

# A SUMMARY OF DENOMINATIONAL ISSUES

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In February of 2015, the MDPC congregation voted in a 75% to 25% decision to enter into Denominational Discernment. Because MDPC was in the process of calling a new Senior Pastor, the Discernment Process was put on hold until after Dr. Halvorson was installed and had time to get acclimated and develop a feel for the will of the congregation. In April of 2016, the Process officially began when a Discernment Team was selected by Dr. Halvorson, and work began on structuring Round Table Talks, Informational Meetings, and a Survey that would allow the MDPC Session to be aware of the thoughts and opinions of the MDPC congregation regarding whether or not to disaffiliate from the PC(USA). The Discernment Team members are **Chris Arend, Mary Lee Going, John Hartman, Melinda Jackson, Buz Jochetz, Lydia Junek, Andrew Miller, Robin Sturgis, John Van Osdall, Brett Wagner, Alf Halvorson, and Paul Nazarian**, a representative from the Presbytery of New Covenant.

After thorough research and discussion, it was decided by the MDPC Session on April 25, 2016, that, should MDPC make the decision to disaffiliate with the PC(USA), we would subsequently affiliate with ECO: A Covenant of Evangelical Presbyterians.

This document contains a balanced presentation of the cases to be made in favor of each denomination. Contained herein are the side-by-side views of both

ECO and PC(USA) on many of the issues that are important in this denominational discussion.

The next step in this process is for **members** to go online to take a brief survey about your opinion on affiliation. Before doing so, please carefully read the enclosed information so that you can make a well-informed decision.

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**For important information regarding the survey process, please turn to page 11 of this publication.**

ECO is committed to a clearly-articulated, Christ-centered theology which professes that Jesus Christ is the sole path to salvation. In the gospel of John (14:6) Jesus says “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”. This belief is at the core of ECO’s theology and as such is included in the Essential Tenets. Pastors and elders must affirm the Essential Tenets of ECO as part of the ordination process.

The written position of PC(USA) is similar to that of ECO in that Christ is clearly recognized as the way to salvation. However, PC(USA) has chosen to practice “mutual forbearance” on this central belief. As a result, in the 2011 Presbyterian Panel Survey only 41% of Presbyterian ministers surveyed “strongly agreed or agreed” with a statement on salvation through Christ alone. Pastors who openly disavow the Lordship of Jesus Christ are allowed to retain their ordinations.

One of the founding principles of ECO is the uniting of pastors and congregations around a common theological core. The goal is not to be same-minded, but like-minded. ECO affirms that theological consensus around certain essentials is foundational for a healthy denomination. As a covenant community, our unity derives from a clearly articulated theology that is Christ-centered, Reformed, and evangelical.

In its Essential Tenets ECO states that “*We are able to confess Jesus Christ as Lord and God only through the work of the Holy Spirit.*”

*“In union with Christ through the power of the Spirit we are brought into right relation with the Father, who receives us as His adopted children. Jesus Christ is the only Way to this adoption, the sole path by which sinners become children of God, for He is the only-begotten Son, and it is only in union with Him that a believer is able to know God as Father.”*

### **Defined Core Theology and Behavioral Expectations –**

One of the main concerns for many individuals and congregations who have chosen to leave the PC(USA) is that it has not defined essential theology and behavior requirements and has chosen to not remove pastors who do not agree with the written position of PC(USA) as evidenced by the Confessions.

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.

The PC(USA) General Assembly overwhelming approved in 2002 a document entitled “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ” that includes this powerful statement:

*Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. No one is saved by virtue of inherent goodness or admirable living, for “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” [Ephesians 2.8]. No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ. Yet we do not presume to limit the sovereign freedom of “God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of truth” [1 Timothy 2.4]. Thus, we neither restrict the grace of God to those who profess explicit faith in Christ nor assume that all people are saved regardless of faith. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.*

This is what the PC(USA) believes about Jesus Christ. “No one is saved apart from God’s gracious redemption in Jesus Christ.” To whom redemption is extended is God’s work. This is a beautiful statement of the Reformed faith, and a reminder that we are in no position to judge, second-guess or even understand the wideness of God’s grace.

Additionally, the ordination question asked of all pastors and elders in PC(USA) states as follows “Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior, acknowledge Him Lord of all and Head of the church, and through Him believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”

The Presbyterian Outlook magazine in 2011 carried the results of a survey of many PC(USA) pastors that included the following question: “*Only followers of Jesus Christ can be saved*”. Only 41% responded “yes”, and critics have used this to argue that PC(USA) has weakened its commitment to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Dr. Charles Wiley, coordinator of the PC(USA) Mission Agency’s office of Theology and Worship, says that a response of “no” to that statement is consistent with orthodox reformed theology. Had the survey statement been “*Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord*”, the clear response would be “Yes.” Reformed theology emphasizes that salvation is the work of God and not of followers. God, in His sovereignty, can save whomever God chooses to save.

