



MDPC and the Presbyterian Church (USA)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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Introduction

Following the decisions and actions of the 2014 General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (USA), MDPC's Session approved a letter to be sent to the congregation expressing its dissent from certain issues on the grounds that they depart from our biblical, theological, Confessional, and historical foundations. The Session also approved and empowered a Denominational Task Force to educate MDPC on the issues regarding our affiliation with the PC (USA).

These Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) were submitted by members of MDPC's Session, Denominational Task Force, and Staff, and provide understanding and insight into many issues facing MDPC and our affiliation with the PC (USA). The answers to these FAQs have been vetted to ensure accuracy and objectivity. We hope these will answer questions, clear up any misinformation or misunderstanding, and provide stability and unity as MDPC evaluates its affiliation with the PC (USA).

A. ON THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

1. **What is the Presbyterian Church (USA)?** It is the denomination to which MDPC belongs. It is one of several Presbyterian denominations in the United States. The PC (USA) was established at the “Reunion” of 1983, when a “northern” Presbyterian denomination known as the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (UPCUSA) joined with a “southern” Presbyterian denomination known as the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). The PC (USA) now has about 10,000 congregations, 1.7 million members, and 20,000 pastors.
2. **What are the other Presbyterian Denominations in the USA?**
 - Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO)
 - Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)
 - Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)
 - Cumberland Presbyterian Church (CPC)
 - Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARP)
 - Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America
 - Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC)
 - Bible Presbyterian Church (BPC)
 - Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA)
 - Reformed Presbyterian Church in the United States (RPCUS)
 - Reformed Presbyterian Church General Assembly
 - Reformed Presbyterian Church – Hanover Presbytery
 - Covenant Presbyterian Church
 - Presbyterian Reformed Church
 - Westminster Presbyterian Church in the United States
 - Korean American Presbyterian Church
 - Free Presbyterian Church of North America
3. **Has MDPC decided to disaffiliate from the Presbyterian Church (USA)?** No. Session has only voiced its opposition to certain GA decisions. A Denominational Task Force has been approved by Session to conduct a comprehensive study on MDPC’s affiliation with the PC (USA).
4. **How many churches have disaffiliated from the PC (USA) in the past few years?** In 2000, the PC (USA) had about 2.5 million members. Currently the PC (USA) has 1.7 million members. The PC (USA) is declining by approximately 60,000 members each year. 96 churches disaffiliated from the PC (USA) in 2011. 110 disaffiliated in 2012. 148 disaffiliated in 2013.
5. **Where are these churches and people going?** Churches that disaffiliate from the PC (USA) must be dismissed to another Reformed denomination. Most churches that have disaffiliated from the PC (USA) have gone to either the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO), or the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). Some have affiliated elsewhere as listed above. People who have disaffiliated from the PC (USA) churches go to another church/denomination, or they cease to attend a local church altogether.
6. **What is the Presbytery?** All Presbyterian churches are grouped into regional “councils” called Presbyteries. MDPC belongs to the Presbytery of New Covenant, which covers southeast Texas and includes 96 churches. The Presbytery’s role is to assist churches to be faithful and healthy by providing accountability and oversight.
7. **How many churches in the Presbytery of New Covenant have disaffiliated from the PC (USA)?** Ten churches in our Presbytery have disaffiliated from the PC (USA): Grace Presbyterian Church (Houston), First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood, Windwood Presbyterian Church (Houston), Advent Presbyterian Church (Spring), West Isle Presbyterian Church (Galveston), Providence

Presbyterian Church (Nederland), Memorial Presbyterian (San Augustine), First Presbyterian Church (Lake Jackson), and First Presbyterian Church (Freeport). Additionally, Peace Presbyterian Church (Pearland) has entered the discernment process. First Presbyterian Church (Houston) voted to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), but the affirmative votes were slightly short of the Presbytery-required 2/3 majority for approval. About 75% of Heritage Presbyterian Church (Houston) voted to disaffiliate, but the remaining 25% still exists as Heritage PC.

