilities:

39 (1) Guide the session and congregation in a time of prayer, reflection, and spiritual discernment  
40 about the direction of the particular church's ministry;

41 (2) Engage in dialogue with the session and congregation to learn the various perspectives within  
42 the congregation, to provide information, answer questions, and address concerns, and to explore options  
43 for continuing a ministry partnership with the congregation;

44 (3) Make agreements that will resolve differences with the congregation, so long as those  
45 agreements are consistent with the book of order and presbytery's mission handbook;

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\* If presbytery standing committees are restructured, references in this policy to a particular committee, such as the committee on ministry, should be read as applying to whatever successor committee performs the relevant functions of the named committee after restructuring.

- 1 (4) Recommend other agreements for approval by presbytery, if they will require changes in the  
2 mission handbook;
- 3 (5) Oversee the implementation of all agreements with the session and congregation;
- 4 (6) Advise the session on the requirements of this policy, including the procedures that must be  
5 followed in ascertaining the will of the congregation;
- 6 (7) Monitor actions taken by the session and the congregation in order to determine how well they  
7 have complied with this policy and whether the votes or other actions accurately reflect the will of the  
8 congregation;
- 9 (8) Negotiate terms of dismissal with a departing congregation;
- 10 (9) Assist members of a dividing congregation to negotiate the terms of their separation;
- 11 (10) Recommend to presbytery whether one of the factions in a dividing congregation should be  
12 designated “the true church within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” pursuant to G-4.0207 and should,  
13 for that reason, retain the church’s name, records, property, and liabilities.
- 14 (11) Determine the value of a departing or dividing church’s property, in consultation with the  
15 administration and finance committee, and recommend to presbytery how that property can best be used  
16 to serve the great ends of the church;
- 17 (12) Evaluate and make a recommendation to presbytery concerning the suitability of the  
18 denomination to which a departing church seeks to be dismissed;
- 19 (13) Recommend to presbytery the dismissal of a congregation, in accordance with this policy, if  
20 that is the will of the congregation, along with specific provisions for the disposition of the church’s name,  
21 records, property, and liabilities;
- 22 (14) In cooperation with the congregational development committee, assist members of a departing  
23 or dividing congregation who wish to remain in this presbytery to redevelop their congregation in order  
24 to continue the church’s ministry or to find new church homes.
- 25 (15) With the assistance of the committee on ministry, recommend whether to maintain or dissolve  
26 any existing pastoral relationships.
- 27 (16) Deal with churches that fail to cooperate and follow this policy as provided in Section XII.

28  
29 The Isaiah 1:18 team is authorized to take all actions that are necessary or advisable to enable the  
30 team to perform these functions. The team may conduct routine or urgent business electronically, at the  
31 discretion of the moderator. The team may authorize limited expenditure of funds in aid of its mission,  
32 but only after conferring with the chairman of the administration and finance committee or his or her  
33 designee to ensure that sufficient funds are available to cover the contemplated expenditures. Any  
34 significant expenditure of unbudgeted funds requires presbytery’s approval.

35  
36 C. Moderator and Secretary

37 The coordinating committee shall designate a team member to serve as moderator. The team shall  
38 choose a secretary at its first meeting.

39  
40 D. Training

41 As soon as practicable after being appointed the team shall meet with the stated clerk to review  
42 the terms of this policy and such portions of the book of order and mission handbook as are relevant to  
43 the team’s work. The team’s moderator shall also arrange for the team to be briefed on what is known of  
44 the circumstances that led to the team’s appointment and to receive such other training or advice (for  
45 example, in spiritual discernment or conflict management) as seems appropriate in the circumstances.

46  
47 IV. The Joint Working Group

48 A. Formation

49 The moderator of a newly constituted Isaiah 1:18 team should contact the moderator and clerk of  
50 session of the affected church, inform them of the team’s appointment, and ask the session to select a

1 delegation to represent the congregation. The delegation should be roughly equal in size to the Isaiah 1:18  
2 team. The members should be broadly representative of sentiment within the congregation, including (if  
3 applicable) those who wish to leave, those who wish to stay, and those who are undecided. They should  
4 be members of the congregation who have the confidence of the session and the congregation, or at least  
5 of significant elements within those bodies, and can speak for them in either an informal or a formal sense.  
6 They should also be able to devote the time and energy needed to follow this process through to a  
7 resolution.