**Summary:** Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him. Grace, love, and communion belong to God, and are not ours to determine.

ECO believes the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God, which teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. The prominence of God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives.

The clearest declaration of God's glory is found in His Word, both incarnate and written. The Son eternally proceeds from the Father as His Word, the full expression of the Father's nature, and since in the incarnation the Word became flesh, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are offered to His disciples. The written Word grants us those treasures, proclaims the saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and graciously teaches all that is necessary for faith and life. We glorify God by recognizing and receiving His authoritative self-revelation, both in the **infallible** Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and also in the incarnation of God the Son. We affirm that the same Holy Spirit who overshadowed the virgin Mary also inspired the writing and preservation of the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit testifies to the authority of God's Word and illumines our hearts and minds so that we might receive both the Scriptures and Christ Himself aright. We confess that God alone is Lord of the conscience, but this freedom is for the purpose of allowing us to be subject always and primarily to God's Word. Therefore, ECO professes the authority (not just guidance) of the Bible.

**Book of Order Changes** - PC(USA) has in practice moved away from an interpretation of Scripture based on reference to other Scripture and traditional church teachings towards a practice that interprets Scripture in light of scientific, social and cultural developments as well as personal experience. This shift is visible in the recent changes to the PC(USA) Book of Order which eliminated the language from the standards for ordination that *"Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church."* to *"Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."* Many people who are in favor of leaving the PC(USA) view the change in language from *"in obedience to Scripture"* to *"guided by Scripture"* as a weakening of the authority afforded the Scripture in assessing leadership candidates suitability for service. This concern is reinforced by the 220th (2012) General Assembly's rejection of a proposal that called for the Book of Order to revert back to the prior language that *"those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church."*

**Definition of Marriage** - The General Assembly changed the definition of marriage in the Book of Order from "between a man and a woman" to "between two people, traditionally a man and a woman." See more on the Marriage topic for more detail.

The Book of Order states "The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit, **the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's word to you.**" Throughout its constitution, the denomination pledges obedience to Jesus Christ alone.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments there is scripture that is in conflict with other scripture.

When elders or pastors are ordained, the questions asked reveal an important hierarchy. The first question speaks of **trust in Jesus Christ your Savior**. The reformed tradition emphasizes salvation as a work of Christ—our following is not what enables our salvation; it is rather an act of gratitude for salvation. Then the second question asks us **to accept** the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal. Then comes the third question, which asks us to sincerely **receive and adopt** the Reformed faith as expressed in the **confessions** of our church. Note the different verbs in these questions? "Trust in Jesus Christ...", "Accept the Scriptures..." and "receive and adopt what's expressed in the confessions..." And then comes the fourth ordination question, which is: "Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and be continually guided by our confessions?"

Catch that hierarchy: obedience, authority, and guided by. We do not regard Scripture as the object of the same obedience that we owe to the living Word, Jesus Christ.

**Summary:** The Book of Order states "The scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's word to you." Throughout its constitution, the denomination pledges obedience to Jesus Christ alone. Note: **We do not regard Scripture as the object of the same obedience that we owe to the living Word, Jesus Christ.**

Broad and undefined theological differences are not healthy for the church. There need to be boundaries that while offering freedom to disagree in appropriate areas, provide a common set of beliefs that constitute the nucleus of the church. Consequently, the ordination vows for teaching elders and ruling elders in both the PC(USA) and ECO require those ordained to “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith”. However, the PC(USA) has chosen not to name the essentials, and not to hold leaders accountable to the standards expressed in the Confessions. “Freedom of conscience” has been offered as the excuse for progressive agendas that do not conform to the Confessions.

MDPC has already adopted the Essential Tenets of ECO through our membership in the Fellowship Community, which was started by several prominent PC(USA) pastors including Rev. Dr. Dave Peterson.

The complete list of Essential Tenets of ECO (and MDPC) is on their website. Summary List:

- Scripture is infallible and authoritative in matters of faith and life and we are to live in obedience to God’s Word.
- The only hope of salvation is God’s grace in Jesus Christ.
- Affirms the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of Jesus Christ as fully human and fully divine.
- Jesus Christ was sent from the Father, ascended to the Father in His resurrected body, and will one day return to judge the living and the dead.
- The Lord’s Supper is open to all who profess belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
- The offices of Teaching Elder, Ruling Elder and Deacon are open to both men and women. ECO does not ordain non-celibate gay and lesbian clergy.
- Marriage in the church is between a man and a woman as established by God at the creation.
- The Book of Confessions is a secondary authority as a faithful exposition of the Word of God. (This is same as that adopted by the PCUSA).