- 8. If MDPC disaffiliated from the PC (USA), how would it affect our Presbytery?** (1) MDPC would no longer be a congregation of the Presbytery of New Covenant, and no longer participate in the Presbytery's ministries and business. (2) MDPC might consider, over a period of time, eliminating our voluntary benevolence giving to Presbytery (\$275,000 in 2014). MDPC's contribution currently comprises approximately 25% of the Presbytery's annual budget.
- 9. Does MDPC have to be affiliated with a denomination?** As a Presbyterian church, MDPC has embraced a particular (Reformed) theology and methodology. This includes the core belief that we are connected to other Christians in a covenantal relationship that is best expressed by collaboration, oversight, and accountability. This is best done in the context of a Reformed denominational structure.
- 10. If we were to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), with which denomination would we affiliate?** If MDPC decided to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), the decision to which denomination we would be dismissed would be decided by the Session and communicated to the congregation before it was time to vote. From the list of Presbyterian denominations above, the one most similar to the PC (USA) is the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, which grew out of the Fellowship of Presbyterians, a group our former Senior Pastor, Dave Peterson, helped to establish. A denominational comparison chart is forthcoming from the Denominational Task Force, which will highlight key issues from some of the viable denominational options.
- 11. What are the issues of conflict between MDPC and the PC (USA)?** In broad terms, MDPC has maintained its historical and foundational commitment to Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation, to the authority of Scripture, to the priority of Missions, and to the transforming power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. MDPC's recent strategic planning process revealed a renewed commitment to these values by the congregation. In contrast, the PC (USA) has moved away from some of these foundational values, and has embraced a more unorthodox biblical interpretation and theology, along with a more political ideology. Recent decisions by the GA of the PC (USA) have failed to affirm that Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, have failed to affirm the call for Christians to live in obedience to Scripture, have reduced the support of Christian mission work, and have emphasized hospitality and justice without a corresponding call to transformation and obedience.
- 12. What would it mean for MDPC to remain affiliated with the PC (USA)?** Uncertain. There may be people at MDPC who are indifferent to the PC (USA) and the actions of the GA. People tend to join MDPC not because we're a PC (USA) church, but because we're a vibrant, growing, Christ-centered church with a commitment to children, youth, families, and generosity. There may be some people who are opposed to the PC (USA) and the actions of the GA. Likewise, there may be some people who are supportive of the PC (USA) and the GA actions. Because of MDPC's size and resourcefulness, we tend to not rely on the PC (USA) and/or its resources.
- 13. Can MDPC remain affiliated with the PC (USA) without embracing all of their doctrinal and social positions?** Uncertain. The result would be some level of conflict between MDPC and the PC (USA), and some potential confusion as MDPC sought to explain our local church positions versus those of the PC (USA). There is also some concern that we could experience difficulty in the future in obtaining Presbytery approval of new pastors that MDPC might call, whose beliefs do not conform to the evolving PC (USA) ideology.

