

Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church

Loving God. Proclaiming Christ. Living Generously. Engaging All.

Date: June 6, 2016
To: The Presbytery of New Covenant
From: MDPC Discernment Team
Subject: Final Report

Introduction

For the past decade or more, Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church has expressed concern about the direction of the Presbyterian Church USA. Historically, MDPC has provided substantial financial support to the Presbytery of New Covenant and to other PC(USA) causes and initiatives, and has participated in the ministry of the PC(USA) through the contributed time and talents of many members and pastors, serving in numerous areas of denominational life. But concern for the direction of the denomination has ultimately forced MDPC to evaluate its relationship with the PC(USA).

In addition to participating in many areas of denominational life, MDPC has also participated in several initiatives which have sought to bring renewal and vitality to the PC(USA). These have included Presbyterians for Renewal, Presbyterian Global Fellowship, and The Fellowship of Presbyterians. We have found encouragement from partnering with churches and Christian leaders who share similar core values, and who are committed to the imperatives of the Great Commission, Christian discipleship, and missional living.

We believe that the recent actions of the General Assembly have only highlighted further the differences between the denomination and MDPC's foundational values, theology and ministry priorities. These growing differences have prompted the conclusions and actions which are outlined in this Report.

Pre-Discernment

In response to the 2014 General Assembly, the Session of MPDC approved the formation of a Denominational Task Force. The mission of this Task Force was: (1) to provide information to MDPC regarding key denominational issues, (2) to survey MDPC members regarding their views on these key denominational issues, (3) to monitor these key denominational issues and assess how other churches were reacting, and (4) to report findings to the Session in November 2014.

TAG Consulting was used to survey the congregation, and the results showed a strong disapproval of many of the policies and positions of the PC(USA). In addition, the survey showed that 55% of MDPC's members recommended disaffiliating from the

PC(USA), 21% recommended remaining affiliated with the PC(USA), and 24% were undecided. Also telling was the data which showed that if MDPC remained affiliated with the PC(USA), 24% of our members indicated they would leave MDPC for another church.

The Denominational Task Force presented the findings to the Session in November and December 2014. Following a time of thoughtful discussion, including input from non-Session members who were given privilege of the floor, the Session voted by paper ballot 38-7 to call a congregational meeting for February 22, 2015 for the purpose of asking the congregation to vote on a motion to enter the New Covenant Presbytery's 2011 *Gracious Reconciliation and Dismissal Procedure*.

Discernment, Part One

The congregation met on February 22, 2015 during the 9:45am worship hour to consider whether or not MDPC should enter the 2011 GRDP. The Rev. Dr. Winfield "Casey" Jones was asked to serve as guest Moderator. The motion was put before the congregation by MDPC's Clerk of Session. Orderly and respectful discussion followed, with speakers alternating between support or opposition of the motion. Of the 1,133 votes cast, 839 (75%) voted in favor of the motion, and MDPC began making plans to enter the 2011 GRDP.

At the time of this congregational meeting, MDPC was aware that the 2011 GRDP was under review and that a revised GRDP would likely be approved by the New Covenant Presbytery. Knowing of potential changes in the GRDP, and believing that these changes were not favorable to MDPC's context and ministry, MDPC and Presbytery agreed that, if MDPC voted to enter the Discernment Process, we would be grandfathered into the 2011 GRDP as provided in that document.

A revised GRDP was approved by Presbytery in July 2015. It contained three notable components which had bearing on MDPC's denominational discernment process: (1) The 2015 GRDP required an explicit affirmation of the PC(USA)'s property Trust Clause, (2) It eliminated the ability to calculate a precise, formulaic cost for dismissal prior to beginning the GRDP, and (3) It provided that the congregation did not have the jurisdiction or authority to conduct a vote on denominational affiliation.

MDPC was searching for a new Senior Pastor at the time of the February 22, 2015 congregational vote. MDPC and the Presbytery of New Covenant mutually agreed to pause any denominational discernment activity until after the installation of MDPC's new Senior Pastor, and to commence the process only after the new Senior Pastor had several months to become acclimated to MDPC's congregation, ethos and mission.