8 It is up to the session to decide just what standing or authority to grant this delegation. Ideally, it  
9 will be constituted in such a way that it can function as an administrative commission and will be  
10 empowered to act on behalf of the session in some or all of the matters that come before it. See G-3.0109b.  
11 At a minimum it must serve as a conduit between the Isaiah 1:18 team and the session, and the session  
12 must be prepared to act promptly on its recommendations. The session shall appoint one of the members  
13 of the delegation to act as moderator, and that person shall be empowered to represent the delegation in  
14 dealing with the moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team on matters of procedure. The Isaiah 1:18 team and the  
15 congregation's delegation together constitute the "joint working group." All important decisions of the  
16 joint working group require the assent of a majority of the Isaiah 1:18 team and a majority of the  
17 congregational delegation; provided, however, that in the event of an impasse, the Isaiah 1:18 team is  
18 authorized to act on behalf of the joint working group.

#### 19 B. Timetable

20 This policy requires the congregation to act deliberately and not in haste. The entire process, from  
21 spiritual discernment and dialogue through final resolution is likely to take at least six months. Although  
22 this represents a significant commitment of time and energy, a matter of this magnitude demands careful  
23 and prayerful consideration. Whatever decision results from this process will better serve the church and  
24 its mission as a result.

25 The following subsections provide a chronology for the joint working group and for the overall  
26 process. It proceeds in stages and ordinarily assumes one meeting of the joint working group for each  
27 stage. It may turn out that things do not proceed in such a neat or linear fashion and adjustments will have  
28 to be made. That is perfectly acceptable as long as the basic integrity of the process is maintained and the  
29 congregation is prepared to make a fully informed and well considered decision.

#### 30 C. First Meeting

31 As soon as can be arranged, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall meet with the congregation's representatives  
32 at their church or at another mutually agreeable location. In order to promote a good working relationship  
33 and to encourage frank and candid discussion, only members of the joint working group should attend the  
34 first meeting. Later meetings may be opened to other interested persons if the joint working group decides  
35 that public attendance would be desirable. The moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team shall preside and serve  
36 as facilitator. The Isaiah 1:18 team's secretary shall take minutes and circulate them to all members of  
37 the joint working group. The moderators shall jointly set the agenda for the meeting, which should  
38 include: (1) introductions of the members, (2) a discussion aimed at identifying the issues causing  
39 discontent and the current state of mind of the congregation, (3) a spiritual discernment exercise, (4) a  
40 spiritual discernment plan for the session and congregation, and (5) a schedule for future meetings.

41 In addition to personal background information, introductions should include a summary of each  
42 person's faith journey and involvement with the church. The moderator of the Isaiah 1:18 team is  
43 responsible for conducting (or assigning) the spiritual discernment exercise, which is intended to acquaint  
44 both groups with the type of prayerful study and discussion that the session and congregation will be  
45 expected to undertake. The moderator of the congregational delegation is responsible for leading the  
46 discussion of issues that are troubling the congregation. To the extent possible, it should be limited to  
47 identifying issues and clarifying positions rather than debating their merits. The moderator of the Isaiah

1 1:18 team should be prepared to offer an outline or curriculum for the congregation to follow in seeking  
2 the Spirit's guidance on the church's mission and ministry, not for immediate adoption but for explanation  
3 and transmission to the session.

4 If time allows, at least three more meetings should be planned, although the schedule may be  
5 truncated or extended, as the circumstances dictate. How quickly additional meetings occur will depend  
6 not only on the availability of joint working group members but also the time needed for spiritual  
7 discernment and town hall meetings for the congregation. Subsequent meetings should follow the same  
8 procedures, except that at the discretion of the moderators, members of the joint working group may  
9 participate remotely, through teleconferencing or similar means, in order to reduce the burden of travel.