- 14. Would a change in our denominational affiliation affect me personally?** Possibly. It depends on your views on biblical authority and interpretation, Christian theology, the Confessions, and several social issues. But MDPC has a long history of focusing on the centrality of Jesus Christ and His Gospel, and calling all people to know God's love and grace. We have tended to center on the things that unite us, instead of those that divide us.
- 15. Is there a faithful-witness role for MDPC to play by remaining affiliated with the PC (USA)?** There could be. With many churches disaffiliating from the PC (USA), and with the PC (USA) continuing to move away from its biblical, theological, and Confessional roots, MDPC could play a vital role as a place for people to call their church home, and as a voice calling the PC (USA) to renewal. However, many congregations and individuals have sought to bring about renewal in the PC (USA) since the 1983 Reunion, with little or no success.
- 16. What decisions has MDPC's Session made regarding GA decisions or the PC (USA)?** Over the last eight years, MDPC's Session has voted as follows:
- Endorsed the Presbyterian Global Fellowship (April 24, 2006)
 - Withheld PC (USA) Per Capita payments (December 15, 2008)
 - Endorsed Kingwood Presbyterian Church's overture to GA to uphold the biblical definition of marriage (May 24, 2010) (Not approved by Presbytery)
 - Formed the Denominational Issues Task Force (active from July 26, 2010 to May 29, 2013)
 - Endorsed the Fellowship of Presbyterians Initiative (March 28, 2011)
 - Maintained Ordination Standards of G6.0106b from the 2010 Book of Order (May 23, 2011)
 - Approved \$72,000 for the Fellowship of Presbyterians (May 23, 2011)
 - Endorsed the Fellowship of Presbyterians and Essential Theological Tenets (April 23, 2012)
 - Approved the letter dissenting from 2014 GA decisions, and approved the formation of the current Denominational Task Force (July 28, 2014)
- 17. What is the charter for our current Denominational Task Force (DTF)?** The Session has authorized the DTF to do four things: (1) educate MDPC on the issues regarding our affiliation with the PC (USA); (2) survey MDPC to better understand the congregation's views on maintaining our affiliation with the PC (USA); (3) monitor emerging issues and developments within the PC (USA); and (4) report to Session at the October 2014 Session meeting.
- 18. Who are the DTF members?** The Session approved the following people: Bob Giles (moderator), Martha Moore, Sandy Smith, Julie Hempel, Larry Nettles, Tom Caver, Mary Beth Staine, David Eyre, and Janell Kelleher. Correspondence should be directed to denomtaskforce@mdpc.org.

B. ON SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

- 19. What do Presbyterians believe about Jesus Christ being the only way to salvation?** It varies somewhat. Historically, the PC (USA) has affirmed that Jesus Christ alone is the only way to salvation with God. In recent years, that affirmation has changed, depending with whom you speak. The PC (USA) still affirms Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and many Presbyterians do believe that Jesus is the only way to salvation. But some people in the PC (USA), out of sensitivity for other faith traditions, now affirm that Jesus is the way for them personally, but that there may be other ways to salvation in God's sovereign will.
- 20. What's the difference between being "guided by" Scripture and being "obedient to" Scripture?** Some people in the PC (USA) that have sought to relax the imperatives of Scripture to allow for more freedom of conscience, and have preferred "guided by" over "obedient to." The current Book of Order reflects this view, especially regarding Ordination Standards. The difference is significant. In simple terms, "guided by" suggests more flexibility when it comes to adhering to the teaching of Scripture. "Obedient to" affirms the authority of Scripture, and affirms the imperative to submit to the teaching of Scripture.

- 21. Scripture and Christian tradition are being cited on different sides of debates. How can we know which “side” to trust?** Many people on both “sides” of issues are faithful Christians, who love Jesus, and affirm biblical scholarship. The PC (USA) has enjoyed a long history of diversity of perspectives, but sometimes that diversity causes divisiveness. An abiding principle of the PC (USA) is that “God alone is Lord of the conscience.” The task of faithful Christians is to study the Scriptures, seek the mind of Christ, weigh particular passages by the whole counsel of Scripture, consider the teaching of Christian theology and church history, and determine what to believe and how to live.