The Rev. Dr. Alf Halvorson was called to be Senior Pastor at MDPC, and arrived in Houston in July 2015. MDPC agreed with Dr. Halvorson to delay the start of active denominational discernment for approximately six months to allow him to settle in and

get to know MDPC's congregation. During these months, Dr. and Mrs. Halvorson met with many different people and groups, including multiple meetings with the organized group and its leaders which favored remaining in the PC(USA), *Good News MDPC*.

Discernment, Part Two

In January 2016, MDPC returned to active consideration of its denominational affiliation. This started with some preliminary conversations between TE Alf Halvorson, TE Dave Steane and RE Bob Giles from MDPC, and with TE Mike Cole and TE Lynn Hargrove from the Presbytery. We explored how the 2011 GRDP differed from the 2015 GRDP, and concluded that some form of a customized process would be needed for MDPC.

Negotiations with the Presbytery staff did not produce a customized process that was acceptable to MDPC. MDPC was repeatedly told that we were grandfathered into the 2011 GRDP, but that the PC(USA) had determined that elements of that policy were unconstitutional and thus our discernment process could result in a challenge within our Presbytery or by another Council of the PC(USA).

Of particular concern to MDPC was ensuring that there would be no required affirmation of the property Trust Clause, that MDPC would retain clear title to its property and assets, and that MDPC's property would not be included in any negotiations and/or formulas for determining a financial exit package.

When Presbytery's General Council rejected MDPC's proposals, MDPC's Trustees determined action was necessary to protect MDPC's property, pastors and Session. By a unanimous vote of MDPC's Trustees, and a 42-3 vote of MDPC's Session, MDPC filed a lawsuit seeking (1) a declaratory judgment that the church possesses clear title to its property and that the PC(USA) Trust Clause does not apply (under the neutral principles of law in Texas), and (2) a Temporary Restraining Order protecting MDPC pastors and Session from any Presbytery intervention or interference.

Following a series of negotiations, and in just six weeks, MDPC and the Presbytery of New Covenant agreed on terms for settlement. This settlement included: (1) \$825,000 to be paid by MDPC to the New Covenant Presbytery over five years, effectively guaranteeing MDPC's continued outreach support for that time frame; (2) \$125,000 to be paid by MDPC to the New Covenant Presbytery and distributed to mutually-agreed presbytery-related mission partners; (3) protection for MDPC's pastors, staff and Session against disciplinary action from any entity of the PC(USA); and (4) a severance guarantee in the event one or more of MDPC's pastors could no longer serve MDPC as a result of the denominational discernment process and decision.

Discernment, Part Three

MDPC's Session voted on 42-3 to concur with the legal action taken by MDPC's Trustees at a called "executive session" meeting on March 7, 2016. Included in the agenda for that meeting was a presentation by Moderator Alf Halvorson to form a Discernment Team for the purpose of developing the specific process MDPC would use to reach a decision on its denominational affiliation. The team would consist of twelve people: six at-large members, four active Session members, one MDPC staff member, and one Presbytery representative mutually agreed upon by MDPC and the Presbytery of New Covenant.

The Session approved the following names for MDPC's Discernment Team: Session members RE John Hartman, RE Melinda Jackson, RE Buz Jochetz, RE Robin Sturgis, plus At-large members RE John Van Osdall, RE Mary Lee Going, RE Lydia Junek, RE Brett Wagner, RE Chris Arend and Andrew Miller. TE Alf Halvorson served as Moderator/Facilitator. MDPC and Presbytery agreed on TE Paul Nazarian to serve as the representative from Presbytery.

MDPC's Discernment Team included a diversity of views on MDPC's denominational affiliation. Of the MDPC members, three were strongly in favor of disaffiliating from the PC(USA), three were strongly in favor of remaining affiliated with the PC(USA), and four were undecided about MDPC's denominational affiliation. All members of the Discernment Team had a vote except for the Moderator/Facilitator who had voice but no vote. During the meetings, all members had ample opportunity to speak if they chose to do so.

The Presbytery of New Covenant was consulted and contributed to the formation of MDPC's Discernment Team, and provided both guidance and support to the process and plans as they were being developed.