A church is defined by its center not by its boundaries. With no center to provide a nucleus to hold people together, the church fractures and people drift away. This has been the experience of the PC(USA).

Enforcement of Ordination Vows - The core beliefs and values contained in the ordination vows could provide these tenets if PC(USA) leaders were held accountable to them. In the PC(USA), it appears discipline related to the enforcement of ordination vows is inconsistent and waning.

The PC(USA) has not reduced the theological foundations of the church to a list of essential tenets. Rather, it sets forth what it believes and what it resolves to do in its tradition of theological wisdom, *The Book of Confessions* is Part I of the church’s Constitution. Part II of the Constitution is the initial section of the Book of Order which summarizes the key themes expressed in the confessions.

These themes include:

- faith in the triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit, and in Jesus Christ as Lord of all and head of the Church;
- acceptance of the Old and New Testament as the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and God’s word;
- commitment to the belief that we are saved by God’s grace alone, to which we respond in faith;
- the election of God’s people for service as well as for salvation.

These traditions have stood the test of time and confirm that the PC(USA) has not softened or weakened its stance on the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Essential Tenets, as adopted by ECO, represent a consensus of the new denomination at a particular point in time on what aspects of its theology are essential. Tenets can be created to argue against some ideas not liked or considered threatening. Over time the general agreement at a specific point in time can change. However, once written down, a tenet takes on a confessional status and is very hard to change or remove. In the specific case of the Essential Tenets of ECO, 1/3 of the voting members of 1/3 of the presbyteries can prevent any change to these statements. This is a very high hurdle.

The Fellowship Community within the PC(USA), of which MDPC is a member, has an identical list of Essential Tenets to that of ECO. However, there are two important differences. First, MDPC, as a member church of PC(USA) can change its position on any part these tenets at any point in the future. That is not possible if MDPC is a member of ECO. In addition, every ECO elder and pastor must sign onto this list of Essential Tenets as a prerequisite for serving. This is not required as a member of the Fellowship Community within the PC(USA). Requiring each new leader to sign onto this list could reduce the rich diversity of viewpoints we have traditionally enjoyed within our pastoral and lay leadership.

**Summary:** The PC(USA) has not reduced the theological foundations of the church to a list of essential tenets. Rather, it sets forth what it believes and what it resolves to do in its tradition of theological wisdom. The Book of Confessions is Part I of the church’s Constitution. Part II of the Constitution is the initial section of the Book of Order which summarizes the key themes expressed in the confessions.

ECO believes in living out the whole of the Great Commission – including evangelism, spiritual formation, compassion, and redemptive justice – in our communities and around the world. For this reason, ECO has as a priority global engagement to support congregations in their contribution to the Great Commission. Because ECO seeks to function differently than traditional denominations, the mission approach emphasizes the role of the local church in mission locally and globally.

**Dollar for Dollar** - MDPC's commitment to missional outreach through dollar for dollar will not change as a result of leaving PC(USA). On the contrary, our radical giving will be welcomed at ECO. Our mission partners work with many denominations and have been told by outreach committee that a change in denomination will not affect our current outreach programs. In fact, only a handful of our current mission partners are affiliated with PC (USA).

**Relief from Distractions** – Though PC(USA) also has a commitment to missional work, there are many distractions resulting from social and political activism which is permitted to dominate General Assembly. The 2014 GA spent 70% of its time on these issues. PC(USA) boasts a membership of 1,600,000, yet they have less than 170 missionaries. It boasts over 10,000 congregations, yet in 2012 it only chartered 4 congregations and planted 6 nationally. In the PC(USA) less than half of the congregations have an installed pastor. Meanwhile, ECO currently has 35 church plants in different stages of development and 150 congregations in the process of affiliating. As evidence of the decreasing emphasis on outreach and evangelism, we point to the decline in the number of missionaries under the care of PC(USA) from about 600 in the 1960s to 334 in 2002 and 169 in 2012. These trends just in the last 10 years are troubling for many who think current emphasis is misplaced.

ECO structures itself to encourage and bless the local congregations as missional churches in their local communities, instead of having a national agenda that requires the resources of the local congregations. ECO's five year goal is to baptize more than they bury. In 2015 the number of adult baptisms increased 139% over the previous year and the number of infant baptisms increased by 49.5%. They will do this by lifting up the centrality of the gospel, growing with an emerging generation of leaders, prioritizing a wave of church innovation, and creating an atmosphere of relational accountability.