10 D. Second Meeting

11 By the second meeting the congregational representatives should be prepared to agree on a spiritual  
12 discernment plan for the session and congregation, subject only to session approval if necessary. The  
13 primary topic at this meeting should be the sources of discontent in the congregation. The Isaiah 1:18  
14 team should be prepared to address the issues identified at the first meeting. One objective is to clear up  
15 misconceptions and be sure that everyone is operating with the same understanding of the facts. A second  
16 objective is to see if the two groups can find common ground on potentially divisive issues of theology  
17 and polity. A third objective is to discuss how congregational concerns might be addressed, lessened,  
18 accommodated, or eliminated and to explore how the congregation might be able to continue working in  
19 partnership with the other churches in the presbytery.

20  
21 The final objective is to determine when and how to extend this dialogue to the entire congregation  
22 in the form of town hall meetings. The joint working group should agree on a format and timetable for  
23 such meetings, which can then be presented to the session for approval.

24 E. Third Meeting

25 This meeting should follow the congregation's period of spiritual discernment and town hall  
26 meetings. The focus should be on deciding whether to pursue reconciliation or to move forward with a  
27 congregational vote on leaving the denomination.

28 If the joint working group's consensus is that there are now viable options for a continued ministry  
29 partnership between the congregation and the other churches of the presbytery, the congregational  
30 representatives should make that recommendation to the session. If there is no consensus, or if the  
31 consensus is that reconciliation is unlikely, the congregational representatives should recommend that the  
32 session vote on whether to seek dismissal from the presbytery. If the session votes to request dismissal,  
33 it must then put the question to the congregation in the manner described in Section VI.

34 F. Fourth Meeting/Subsequent Meetings

35 If the session decides to pursue reconciliation rather than dismissal, or if the congregation votes  
36 not to seek dismissal, the joint working group should meet at least once more to discuss how to heal  
37 divisions within the congregation, how to deal with a departing minority (if there is one), and how to  
38 improve the congregation's relationship with presbytery and the denomination. It may continue meeting  
39 and working together as long these issues persist and as long as it is making progress in resolving these  
40 issues.

41 If the congregation affirms the session's decision to seek dismissal, the joint working group should  
42 meet as soon as possible thereafter to confirm the results of the vote (and that all required procedures were  
43 followed) and to discuss when and how the church's request for dismissal will be presented to presbytery.

44 V. Town Hall Meetings

45 There must be at least one town hall meeting to which the entire church family is invited. The  
46 purpose is to provide an opportunity for members of the congregation to engage in dialogue with each

1 other and with representatives of presbytery concerning the issues impelling members of the congregation  
2 to seek separation from the denomination. The joint working group may determine that more than one  
3 such meeting is required to ensure that all members of the congregation have an opportunity to attend and  
4 that all issues are fully discussed. Where feasible, these meetings should precede any congregational vote  
5 on dismissal by at least 30 days. **No formal action may be taken at these town hall meetings; the**  
6 **meetings are for informational and educational purposes only.** They may also include spiritual  
7 discernment components.  
8

9 The joint working group should plan and lead the discussion at these meetings. Members of the  
10 Isaiah 1:18 team must be invited to attend and participate as resources and representatives of presbytery.  
11 The role of the Isaiah 1:18 team is to provide information relevant to the congregation's decision, answer  
12 questions, address concerns, and discuss the congregation's ongoing relationship with the presbytery.  
13

#### 14 VI. Discerning the Will of the Congregation

15 If the church completes the required spiritual discernment and dialogue, and if the session  
16 thereafter votes to seek dismissal, as provided in Section IV(E), the joint working group, in consultation  
17 with the session, shall set a date and time for a meeting and prepare a proposal to present to the  
18 congregation. This is not a congregational meeting held pursuant to G-1.0501 but rather an advisory vote  
19 authorized and overseen by this presbytery as an essential part of its responsibility under G-3.0301a and  
20 G-3.0303 to consult with the church's members. The meeting and advisory vote of the congregation are  
21 to be conducted by the joint working group on behalf of presbytery and the session of the church. The  
22 meeting is to be moderated by a teaching elder of this presbytery who is not currently serving as pastor or  
23 associate pastor of the church considering disaffiliation. If possible, the moderator shall be chosen by the  
24 joint working group, with the concurrence of the session. If the joint working group and session are unable  
25 to agree, the Isaiah 1:18 team shall choose the moderator.  
26