The Discernment Team met eleven times over the course of two months to plan and implement a fair and open process of discerning God's will for MDPC. Each Discernment Team meeting was opened and closed in prayer for wisdom, guidance, and peaceful resolutions. The meetings included introductions, shared faith stories and understanding of the spiritual and theological issues at stake. The Presbytery Representative guided the group in a prayerful dialogue on foundational theological issues as stated in the 2011 GRDP, page 5.

The Discernment Team created a process of prayer and discernment to listen to the concerns, sensitivities and questions of the congregation. The gatherings included the following events and, in order to attain maximum participation, they were held at various times with childcare provided. These events included:

- Six prayer meetings on Wednesday evenings from April 13-May 27.

- Four Round Table Talks helped the members of the congregation express their feelings and voice their views to Session and the Discernment Team.
- Two Informational Meetings where leading authorities from PC(USA) (TE Ted Wardlaw and TE Blaire Monie) and ECO (Rev. Dr. Jim Davis and RE Jody Harrington) shared their views in a Q&A format, and where the Discernment Team wrote the questions for the speakers to prepare responses. Questions from the Round Table Talks were also included. These Informational Meetings were video-taped and made available on the church's website.
- One Informational Meeting where MDPC's eight pastors shared their views on denominational affiliation. The pastors also answered all questions from the audience. Members, visitors, and guests were invited to attend. TE Casey Jones moderated the event. This meeting was also video-taped and made available in the church's website.
- Written information was also provided to the congregation, especially to help those who were not computer savvy. All written materials were developed, edited and approved by MDPD's Discernment Team, and each perspective (pro-PC(USA) or pro-ECO) was presented as written by their respective advocates. There was great effort made in getting information to our congregation via USPS, email, MDPC website, and paper copies at the church. The written information included:
 - Bulletin Inserts
 - Discernment Event & Process Calendar
 - Denominational Discernment events details
 - FAQ Response to The Round Table Talks and FAQ, Part II
 - Side-by-side comparison of PC(USA) and ECO on key issues
 - Denominational Comparison Charts (one by the PC(USA); one by MDPC)

A major issue for MDPC's Discernment Team was finding a method for gathering the congregation's views on denominational affiliation. The PC(USA) had determined that the authority for such a decision lies with the Session and not the congregation, and that if a congregation were to meet on this issue, the meeting and vote could only be advisory. Therefore, MDPC's Discernment Team sought an alternative plan which would preserve the spirit of the 2011 GRDP by allowing congregational input, but not violating the Constitution regarding the scope of a congregation's authority. The Discernment Team also wanted to do everything possible to preserve unity and avoid situations where division and hostility might emerge.

The Discernment Team evaluated the benefits and liabilities of having a congregational meeting, and determined that this was not a prudent option. The rationale was:

- Congregations of the Presbyterian Church USA are governed by the Constitution of the PC(USA) (Book of Order *Preface*).

- The Constitution of the PC(USA) states that all meetings and councils are to follow the most recent version of Robert's Rules of Order (G-3.0105).
- Robert's Rules of Order (page 429) states, "*A motion to take an informal straw poll to 'test the water' is not in order because it neither adopts nor rejects a measure and hence is meaningless and dilatory.*"

Thus, MDPC's Discernment Team decided to utilize a congregational survey as a means to gather input in order to inform the Session regarding the congregation's recommendation on denominational affiliation.

Discernment, Part Four

One of the key questions for MDPC was, *if MDPC disaffiliated from the PC(USA), with whom would MDPC affiliate?* At the April 25, 2016 stated Session meeting, presentations were made on each of the alternative Reformed denominations to which MDPC might be dismissed, if MDPC determined that disaffiliation from the PC(USA) was God's will. The presentations included The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), The Cumberland Presbyterian Church (and other smaller Reformed denominations), ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO), and even the idea of MDPC becoming an Independent congregation.

After careful review, the Session agreed that, if MDPC were to disaffiliate from the PC(USA), the only viable option would be to affiliate with ECO. A motion was made and seconded to that effect, and MDPC's Session voted by voice and approved ECO as our destination, if MDPC determined that disaffiliation from the PC(USA) was God's will.

Instead of using TAG Consulting, the Discernment Team decided to use ReconMR, a Texas-based consulting and research firm. ReconMR proved to be highly professional, cost-effective and expeditious in this task.