The PC(USA) has a long and rich tradition of global mission throughout the world. World-renowned educational institutions like the American University in Cairo and in Beirut are the legacy of Presbyterian mission work in the 19th and 20th centuries. Partner churches in Korea, Brazil, Kenya, Malawi, Zambia, South Africa, and Cuba exist today because of the faithfulness of Presbyterians to mission in a global context. The PC(USA) and its predecessors have also given birth to schools and hospitals in the USA and around the world and its seminaries are in covenant relationships with seminaries in places such as Africa, Eastern Europe and soon in Cuba.

Presbyterian World Mission (PWM), the arm of PC(USA) charged with global mission, has a robust global presence, currently sponsoring about 170 missionaries and 90 Young Adult Volunteers (YAVs). The YAV program is one under which recent college graduates commit a year of their lives to mission work which can either be in USA or abroad. One PWM example is its global commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ is its partnership with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Egypt (EPCE), the largest Protestant church in the Middle East and the church that our missionaries planted over 150 years ago. The EPCE is presently planting 26 new churches in Egypt.

PC(USA) Disaster Relief is one of the most significant disaster relief organizations which provides help in time of great need to people throughout the world. PC(USA) had boots on the ground within 48 hours after the Nepal earthquakes.

PC(USA) reports that 140,000 people joined PC(USA) in 2013 and 2014, cumulatively. One new development is the "1001 New Worshiping Communities" initiative authorized by the General Assembly in 2012. It has resulted in over 300 new worshipping communities.

**Summary:** MDPC, with its historical commitment to "Dollar for Dollar", to outreach, and to mission, is ideally suited to work alongside of Presbyterian World Mission to leverage its people and financial resources for mission, both in the United States and around the world.

**Preserving our History** – Our history as Presbyterians starts with those who came before us. Our history is the same whether MDPC stays in the PC(USA) or joins ECO. In fact, it is this proud history that drives us towards ECO so we can preserve all that is good about the Presbyterian Church while positioning MDPC to focus on the Great Commission without distraction by political or social issues. The ECO movement, is less about leaving PC(USA) and more about joining ECO where MDPC can continue to flourish amongst likeminded congregations.

**History of ECO** - In the summer of 2010, seven pastors from the PC(USA) spoke of finding new ways to encourage each other in faith, ministry, and mission. They were concerned by the declining membership within their denomination (from 3.3 million to 1.6 million in 40 years). They worried that growing denominational disputes over theology and bureaucracy stole focus from their pastoral calling of sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and equipping a new generation to lead. These pastors dreamed of reclaiming a sense of covenanted community among leaders from a Presbyterian and Reformed heritage, and to find new ways for churches to connect, grow, and multiply. In January 2012, at a conference in Orlando with more than 2,200 in attendance, a new denomination was formed: ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

**MDPC's Fingerprints on ECO** – The original 7 pastors that met in 2010 included MDPC's pastor, The Rev. Dr. Dave Peterson. Dave Peterson shared with sessions and our congregation his sadness in the direction of PC(USA). As a result, MDPC's pastors, session, and congregation aided in the birth of The Fellowship of Presbyterians which was the genesis for the creation of ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

**Focus on Future** – ECO was created for the purpose of preserving our rich history and beliefs of the Presbyterian Church. The future is what drives those who are passionately focused on its core values. Please see the Essential Tenets section for a summary.

Although PC(USA) has many resources to offer its members, MDPC does not utilize many of these resources today. Resources like conference centers, ministries, missional agencies, and education curricula are plentiful to churches like MDPC today. PC(USA) seminaries accept students from many denominations and graduate candidates who may be called to ECO or other denominations. In addition, multi-denominational seminaries, such as Fuller Theological Seminary, which has one of their main campuses located in Houston, educates both PC(USA) and ECO pastors. ECO does not explicitly endorse any seminaries. It is willing to accept candidates from a variety of seminaries, provided they agree with the Essential Tenets and are willing to be held accountable by the hierarchical and relational accountability of ECO polity. This is especially helpful in the planting of ethnic churches.

The PC(USA) traces its lineage to the earliest American Presbyterian churches, and held its first General Assembly in 1789. Its theology is rooted in the Reformed preaching and worship of Calvin's congregation in Geneva and the work of Presbyterians in Scotland and Ireland in the mid-sixteenth century. The denomination is the result of a 1983 reunion of two Presbyterian traditions, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (Northern) and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern).

The PC(USA) is the largest of the several branches of the Presbyterian and Reformed family of churches in the US with (as of 2014) 9,829 congregations and 20,383 ordained teaching elders. There are approximately 1.67 million members, and 1-2 million additional adherents who are active in PC(USA) congregations but are not on the active rolls.

The denomination has been losing churches and total membership for a number of years as has every mainline denomination. That trend is likely to continue for a while longer as many small churches with aging congregations decline and some shut down. However, the PC(USA) has a number of larger, strong churches across the nation that have no intention of leaving and are growing.