C. ON CHURCH PROPERTY

- 22. What is the Trust Clause regarding church property?** Prior to the 1983 Reunion of the PCUS and the UPCUSA, there was no Trust Clause for the “southern” PCUS churches, with which MDPC was affiliated. Since the 1983 Reunion, the Book of Order has stated that all property of a local PC (USA) church is held in trust for the benefit of the PC (USA) (Book of Order, G-4.0203). The rationale for this clause is to affirm the connectional nature of the PC (USA), and to maintain oversight and accountability. As churches have sought to disaffiliate from the denomination, tension has emerged when congregations have sought to keep their property, which most often has been acquired through funds provided by the individual members of that congregation.
- 23. If MDPC decided to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), would we lose our property?** Probably not. First, the Presbytery of New Covenant has a [Gracious Reconciliation and Dismissal Policy](#) (GRD) which provides a process for a church to be dismissed to another Reformed denomination, and which guarantees that the disaffiliating church will keep its property. A new policy is being written and will be voted on in March 2015 that will replace the GRD currently in place. Second, the Texas Supreme Court has ruled (Masterson case) that the church property Trust Clause, which states that local church property is held in trust for the denomination, is not a valid and defensible trust. As a result, it appears that the Trust Clause is not valid in Texas. This ruling is being appealed to the US Supreme Court, however.
- 24. Could MDPC retain ownership of our property through negotiation?** As mentioned above, our Presbytery has a GRD policy which allows churches to keep their property. There would be a financial settlement to the Presbytery, currently based on an average of the church’s benevolence giving to the Presbytery, and a negotiated financial settlement based on the insured value of the church’s property. Some churches have elected to bypass a GRD and seek to have a court determine that the congregation, rather than the Presbytery, owns their property. In some of these cases, a settlement has been reached based on a percentage of the insured value of the property.

D. ON MDPC’S PASTORS AND STAFF

- 25. If MDPC decided to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), what would happen to our ordained pastors and staff?** If a church decides to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), pastors will have the option of moving their ordination to the denomination to which their church is dismissed, or they could remain in the PC (USA). If they choose to remain affiliated with the PC (USA), they would need to seek a new call to another PC (USA) church/ministry. The non-ordained staff is unaffected, since they are not under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery.
- 26. What about the pastors’ pensions and medical insurance?** After three years of continual service, PC (USA) pastors are fully vested in the Pension Plan and will not lose their pension. If MDPC were dismissed to another Reformed denomination, contributions to the PC (USA) Pension Plan would cease, but contributions would be made to whatever plan the new denomination has in place. Medical insurance would cease to be provided through the PC (USA) Board of Pensions, and employees would be covered by whatever plan the new denomination has in place.

- 27. Are MDPC's pastors prohibited from participating in the discernment process?** No. While some Presbyteries take an aggressive position and penalize clergy who participate in conversations about denominational affiliation, this is not the current approach of the Presbytery of New Covenant's GRD. We believe there can be an open process of evaluation, which includes our pastors, without concern that the Presbytery might remove MDPC's pastors and Session with an Administrative Commission.

E. ON THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

- 28. What is the General Assembly?** The Presbyterian Church (USA) is structured into four "councils." They are the (1) Session (elders and installed pastors of a particular church), (2) Presbytery (a regional grouping of churches), (3) Synod (a regional grouping of Presbyteries), and (4) General Assembly. The GA is the biennial gathering of the national PC (USA), and includes about 600 voting commissioners (half pastors/half elders) elected from each of the 173 Presbyteries. GA is a week-long meeting in which many business items are considered. These can include changes to the Book of Order and/or the Book of Confessions, or other policy issues.
- 29. How do the GA decisions affect MDPC?** Each congregation in the PC (USA) is governed by the PC (USA) Constitution, which consists of the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. Any changes to the Constitution, as approved by the GA and/or a majority of the 173 presbyteries, become authoritative for local churches. Beyond the Constitution, and because of the connectional nature of the Presbyterian Church (USA), MDPC might be perceived to be in agreement with the actions and decisions of the GA. However, MDPC is highly autonomous in that we seek to be obedient to Jesus Christ and the Bible, and guided by our core values. These override any particular GA actions or decisions. Furthermore, to the extent that the PC (USA), through the GA, takes certain positions that some view as social and political, members of our congregation may either be comfortable or uncomfortable with those positions. Where our congregation supports and affirms those positions, then we have no conflict at all with our denomination. However, if our members are uncomfortable with those positions, then this discomfort can have an impact on the membership, its unity, and, hence, MDPC.
- 30. The July 29th Session letter mentioned something about an Authoritative Interpretation being used. What is an AI?** Until recently, AIs were only used to clarify something that was ambiguous or unclear in the Book of Order of the PC (USA). It was used to provide an authoritative answer on an unclear issue. When an AI is used, it does not require the concurrence of the Presbyteries, and it becomes binding on the PC (USA) the moment the GA ends. Recently, the AI has been used as strategy to get the GA to make a binding decision on issues, thus circumventing our polity, which requires a majority of Presbyteries to approve a change before it becomes binding and a part of the Constitution. In its letter to the congregation, the Session expressed particular dissent to the inappropriate use of the AI to bypass normal polity and governance.
- 31. What was it about this GA that caused MDPC's Session to dissent?** While it is true that previous GAs approved items that are in conflict with MDPC's values, the 2014 GA has been described as the most political GA in recent history, and one in which there was disregard for the PC (USA) Constitution and parliamentary process. In addition, many lobbyists were permitted access to the GA Commissioners to influence voting, particularly regarding the divestment from companies doing business in Israel and from fossil fuel companies. It was the belief of MDPC's Session that the GA decision to permit clergy and churches to perform same-sex weddings, in states where they are legal, contradicts not only the Constitution, but also the teaching of Scripture, Christian theology, Christian history, and the bulk of the worldwide Christian Church.