27 The proposal shall put the following question to the congregation: "Shall [the church] request  
28 dismissal from the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on the following  
29 terms?" The proposal must specify the denomination to which the church would be dismissed and the  
30 disposition of the church's name, records, property, and liabilities, as well as any other terms that, in the  
31 judgment of the Isaiah 1:18 team, should be expressly put before the congregation. The Isaiah 1:18 team  
32 may put additional questions or alternative proposals to the congregation, either orally or in writing, to  
33 clarify the views of the members, including their views on any disputed issues and how they intend to  
34 respond if the church is dismissed.

35 To the extent possible, the Isaiah 1:18 team should conduct its due diligence on denominational  
36 suitability, name, records, and property issues—and inform the joint working group of any terms the team  
37 would insist on—before the proposal is finalized. If the session agrees, those terms can be included in the  
38 proposal presented to the congregation. If not, the session may present its preferred version to the  
39 congregation, but the congregation must be informed of the Isaiah 1:18 team's position and how this might  
40 affect presbytery's action on the proposed dismissal.  
41

42 If the Isaiah 1:18 team and the session agree to modify the terms of dismissal after the congregation  
43 has voted on them, the revised terms should be resubmitted to the congregation for another vote only if  
44 the revisions are significant and there is reason to believe they might affect the congregation's decision.  
45 The joint working group should make this determination.  
46

47 Before the meeting is announced to the congregation, the session must review its rolls and produce  
48 an accurate current list of active members. Each member on the active roll shall be given at least 30 days  
49 written notice of the meeting. The meeting shall also be announced at all worship services between the  
50 date of the written notice and the meeting.

1  
2 Because the purpose of the meeting is for presbytery to consult with the congregation, no specific  
3 quorum is required; however, if attendance is below the number required for a congregational meeting  
4 called pursuant to G-1.0501, the Isaiah 1:18 team need not accept the results as accurately reflecting the  
5 will of the congregation. A representative of the Isaiah 1:18 team shall be allowed to make a presentation  
6 to the congregation at the outset of the meeting, and members of the team shall have the privilege of the  
7 floor. Voting shall be by written ballot, with the joint working group serving as tellers. The joint working  
8 group, or in case of deadlock, the Isaiah 1:18 team, shall decide all other matters of procedure relating to  
9 the meeting.

10  
11 **VII. Recommendation to Presbytery**

12 If the Isaiah 1:18 team concludes that the motion was proper and the vote was fairly conducted  
13 and complied in all material respects with the procedures set forth in this policy, it shall certify the results  
14 and recommend one of the following actions to presbytery.

15  
16 **A. Continuation of the Relationship**

17 If the congregation votes against dismissal, the Isaiah 1:18 team should so inform presbytery and  
18 recommend further actions as appropriate. The Isaiah 1:18 team should offer whatever assistance it can  
19 in reconciling the factions in the church or, failing that, negotiating an amicable departure by the dissident  
20 faction. The Isaiah 1:18 team's recommendation to presbytery should include: (1) any restructuring of  
21 the church's relationship with presbytery that is acceptable to the team and would assist with a  
22 reconciliation; (2) any terms, acceptable to the team, that are negotiated by the church with a departing  
23 minority faction; and (3) any assistance presbytery should give the church in revitalizing its life and  
24 ministry, particularly if the church will suffer the loss of a significant number of members.

25  
26 **B. Gracious Separation**

27 If the congregation's advisory vote is in favor of dismissal, and if the Isaiah 1:18 team approves  
28 the proposed terms, it should recommend that presbytery approve the church's request. If the congregation  
29 favors dismissal but the Isaiah 1:18 team does not approve all of the proposed terms, the Isaiah 1:18 team  
30 should continue to negotiate with the session, through the joint working group, in an effort to arrive at  
31 mutually acceptable terms for the congregation's dismissal. This would be the case if, for example, the  
32 Isaiah 1:18 team favors a different disposition of the church's property than the one proposed by the  
33 congregation or if it believes that some additional provision must be made to assist members who wish to  
34 remain in this presbytery in transitioning to a new church. If a mutually acceptable solution is found, the  
35 Isaiah 1:18 team should recommend dismissal on the agreed terms to presbytery. If not, the church and  
36 the Isaiah 1:18 team may each present their proposed terms of dismissal to presbytery for its decision.