As the PC(USA) looks to the future there are several things about which to be encouraged. One new development is the "1001 New *Worshipping Communities*" initiative authorized by the General Assembly in 2012. It has resulted in over 300 new worshipping communities, many of which are focused on the unchurched and take the church outside of its traditional comfort zone. The goal is to shift from an inward-focused, membership-maintenance model of church to a more outward, creative, and disciple-making expression of church. This is the kind of evangelical effort that could eventually turn around the decline in overall membership. In addition, the 10 seminaries of the PC(USA) are among some the best in the country and offer different specialties so candidates have a variety of options. Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, for example, has equipped itself with several offerings attractive to Hispanic theologians, including those interested in creating new worship communities. This network of seminaries provides an ongoing stream of well prepared new Presbyterian pastors.

Even though a significant number of more evangelical churches have left the PC(USA) there are about 180 churches that are part of the Fellowship Community, an organization founded by a group of pastors that included Dr. David Peterson, and in which MDPC is a member church. This group has pledged itself to remain in the PC(USA) and be an evangelical voice in this body of Christ. MDPC could be a leading voice in the Fellowship's goal to be a stronger voice in the denomination.

**Summary:** PC(USA) is the largest of the several branches of the Presbyterian and Reformed family of churches in the US with (as of 2014) 9,829 congregations and 20,383 ordained teaching elders (pastors). There are approximately 1.67 million members.

ECO was conceived with a goal of being a reformed body that keeps churches connected, but allows enough autonomy and flexibility that the local church will be able to flourish, thrive, and plant new churches. ECO has created an ordination process that is adaptable and flexible enough to meet the unique needs of each candidate. However, it is a rigorous process of assessment that has high expectations of candidates who need to be theologically astute, knowledgeable of Scripture, called and supported by their church community. Candidates must have already served the church successfully in multiple capacities.

In contrast to PC(USA), **ECO requires that ordained pastors and elders adhere to the Essential Tenets.** ECO has created an ordination process open to both men and women that is adaptable and flexible enough to meet the unique needs of each candidate, opening the ordination process to more ethnic pastors in accordance with its goal of planting more ethnic churches. However, ECO also created standards that give each Pastoral Ministry Ordination Team (PMOT) the flexibility to treat every candidate as an individual, called by God, to serve the church in the capacity of pastor.

The ECO ordination process is similar to PC(USA) but there are also some major differences.

### 1. No set timelines

A candidate can move quickly or slowly through the ordination process. This provides the candidate with the freedom to adapt the ordination process to their needs.

### 2. Examinations

While candidates still take four different ordination exams, these exams are not simply pass/fail tests. Instead, these tests are used to actually assess the candidates. An assessment is performed of what the candidate failed in the exam and then through interviews and written responses a way forward is developed with the candidate to work on the deficiency.

### 3. Prior Experience

Candidates are expected to have a great deal of ministry experience before applying for ordination in ECO. One of the goals of the original team who created the ECO ordination process was to dramatically drop the statistic of pastors leaving the ministry after their first five years.

As it continues to grow, ECO seeks a fresh invigorated perspective from called pastors to challenge us all to go deeper in our discipleship, to help the church stretch further in its proclamation of Jesus Christ who is the hope of the world, and to make a lasting impact in growing the Kingdom of God.

PC(USA): *“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life. It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve it in ordered ministries shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in this Constitution.”*

ECO: *“Ordaining bodies must ensure that all officers adhere to the Essential Tenets of ECO. Failure of officers to continue to adhere to these standards is grounds for a session or presbytery to remove an officer from service according to the Rules of Discipline in this Constitution.”*

The differences in these statements speak for themselves. While the two have much in common, a key difference exists in emphasis. PC(USA)’s standards set forth requirements founded primarily on the faith of the individual officer or pastor, while ECO’s Essential Tenets serve as the de facto standards. Those standards thus become a litmus test for the behavior of officers and pastors.

PC(USA)’s ten US seminaries, many theologians believe, offer the finest Christian theological education. All pastors must be seminary trained before they are eligible to be called by a PC(USA) congregation. Life experiences alone will not substitute for a seminary education.

ECO professes that God's Word over our lives shapes our priorities, and the unrivaled authority of the Bible directs our actions to be in concert with Christ's very best for our lives. Therefore, ECO turns to biblical truth for the standard of marriage. There are a number of references to marriage in the Bible. Genesis 2:23-24 says "This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called 'woman', for she was taken out of man. That is why a man leaves his father and mother and unites with his wife, and they become a new family." In Matthew 19:4-6 Jesus says "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator *made them male and female*, and said, '*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and will be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh*'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Based on obedience to the Bible, **ECO Polity and Discipline** says "We therefore hold one another accountable to maintain chastity in thought and deed, being faithful within the **covenant of marriage between a man and a woman as established by God** at the creation or embracing a celibate life as established by Jesus in the new covenant..."

