

MDPC and Denominational Discernment

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Part One

Released April 22, 2016

Introduction

MDPC has completed the first phase of its Denominational Discernment by conducting two Round Table events on April 14 and April 16, 2016. These conversations were honest, respectful, and gave all who attended a chance to have their voices heard on the questions asked.

The Round Table events were particularly helpful in revealing that many at MDPC are under-informed on some of the basic information pertaining to the structure and terminology of the Presbyterian Church (USA) [PC(USA)]. The following FAQ has been put together to provide this basic information, in order to help our congregation participate in the Discernment process in an informed way.

The information that follows is intended to present the basic facts, and be free from bias either in favor or against MDPC remaining affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (USA). The Q&As included here have been written and approved by MDPC's pastors.

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 9,000 congregations, 1.5 million members, and 20,000 pastors.*

2. **What are the other Presbyterian Denominations in the USA?**
 - *A Covenant Order of Evangelical 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. **What is MDPC's history with the PC(USA)?** *When MDPC was founded in 1955, it was part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). In the 1983 reunion of the PCUS and the UPCUSA (see #1 above), MDPC became a congregation of the PC(USA).*
4. **What is the General Assembly (GA)?** *The PC(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. 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 172 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.*
5. **What is the Presbytery?** *All Presbyterian churches are grouped into regional "councils" called Presbyteries. There are 172 Presbyteries in the PC(USA). 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.*
6. **What is the Synod?** *All Presbyteries are grouped into regional "councils" called Synods. There are 16 Synods in the PC(USA). MDPC belongs to the Synod of the Sun, which includes 11 Presbyteries in four states. The Synod's role is to coordinate and oversee the work of its respective Presbyteries.*
7. **What is the Session?** *The Session of a local Presbyterian church is the "council" that has the primary authority in a local congregation. It is comprised of men and women who have been nominated by the church's Nominating Committee, and elected by the congregation during a Congregational Meeting. Session also includes all ordained and installed PC(USA) pastors who also are entitled to vote. In general terms, the Session serves two important functions: (1) to represent the larger congregation in decision making, and (2) to lead the congregation in accordance with God's perceived will. There are many other functions of the Session, which include things like approving the annual budget, etc. The authority of the Session is found in the Book of Order G-3.02.*
8. **Who are the Trustees?** *The MDPC Trustees are seven ruling elders, nominated by the Nominating Committee and elected by the congregation, whose responsibilities include having the power and authority to deal with real property matters. This includes having the power to hold and defend titles to the church property. See the Book of Order G-4.0101.*
9. **What is within the congregation's authority?** *The Book of Order states in G-1.0503 that a congregation has authority to do six things: (1) elect ruling elders, deacons, and trustees; (2) call a pastor, co-pastor, or associate pastor; (3) change existing pastoral relationships (terms of call, dissolving pastoral relationships); (4) buy, sell, or mortgage real property; (5) request the Presbytery to grant an exception to G-2.0404 (term of service for ruling elders); and (6) approve a plan for the creation, amendment, or dissolution of a congregational witness in G-5.05 (partnering with another church).*
10. **Has MDPC decided to disaffiliate from the Presbyterian Church (USA)?** *No. MDPC voted 75-25% on February 22, 2015 to enter the Presbytery of New Covenant's "Gracious Reconciliation and Dismissal Procedure" (GRDP). Since then, we paused to let the Senior Pastor Nominating Committee complete its work and call Alf Halvorson as our Senior Pastor. At Alf's request, we continued this pause to let Alf get to know MDPC. In January 2016, we began active Discernment plans.*

- 11. Isn't the decision to disaffiliate from the PC(USA) a foregone conclusion?** *No. While the authority to determine a local church's denominational affiliation resides with the Session, no such decision has been made. The Session is committed to having a fair process where a variety of viewpoints are expressed. Only after weighing the input from the congregation will the Session seek to discern God's will for MDPC's denominational affiliation.*
- 12. Does the congregation vote on denominational affiliation?** *No. The PC(USA) has determined that a congregational vote is unconstitutional. MDPC's Session has always considered congregational input an essential part of our Discernment Process, and will decide the best way to solicit the views of the congregation on these issues and how they will be provided to the Session for consideration.*
- 13. 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.*
- 14. If we were to disaffiliate from the PC(USA), with which denomination would we affiliate?** *If MDPC's Session 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. From the list of Presbyterian denominations above, the one most similar to the PC(USA) is A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), which grew out of the Fellowship of Presbyterians, a group our former Senior Pastor, Dave Peterson, helped establish. A key factor is that ECO universally affirms the ordination of women. A denominational comparison chart is available at mdpc.org that compares PC(USA), A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).*
- 15. What is the Trust Clause regarding church property?** *Prior to the 1983 Reunion of the PC(USA) and the UPC(USA), there was no Trust Clause for the "southern" PC(US) churches, the denomination 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.*
- 16. If MDPC decided to disaffiliate from the PC(USA), would we lose our property?** *No. MDPC's Session has settled the legal action with the Presbytery of New Covenant and has been given a "quit claim" deed to MDPC's property. In exchange for this "quit claim" deed, MDPC has signed a promissory note to continue funding the Presbytery of New Covenant for five years, totaling \$825,000.00 (\$13,570 per month for five years). In addition, a mission partner donation of \$125,000, payable over five years, also has been included. Furthermore, 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.*
- 17. 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), the ordained PC(USA) pastors may apply for transfer to the new Reformed denomination, or may ask the PC(USA) (Presbytery) to grant them permission to serve at a non-PC(USA) church. Both options are*

subject to approval by the respective Presbytery. The non-ordained staff is unaffected, since they are not under the jurisdiction of the Presbytery.

- 18. What about the Pastor's 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.*
- 19. Are MDPC's pastors prohibited from participating in the Discernment Process?** *No. While some Presbyteries have taken aggressive action against clergy who participate in conversations about denominational affiliation, this is not the current approach of the Presbytery of New Covenant. 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.*
- 20. Are MDPC's Foundational Principles somehow in jeopardy?** *MDPC was founded on the centrality of Jesus Christ, the centrality of prayer, and the centrality of generosity (Dollar for Dollar giving). In addition, the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20 (The Great Commission) have been a central focus for MDPC: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." These principles are part of MDPC's DNA and should continue regardless of the denomination to which MDPC is affiliated.*