- 32. Isn't the real issue about homosexuality and same-sex marriage?** No. The approval of same-sex marriages (where legal) was one of the three key GA decisions referenced in the dissent issued by MDPC's Session. MDPC affirms that all people are sinners in need of God's grace and forgiveness. Everyone is welcome at MDPC, regardless of condition or orientation. But everyone is also called to be transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and conformed to the image of Christ. The letter was not a repudiation of homosexuals. It was, however, a strong affirmation of the biblical, theological, historical, and Confessional definition of marriage, designed by God to be between a man and a woman. The real issue is whether the PC (USA) continues to espouse and represent the theology and views of the majority of MDPC's membership, along with our core values and strategic initiatives.

F. ON THE DISMISSAL PROCESS

- 33. If we decide that we want to disaffiliate from the PC (USA), what is the process?** We could choose to follow the Presbytery of New Covenant's GRD, or explore the possibility of negotiating our own process. If we used the current GRD, the terms for dismissal are known in advance, and the discernment process is done in cooperation with the Presbytery.
- 34. Can the congregation go ahead and vote on disaffiliation now?** The Session could call a congregational meeting for that purpose, but such an important issue requires careful consideration as the leadership tries to discern God's will for MDPC.
- 35. Will this affect the church's giving if we don't disaffiliate from the PC (USA)?** Probably. Some people have already indicated that they will stop attending and giving if MDPC remains affiliated with the PC (USA). It's difficult to know how many people feel this way, or how exactly this might impact MDPC's budget.
- 36. What will happen to our congregation if half want to disaffiliate and half want to remain affiliated with the PC (USA)?** It depends on the process we use if we decide to disaffiliate from the PC (USA). If we follow the Presbytery GRD policy, we are required to have a 2/3 majority vote by the 30% quorum of the congregation. If half voted "no," then we would remain affiliated with the PC (USA). The real question, of course, is about MDPC being divided. People will vote the way they do for different reasons. Current research suggests that when a church votes to disaffiliate, many of those who voted "no" end up remaining in the church.
- 37. If two thirds of our members decide that it is best to disaffiliate, and one third decide it is best to remain affiliated with the PC (USA), how will the minority be protected and encouraged in their faith walks?** MDPC would need to work hard to practice forbearance and compassion, and seek to stay on the highest road possible. Preserving unity is a biblical imperative that cannot be ignored. The Presbytery will work with the minority to form a new congregation if desired.
- 38. Do the pastors vote on whether MDPC disaffiliates from the PC (USA)?** No. Pastors are members of Session and of the Presbytery. They do not vote in congregational meetings.
- 39. How long do we expect the process to take?** The DTF has committed itself to doing its work as expeditiously as possible, without being insensitive or reckless. If we choose to enter the Presbytery's GRD policy, the process could last six months to two years, although we would hope to complete the process as quickly as possible.
- 40. How can we prevent the negative "fallout" that First Presbyterian of Houston is experiencing?** MDPC has a different personality than any other Houston church. In reality, any decision on denominational issues could become divisive. It's acceptable for Christians to disagree, but how we disagree makes all the difference. When the issue becomes about power and control, everyone loses. When we seek the mind of Christ, make a decision, and move on in peace and unity, everyone wins.