In contrast, during the 2014 General Assembly the **PC(USA) amended its Book of Order to say** "Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. **Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people**, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives.

It is important to note that MDPC has continued to maintain the traditional definition of marriage between a man and a woman. Therefore, becoming a part of ECO will mean that we maintain our current standard.

ECO's Essential Tenets call for marriage between a man and a woman and celibacy for singles.

PC(USA) describes marriage as follows: "*Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives.*" PC(USA)'s language was added in 2014, replacing language that contemplated marriage exclusively between a man and a woman.

In The Book of Order, the pastor has discretion to determine if two people are prepared to undertake the serious obligations of marriage, regardless of their gender.

The Book of Order provides that sessions have discretion whether to approve the use of a church's sacred space for any ceremony of marriage. So the denomination cannot compel pastors to violate their own consciences on this matter, or to compel sessions to violate theirs.

Contrary to the claims of some, PC(USA) never requires churches or pastors to perform same-sex weddings. PC(USA) does not single out celibacy as a requirement for unmarried members or officers in the church. ECO does require adherence to celibacy on the part of single pastors and officers.

**Summary:** The denomination cannot compel pastors to violate their own consciences on this matter, or to compel sessions to violate theirs.

ECO believes social justice and political activism are important, but should be separate from the bringing the gospel to a broken world. However, they do not believe this should be done on the national rather the congregational level. ECO encourages the local churches to do this work in their communities as they focus on kingdom building work.

In the PC(USA), during the 221th General Assembly held in 2014 the General Assembly discussed several social justice items including approximately 20 items including calling for revision of the US Tax Code to redistribute wealth through progressive taxation, elimination of deductions for mortgage interest and charitable contribution, elimination of housing allowance for pastors, calling for registration of all guns and regulation of all ammunition, disapproving a study on the plight of unwanted children, and disapproving an overture to replace the words “guided by Scripture” in the ordination vows to “obedient to Scripture.”

During the 2014 General Assembly, the PC(USA) took the following actions:

- **Definition of Marriage** - The definition of marriage was changed from “between a man and a woman” to “between two people, traditionally a man and a woman.”
- **Israel/Palestinian Issue** - Approved an overture directing the divestment of stock holdings in Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, and Caterpillar because of the use of their products in the West Bank by the Israeli government.
- **Fossil Fuels Issue** – Considered an overture directing the divestment of companies related to fossil fuels. As a result, our Presbytery and some of our own MDPC members have spent countless hours and resources working through the process to attempt a reversal of the proposed divestment strategy.

**Political Issues** - During the last ten years the PC(USA) Constitutional Services office of the General Assembly in consultation with the Advisory Committee on Litigation has filed 22 amicus (friend of the court) briefs on a wide variety of issues including: Support of the Affordable Health Care Act; Opposition to the display of the Ten Commandments; Abolishment of capital punishment; Restrictions on the constitutional right to bear arms; Right of detainees at Guantanamo Bay to sue in United States courts; Welcoming immigrant brothers and sisters; Addressing global climate change; Fair food and farm policy; Preventing violence against women; Reducing military spending; Use of drones by the United States military

**In summary**, ECO believes that social justice is important and should be addressed by the church. However, there is not a national agenda. Each congregation is encouraged to take positions and actions in their local communities. This enables the resources (time and money) to be spent locally rather than asking the local member churches to fund the administrative burden necessary for a national effort.

Fred Craddock, the great preacher, said “there is not one single square inch of creation upon which, if you look hard enough, you cannot find carved there the initials of God”. His point was that God cares about God’s world, every inch of it, and since God cares about the world, we are called to care about it too. John Calvin, when he was leading the Church in Geneva, was as passionately interested in the hospitals and schools and sewer systems as he was in the spiritual life of the churches under his charge. And so it is that Presbyterians have historically felt responsible to speak both to the Church and to the world.

Because we believe that God cares, Presbyterians have historically taken positions on social justice issues, including the movements for Abolition, Woman’s Rights, Civil Rights and L.G.B.T acceptance and inclusiveness.

PC(USA) will continue to be a strong voice on issues of social justice to leverage our voices with 10,000 other Presbyterian churches. This is more impactful than ECO’s strategy of leaving the addressing of social justice issues up to local churches whose individual voices will be faint.

To witness our commitment to social concern the process of change often happens from the ground up. A session sends an overture to the presbytery, and the presbytery debates it, and, if approved, sends it to the General Assembly. The overture is assigned to a relevant G.A. committee for debate and, if approved, sends the overture to the floor of the General Assembly for debate and a vote. Since the United States form of government is patterned on the Presbyterian form, you can sense the similarities of governance.