37  
38 **VIII. Terms of Gracious Separation**

39 The proposal put to the congregation and the Isaiah 1:18 team's recommendation to presbytery  
40 should address, to the extent applicable, disposition of the church's property and liabilities, the receiving  
41 denomination, the church's name and records, provisions for members who wish to remain in this  
42 presbytery, and any other issues the Isaiah 1:18 team believes are important with respect to the particular  
43 church.

44  
45 **A. Disposition of the Church's Property and Liabilities if the Congregation is Substantially**  
46 **United in Seeking Dismissal**

47 If the congregation overwhelmingly favors dismissal, and would leave as a largely intact  
48 congregation, and if the congregation is requesting dismissal with its property, the Isaiah 1:18 team must  
49 determine if this represents an appropriate use of the property. It should consider the value of the property,  
50 the ministry and mission the property would support with the departing congregation, what alternative

1 uses and options exist for the property, their cost and feasibility (including the cost and feasibility of  
2 invoking the trust clause of G-4.0203 and litigating to enforce it), and what contribution those alternative  
3 uses would make to the church’s mission in the world. It should consider the origins and history of the  
4 property, including the understanding and expectations of those whose faithful stewardship it represents,  
5 as well as the finances, history, spiritual and financial needs, and other circumstances of the congregation  
6 seeking dismissal.

7  
8 We do not seek to “punish” a departing congregation or to extract a quid pro quo for allowing the  
9 congregation to leave with its property; neither do we covet its property as a means of addressing the  
10 presbytery’s or other churches’ financial needs. Our purpose is to discern how we can best and most  
11 effectively deploy the church’s resources to advance the great ends of the church. In the end, we all serve  
12 Christ, the head of the church. It is through that lens that we view our fiduciary and stewardship  
13 obligations with respect to a departing church’s property. The purpose of the trust clause in G-4.0203 is  
14 not to enable routine confiscation of a departing church’s property but to ensure that the property is used  
15 in the way it was intended, as “a tool for the accomplishment of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world,”  
16 G-4.0202, a mission that is not limited to any one denomination, even our own. See F-1.0302a. The Isaiah  
17 1:18 team should endorse the congregation’s request if, all things considered, the best use for the property  
18 is to continue serving the ministry of the departing church.

19  
20 The church’s liabilities should follow its property—that is to say that if a church is dismissed with  
21 its property, the church must also assume all liabilities that are in any way related to the property.  
22 Likewise, if presbytery were to invoke the trust clause and seek to retain the property, it must also assume  
23 the church’s liabilities. Any amounts owing to presbytery must be paid off if a church leaves with its  
24 property. The Isaiah 1:18 team should also consider whether the church should be required to reimburse  
25 presbytery for any past investments made by presbytery in the church.

26  
27 B. Disposition of the Church’s Property and Liabilities if the Congregation is not Substantially  
28 United in Seeking Dismissal

29 If a majority of the congregation favors dismissal but there is a significant part of the congregation  
30 that wishes to remain in this presbytery, the Isaiah 1:18 team must take steps to ensure the interests of  
31 both groups are protected.

32 1. Determination of the True Church

33 Initially, the Isaiah 1:18 team must determine if one of the factions “is entitled to the property  
34 because it is identified by the presbytery as the true church within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” G-  
35 4.0207. The Book of Order does not define what it means by the “true church” in G-4.0207, but it does  
36 use the phrase elsewhere when describing manifestations of the church universal: “Where Christ is, there  
37 is the true Church. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, Reformed Christians have marked the  
38 presence of the true Church wherever: the Word of God is truly preached and heard, the Sacraments are  
39 rightly administered, and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered.” F-1.0303. See The Scots  
40 Confession, Ch. XVIII (*The Book of Confessions*, 3.18). See also F-1.0401 (the Presbyterian form of  
41 government is “built around the marks of the true Church”). A particular church that exhibits these marks,  
42 “beyond any doubt, is the true Kirk of Christ.” The Scots Confession, Ch. XVIII (*The Book of*  
43 *Confessions*, 3.18).