The survey consisted of a few basic demographic questions, then asked: *With which denomination should MDPC affiliate? A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians or the Presbyterian Church USA?* Each active member of MDPC received a first-class mailing which included the side-by-side comparison of ECO and PC(USA) on key issues, survey instructions, and a unique access code for each member, which must be entered to complete the survey, and which could only be entered once. Additionally, MDPC made arrangements for members who would not/could not complete the survey online. These responses were entered into the survey by MDPC staff, with the understanding of strict confidentiality.

The survey was open for eight days, from May 15-22, 2016. When the survey closed, ReconMR reported the following results to MDPC on May 23, 2016:

- 1,168 MDPC members completed the survey (one-third of active membership)
- 79% recommended affiliation with ECO
- 21% recommended affiliation with PC(USA)

A spreadsheet is attached which provides the raw data of the survey.

On May 23, 2016, MDPC's Session met for its stated monthly meeting. Following the conclusion of regular business, MDPC's Session went into "executive session" to consider the survey results. The survey was discussed in detail, and all present had the opportunity to speak to the issue of MDPC's denominational affiliation. The following motion was made and seconded: *Shall Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church disaffiliate from the Presbyterian Church USA and affiliate with A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians?*

In preparation for this vote, MDPC's Session gathered for a time of corporate prayer, and celebrated the Lord's Supper to affirm our oneness in Jesus Christ.

The vote was taken by written ballot, and the results were that 47 voted YES and 8 voted NO. The motion carried with an 85% majority.

The following day, May 24, 2016, MDPC's staff and congregation were notified of the Session's decision. This was done in person, through email, and through USPS. The Presbytery of New Covenant was also notified, as was The Rev. Dr. Dana Allin, Synod Executive for ECO.

Going Forward

With the decision now made to disaffiliate from the PC(USA) and affiliate with ECO, MDPC now turns its attention to transition and healing.

With the filing of this Report and an accompanying letter from MDPC's Clerk of Session, Jere Overdyke, we have asked to be placed on the July 16, 2016 Presbytery Docket with a motion to dismiss MDPC from the PC(USA)'s New Covenant Presbytery to ECO's Texas & Louisiana Presbytery. MDPC has already begun conversations with ECO representatives about working with those MDPC pastors who wish to have their ordination transferred to ECO. Likewise, MDPC will soon be submitting its application to be received into ECO as a congregation. Additionally, MDPC is developing a plan to transition its staff from the PC(USA) Board of Pensions to ECO's equivalent(s).

While there was clearly a strong majority of both the congregation and Session who determined that MDPC should affiliate with ECO, we are also mindful that a portion of our MDPC family are in the minority. These members may experience understandable pain, loss and grief from this discernment process and the final decision. We affirm the long-standing truth that God chooses to reveal His will through the voice of the

majority. We are thankful for such a clear revelation for MDPC, but we still grieve for those who disagree with the decision.

To foster reconciliation and healing, MDPC plans to conduct several ministries where people who are concerned about our move to ECO can be cared for, prayed for, and supported. These include:

- A meeting with Presbytery representatives to discuss membership options for those who do not wish to remain at MDPC.
- Three planned classes/informational meetings focusing on sharing, grief recovery, reconciliation and healing.
- Counseling and support by MDPC's Caring Ministries, pastoral staff and Stephen Ministers.
- Ministry and service opportunities for the congregation to come together in mission.
- Encouraging members to reach out to members to foster Christian unity and community.

Conclusion

MDPC has enjoyed and celebrated our partnership with the Presbytery of New Covenant. The Presbytery has provided a faithful witness to Jesus Christ in one of the most diverse cities in the USA. MDPC's decision to disaffiliate from the PC(USA) is not a rejection of the Presbytery. Rather, we have concluded that the PC(USA) no longer represents the theological foundation and ideology upon which MDPC was founded and continues to exist today. We believe that ECO will better support and encourage us to fulfill what Christ has called us to be and do. We trust that there will be ways for us to keep partnering together with the Presbytery of New Covenant in mission and discipleship, for the Glory of God and the furtherance of the Kingdom.