Heath Rada, Moderator of PC(USA)’s General Assembly and other leaders are concerned G.A. meetings devote too much energy debating current social issues. Some decisions, like divestment of three companies doing business with Israel, have generated divisiveness. Several Overtures on the agenda for this summer’s G.A. meeting propose changes that would reduce the focus on issues dividing Presbyterians placing more focus on the thing that unites us.

G.A. debated, but reached no decision, on the divestment of stocks in companies producing fossil fuels. The matter is on the agenda this summer. A group in our Synod of the Sun developed an opposing view pointing out the many fallacies of divestment as a strategy to address climate change. We developed three overtures seeking to turn the PC(USA) away from divestment. Our position has now been endorsed by two influential leadership groups within PC(USA). We are quite hopeful that the denomination will see the folly of divestment and reject that overture this summer.

**Summary:** Jesus spoke out regularly on social injustices. If today’s Christians do not speak out, who will?

## Denominational Structure

### ECO

The polity of ECO and PC(USA) are similar, although ECO has only three layers: session, presbytery, and synod, while the PC(USA) has four layers: session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly. However, ECO aspires to reclaim a sense of covenanted biblical community, where unity is derived from a shared mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ more than structural mandate. Congregations will gather together not to debate process or policy, but to collaborate, share best practices, encourage a Jesus way of life, and spur one another on to love and good deeds. Many aspects of ECO polity rely on the good work of our Presbyterian heritage, while other parts are new; all these recommendations require ongoing willingness to adapt along the way. As a new denomination, our bias is to encourage a spirit of innovation, of Spirit-filled risk-taking that might lead to new possibilities not yet in sight.

#### The Distinctive Elements of ECO Polity:

- Flat, nimble structure to facilitate an atmosphere of high trust, high accountability, low control.
- Affirmations of micro-expressions of church, with smaller worshiping bodies supported
- Commissioning of elders and deacons for greater service
- Fostering accountability and encouragement through the local presbytery and Mission Affinity Groups
- Churches retain full ownership rights to their property
- Less time and money invested in maintaining a denominational structure
- More time invested in training pastors and leaders

ECO offers an annual National Gathering in different places around the country. It is a conference that includes meetings of the Synod as well as various equipping seminars and plenary speakers. Through its church planting initiative it provides training conferences several times per year and regional gatherings. ECO values leadership development through coach certification events for mentorship training and missional leadership workshops.

### PC(USA)

The structure (organization and governance) of PC(USA) has evolved over hundreds of years. However, at its core is a representative form of government that has performed effectively, if not perfectly, since the 18th century. ECO, in existence only since 2012, has adopted much of that form of government and is also founded on principles of representation. The specifics of ECO's structure, however, are by definition a work-in-progress.

Key differences exist in both the size and organization of the two denominations.

ECO's is flatter, with three levels of governance. PC(USA), which is ten times the size of ECO, has four. PC(USA)'s General Assembly is its highest body, with representation from all lower entities. It meets and debates in a fashion similar to a congress. ECO's highest ruling authority is its Synod Executive Committee, which is comprised of between six and nine individuals.

MDPC belongs to the Presbytery of the New Covenant, including 106 churches and church plants in SE Texas. The local ECO Presbytery covers all of Texas and Louisiana and currently includes 22 churches. PC(USA) includes 172 presbyteries while ECO currently has 13.

PC(USA)'s Book of Order, which covers Presbyterian Polity, Form of Government, Directory for Worship, and Rules of Discipline is the guiding organizational document for the denomination. Its antecedents go back as far as the Reformation. It establishes significant oversight authorities for the discipline of the church. ECO's polity is less mature. In light of its rich history, the structure and governance of PC(USA) reflects a mature denomination with a proven structure and process. While not perfect, this maturity enables PC(USA) to focus on mission and not on the growing pains of starting a new denomination.

**Summary:** PC(USA)'s governance has developed over generations of congregations living in unity and its growing pains are behind it.

# MDPC Members!

## Your participation is needed for an important survey.

Each MDPC member will have the opportunity to express their opinion through a brief survey recording their thoughts on continued affiliation with the PC(USA), or a new affiliation with ECO. The results of this anonymous survey, conducted by an objective third party, will be provided to the MDPC Session before its final vote on whether or not to disaffiliate from the PC(USA).