44 This seems an appropriate place to start in defining “true church,” but it presents a problem of  
45 interpretation. Both G-4.0207 and F-1.0303 are framed in the present tense (“is entitled . . . is identified;”  
46 “is truly preached . . . are rightly administered . . . is uprightly ministered”); they assume an existing, fully  
47 functional church, which neither faction, by itself, would yet be. In this sense the answer is always “no;”  
48 a faction within a church is not a church, true or otherwise. But this would make the provision superfluous,  
49 something we assume the drafters did not intend. If G-4.0207 is to have any substance, it must therefore  
50 be read as requiring a prediction of future performance. Accordingly, the Isaiah 1:18 team must ascertain



1 the likelihood that one or both factions will live into the definition of “true Church” in F-1.0303 if the  
2 church splits.

3 There are really two issues here, one organizational, the other theological. The organizational  
4 issue is whether a faction is capable of functioning long term as a church. That is to say, it must have both  
5 the willingness and the ability to organize and sustain itself as an independent entity, distinct from the  
6 congregation of which it has until now been an undifferentiated part—one that can adequately provide the  
7 “marks of the true Church” for its parishioners. This requires consideration of the faction’s expressed  
8 intentions, strength of purpose, cohesiveness, human and financial resources, spiritual maturity,  
9 leadership, and prospects for success. Projecting the likelihood that a faction will become a successful  
10 church is obviously difficult, but it is a difficulty inherent in the language of G-4.0207.

11 The theological issue is posed by the use of the words “true” (in G-4.0207) and “truly” (in F-  
12 1.0303). We take the word “truly” in this context to mean in accordance with the Reformed tradition, as  
13 embodied in scripture and in the Presbyterian church’s historic confessions. The Isaiah 1:18 team will  
14 therefore be called on to judge whether either faction has departed (or, more accurately, can be expected  
15 to depart when functioning as a church) from these standards.

16 If only one of the factions passes both of these filters, it necessarily constitutes the only true church  
17 to emerge from the split for purposes of G-4.0207. If, however, there are two viable factions, each  
18 satisfying both prongs of the test, the Isaiah 1:18 team must consider whether one of these factions is, or  
19 after the split will become, “*the true church within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*.” Use of the definite  
20 article means this clause applies only if there is just one such church. If both churches decide to remain  
21 within the denomination, G-4.0207 has no application. The same would be true if both decide to leave.  
22 But if one leaves and the other stays, the one remaining denominationally loyal would by default become  
23 the true church within the denomination.

24 This is not the end of the inquiry, however, as the entitlement to property is not automatic. The  
25 Isaiah 1:18 team must determine “*if one of the factions is entitled to the property because it is identified*  
26 *by the presbytery as the true church within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*.” In other words, is  
27 denominational loyalty a sufficient reason, in the circumstances of the particular case, to award the  
28 church’s property to one faction over the other? The answer to that question, it seems to us, requires  
29 consideration of the same factors as under Section VIII(A). Denominational loyalty is an additional factor  
30 to be weighed in the balance, but it is subordinate to the overriding goal of identifying the highest and best  
31 use for the property in service to Christ’s Church and in furtherance of its mission. If the Isaiah 1:18 team  
32 concludes that a division of property between the factions best serves this goal, it should apply the  
33 standards in Section VIII(B)(2) in determining how best to achieve such a division.

## 34 35 2. Principles for Division of Property

36 Whenever there is a significant minority faction, presbytery will assist the dissenting members to  
37 form or affiliate with another church, and the departing church will be expected to support that effort  
38 financially in a way that reflects the relative numbers of the two groups.

39 The details of this support must be worked out in each instance based on the unique facts and  
40 circumstances of the particular church. In some cases non-financial terms may assume greater importance.  
41 In others there may be outstanding financial obligations that will alter the calculus. As a general rule,  
42 however, it will be sufficient if the departing congregation agrees to divide its net assets in a way that  
43 reflects the proportion of members present and voting who favored dismissal compared to those who  
44 opposed dismissal (or if it obligates itself to a future stream of payments reflecting the present value of  
45 those assets). Alternatively, a financial payout may be based on the estimated cost of a new or expanded  
46 ministry presence in the area of the departing church. The departing church would pay these funds or  
47 other assets either directly to the new church formed by its former members or to presbytery for use in  
48 assisting the former members, other nearby churches, and new church development.