41. **What time constraints are we under regarding future decisions about MDPC and PC (USA)?** None really. The only issue of consideration is that the Presbytery's GRD Policy is being revised (probably in March 2015), and the terms for dismissal will change. It's unclear how they will change, however, as the writing team is still receiving input. Another consideration is that the search for a new Senior Pastor is complicated by questions about MDPC's denominational affiliation.
42. **If other churches in the Houston area want to consider disaffiliating from the PC (USA), is there a possibility of disaffiliating from the PC (USA) along with these churches?** No. Each church should make this decision on its own, based on its values, personality, etc.
43. **Would we have to get involved in a messy public legal fight over our property if we decide to leave?** Not if we enter into the Presbytery's GRD policy, and if the Texas Supreme Court ruling is sustained.
44. **How much would it likely cost MDPC financially if we choose to disaffiliate from the PC (USA)?** Under the current GRD policy, we estimate currently that it would cost MDPC approximately \$800,000 (paid over a multi-year time frame) to be disaffiliated from the PC (USA).

G. ON MDPC'S PASTOR NOMINATING COMMITTEE (PNC)

45. **Is evaluating our relationship with the PC (USA) affecting our PNC?** Our PNC reports that the topic of denominational affiliation has been part of their discussion with potential candidates. They have been careful and deliberate to represent accurately MDPC, including our current denominational considerations, to every potential candidate. Likewise, the PNC understands rightly that it is not their role to influence MDPC's denominational affiliation. That decision belongs to the Session and congregation. The PNC is considering candidates who understand MDPC's unique ministry context, and are comfortable leading us in accord with our history, beliefs, values, and strategic initiatives.
46. **Should we wait for our next Senior Pastor to arrive before we evaluate MDPC's relationship with the PC (USA)?** No. While pastoral leadership is important, the decision to evaluate MDPC's relationship with the PC (USA) is the responsibility of the Session.

H. ON CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNICATION

47. **What has been the congregational response to the two letters sent out earlier by the clerk chair?** It's difficult to measure exactly. People have responded through conversations, letters, and emails, and just a few of these have been directed to the Session. It appears, from the responses received at MDPC to the July 29th letter of dissent, that there is a 10:1 ratio of support for the Session decision to dissent from certain GA decisions and actions.
48. **Will we be having a town hall meeting sometime to publicly discuss these matters?** This is still to be determined, but a town hall meeting to discuss the primary issue of MDPC's affiliation with the PC (USA) is likely.
49. **When will the Session have a recommendation for action (if any)?** The DTF will make its preliminary report to the Session in October 2014. The process of educating and surveying the congregation, along with gathering relevant information on the issues, will take some time, but we expect that Session will receive a final report and recommendations by the end of 2014.
50. **How will MDPC be kept informed of the issues and deliberations?** Relevant items will be posted at mdpc.org, and will be emailed and mailed via USPS. This evaluation must be done with a high degree of transparency and trust. The process will be communicated clearly so that everyone knows the steps and progress.

I. MISCELLANEOUS

51. **We have just adopted and explained a new MDPC Mission statement. Will our ability to work toward our Mission be helped or hurt if MDPC disaffiliates from PC (USA) for, say, ECO?** MDPC's mission statement, core values, and strategic initiatives will remain the same regardless of the Presbyterian denomination to which we belong.