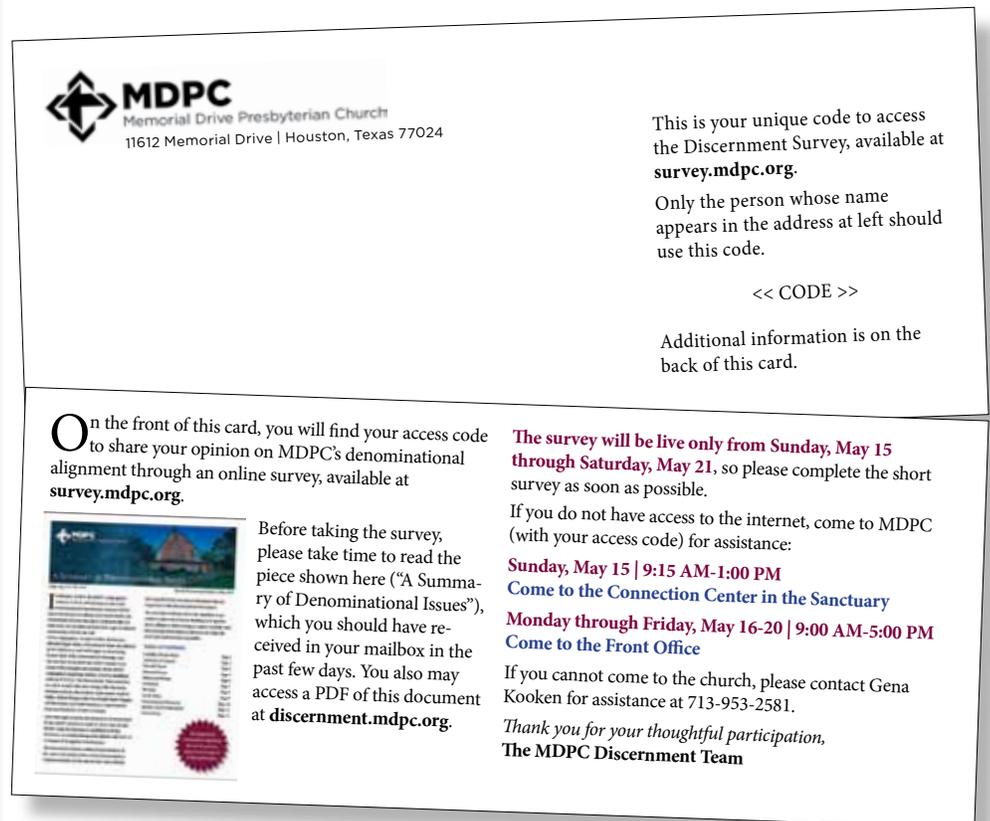
The survey is for members only and will require a personalized access code, which will be mailed to each eligible member in your household by separate post. The graphic below shows an example of the piece that you will be receiving (note: mailing times can be unpredictable, so you may have already received your codes). Instructions for taking the survey will be provided in the access code mailout.

The survey is only open for one week (**May 15-21**), so please complete the short survey as soon as possible. Go to **survey.mdpc.org**. Assistance will be provided for those who do not have access to the internet, and additional instructions will be included on the access code mailing.



**MDPC**  
Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church  
11612 Memorial Drive | Houston, Texas 77024

**IMPORTANT DISCERNMENT INFORMATION:**  
Your unique survey code is enclosed.



**MDPC**  
Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church  
11612 Memorial Drive | Houston, Texas 77024

This is your unique code to access the Discernment Survey, available at **survey.mdpc.org**.  
Only the person whose name appears in the address at left should use this code.

<< CODE >>

Additional information is on the back of this card.

On the front of this card, you will find your access code to share your opinion on MDPC's denominational alignment through an online survey, available at **survey.mdpc.org**.

Before taking the survey, please take time to read the piece shown here ("A Summary of Denominational Issues"), which you should have received in your mailbox in the past few days. You also may access a PDF of this document at **discernment.mdpc.org**.

**The survey will be live only from Sunday, May 15 through Saturday, May 21**, so please complete the short survey as soon as possible.

If you do not have access to the internet, come to MDPC (with your access code) for assistance:

**Sunday, May 15 | 9:15 AM-1:00 PM**  
**Come to the Connection Center in the Sanctuary**

**Monday through Friday, May 16-20 | 9:00 AM-5:00 PM**  
**Come to the Front Office**

If you cannot come to the church, please contact Gena Kooken for assistance at 713-953-2581.

*Thank you for your thoughtful participation,*  
**The MDPC Discernment Team**



Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church

11612 Memorial Drive  
Houston, Texas 77024

# Sent To Serve

## Summer Service Opps

“As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.” John 20:21

Following Pastor Alf’s Sent By the Savior Sermon series, we hope you’ve heard God’s call to go out into the city and beyond to share the love and hope found in Jesus Christ.

For details on opportunities, visit [sent.mdpc.org](http://sent.mdpc.org).