## 49 3. Procedure

1 If the minority faction is relatively small, the joint working group should serve as the forum in  
2 which the terms of dismissal are negotiated, but with the addition, if necessary, of appropriate  
3 representation for the minority. If the Isaiah 1:18 team and the session are unable to agree, the Isaiah 1:18  
4 team shall recommend its last best offer to presbytery. If presbytery agrees, those shall be the terms of  
5 dismissal.

6 If the minority faction is relatively large, the terms should be negotiated directly by representatives  
7 of the two factions, with the Isaiah 1:18 team acting as mediator. The Isaiah 1:18 team may not impose  
8 terms, but it is empowered to determine the procedures to be followed, and it must approve the terms of  
9 any agreement as accurately reflecting the sentiments of both factions and as fair to all concerned.

10 There are several patterns for this kind of separation and fair sharing or division of common  
11 properties, which the Isaiah 1:18 team may offer as guides to negotiation. Whatever resolution is reached  
12 must account for the church's name, records, and history as well as its property.

13 If the two sides reach impasse, they may submit the issues in dispute, at their own expense, to  
14 binding arbitration before a third-party neutral. The third-party neutral may be an individual acceptable  
15 to both parties and the Isaiah 1:18 team or may be someone who is selected according to the procedures  
16 of an established Christian mediation and arbitration service. If they fail to submit their dispute to neutral  
17 arbitration, the Isaiah 1:18 team is authorized decide all unresolved issues.

### 18 19 C. Suitability of the Receiving Denomination

20 Before recommending approval of the proposal, the Isaiah 1:18 team must investigate whether the  
21 denomination to which the congregation wishes to be dismissed "is conformed to the doctrines and order  
22 of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)." Authoritative Interpretation, Item 07-13, *Transfer of Ministers and*  
23 *Congregations to Transitional Presbyteries*, 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, *Minutes* pp. 14-15. It should  
24 consider whether: (a) the receiving body is doctrinally consistent with the essentials of Reformed theology,  
25 as those are understood by this presbytery; (b) whether it is governed by a polity that is consistent in form  
26 and structure with that of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); and (c) whether it is of sufficient permanence  
27 to offer reasonable assurance that the congregation is not being dismissed to de facto independence. *Id.*  
28 A congregation may not be dismissed to independency.

29 There is no objective standard for determining the requisite consistency in doctrine and polity.  
30 That is a matter committed to the judgment of presbytery, informed by the Isaiah 1:18 team's  
31 recommendation. We offer several principles to guide the exercise of that judgment. None of these factors  
32 is determinative, and each case must be judged on its unique circumstances, but we commend them to the  
33 team as critical issues to be addressed.

34 First, "consistent" does not mean "identical." Our own denomination has resisted defining the  
35 essential tenets of our faith and allowed a reasonable scope for freedom of conscience on the part of its  
36 members. A similar approach should be taken in evaluating a receiving denomination. It would be  
37 inappropriate to expect greater doctrinal consistency from those outside our fellowship than from those  
38 within it. Conformance, in this context, is better understood as a level of compatibility that would allow  
39 the church to make a straightforward transition to its new denomination, one that does not require  
40 wholesale, disruptive revisions of doctrine and governance.

41 Second, we take seriously the aspiration toward greater church unity and the commitment to  
42 breaking down denominational barriers and deepening communion "with all other churches within the  
43 one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church" set forth in our constitution. *See* F-1.0302a. A denomination with  
44 which we are committed to being in deeper communion is of necessity a denomination with which we  
45 share much in common. The Isaiah 1:18 team should view sympathetically any application for dismissal  
46 to a denomination with which the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) desires a deeper communion, at least to  
47 the extent that being in such communion implies a basic level of compatibility.

48 Third, the guiding principle in making this determination should be whether the congregation to  
49 be dismissed will have an opportunity to thrive and grow as a missional church in the proposed new  
50 denominational context. Will it have the right mix of freedom and support in both its theology and its

1 governance? Will it be equipped for ministry in the place it seeks to serve? Will it have a reasonable  
2 chance of success? Will it be able to honor its heritage as part of the Reformed tradition? These are the  
3 kinds of questions the team should ask, the answers to which should inform any recommendation it makes.  
4

5 D. Disposition of the Church's Name and Records

6 The Isaiah 1:18 team shall make its own determination and include a recommendation for the final  
7 disposition of the name and the records in its report to presbytery.  
8

9 E. Assistance to Remaining Members

10 The Isaiah 1:18 team should work with a departing congregation to arrange for members who wish  
11 to remain in this presbytery to find a new church home. If the remaining members are sufficiently  
12 numerous that they could form a separate church, the team should work with them to see if that is a feasible  
13 option. In either case, the terms of dismissal presented to presbytery should specify how the needs of  
14 these members will be addressed.  
15

16 IX. Status of the Pastor – to be worked out with the committee on ministry

17 The pastor of a church considering disaffiliation with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may  
18 express an opinion and be an advocate for a particular position, but must do so in a way that is consistent  
19 with the obligation of pastoral care owed to all members of the congregation and the strict neutrality  
20 required when moderating the session. The pastor must work with both the majority and minority, as long  
21 as they remain members of the congregation.

22 If the pastor of a church leaving the denomination wishes also to disaffiliate, the Isaiah 1:18 team,  
23 in consultation with the committee on ministry, may recommend the dismissal of the pastor to another  
24 denomination. If the pastor wishes to stay within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Isaiah 1:18 team,  
25 in consultation with the committee on ministry, may recommend the dissolution of the pastor's  
26 relationship with the departing church. In either case the Isaiah 1:18 team, in consultation with the  
27 committee on ministry, shall ensure that the presbytery's dissolution policy is followed for whatever  
28 transition the pastor will have to undertake as a result of the congregation's departure.  
29

30 X. Gracious Separation

31 If a congregation is approved for dismissal under this policy, the Isaiah 1:18 team should lead a  
32 brief service of commissioning at the presbytery meeting where the dismissal is approved to celebrate the  
33 church's history within the presbytery, to ask a blessing on its continued ministry, and to pray for the well-  
34 being of the members it leaves behind. To the extent possible, this tone should extend to all dealings  
35 between those who choose to stay and those who choose to leave, recognizing that we labor together in  
36 the same vineyard and that what unites us is far greater than what divides us.  
37

38 XI. Options for Reconciliation

39 There are potential options that congregations and the presbytery could prayerfully consider to  
40 foster unity, some of which require greater effort and agreement from other councils of our church, some  
41 of which are more readily available. This incomplete listing is not intended to reflect recommendations  
42 of the presbytery, but is intended to indicate the breadth of options open to us and to encourage expanded  
43 dialogue as we open ourselves to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Some potential options include dual  
44 committee / evangelical cluster, union churches, and union presbyteries.  
45

46 XII. Alternative Procedure

47 The overriding goal of this process is the creation of an atmosphere where the peaceful  
48 discussion and resolution of disagreements as brothers and sisters in Christ can take place. It is therefore  
49 incumbent on the session of a disaffected congregation to be committed to the whole process. If the  
50 session of a disaffected congregation refuses to cooperate with the Isaiah 1:18 team or fails to follow

1 this policy through to completion, the Isaiah 1:18 team may conduct an investigation pursuant to G-  
2 3.0109b(5) to determine the reasons for noncompliance and to assess the current state of affairs in the  
3 congregation. If it is unable to persuade the session to begin (or resume) the process of reasoning  
4 together laid out in this policy, the Isaiah 1:18 team is authorized to take such additional steps pursuant  
5 to G-3.0303e as may be necessary to protect the rights of all members of the congregation and to settle  
6 all differences and grievances in a fair and orderly way. To the extent possible, this process shall follow  
7 the same principles and procedures as would apply had the session complied voluntarily with this policy.

8 *Adopted by the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee - May 3, 2012*

9 *Revised 7/16/2015*

10 *Revised by the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee – July 18, 2015*