

Presbytery of Boston
Presbytery's Work Group
Final Report -- First Reading
March 26, 2012 Meeting of Presbytery

Presbytery's Work Group was elected at the March 2011 stated meeting of the presbytery and given the task

to draft a process and protocol for responding if and when a congregation of the Presbytery expresses interest or takes action to depart the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

After circulating a draft report and considering the comments of the Presbytery, this final report is now presented to the Presbytery for a First Reading at the March 26, 2012 Presbytery meeting, and for a Second Reading and adoption at the May 19, 2012 Presbytery meeting. The report consists of the following elements:

1. a statement of general principles which have guided the Work Group in its task;
2. proposed amendments to presbytery's Standing Rules to create a cooperative process between presbytery and congregation to reach a mutually agreeable outcome;
3. a statement of assumptions that would be fundamental to presbytery's actions in any case of a congregation's departure from the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

General Principles

1. Foremost in our minds and basic to our work is that the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ is a gracious gift from God. Whether that fact is viewed from a perspective of a church in distress about continuing in membership in the Presbytery of Boston or from a contrasting perspective of distress about a church's reluctance to continue in its membership, we affirm that the whole Presbytery of Boston has a responsibility to listen to, and with integrity respond to, the thoughtful reflections of its member churches and of its enrolled teaching elders.
2. The unity of the Presbytery of Boston is derived from our presbytery's life within the interdependencies of this denomination as one expression of the Body of Christ. We appeal to and rely on that identity of faith, and also to the constitutional commitments of order by which all our teaching elders, ruling elders and deacons have promised to abide. Without our faith-identity we are no more than any secular organization that has a mission statement, a payroll, factions, market-share issues, etc., and which must exercise power to protect the organization's property and resources. At the same time, only as we live together according to our constitutional order have we legal standing with the privilege of voice and vote to change the provisions of that constitutional order as it provides for spiritual community and shared mission in the name of Jesus Christ.
3. As individuals and churches of the Presbytery of Boston, our most significant membership is in the Body of Christ.

4. At the same time, with acknowledged distinctives and differences we Presbyterians live out the dynamics of our unity within the living Body of Christ as matters to be organized under our Constitution (Parts I and II).

Proposed Amendments to the Standing Rules

14.
 - a. **The session of a congregation that contemplates seeking presbytery's approval of an action under G-3.0303 (b) (moving, dividing, being dismissed or being dissolved) or under G-5.05 (entering into joint witness with another denomination) may invite presbytery to create a response team. Creation of a response team should occur expeditiously, without further inquiry, and ideally within one month.**
 - b. **The function of the response team shall be to accompany the session and congregation as they discern the way in which God is calling them to live out their future ministry as part of the church of Jesus Christ, taking care to seek to hear the breadth of opinions represented.**
 - c. **The response team shall consist of three ruling or teaching elders, none being members or staff in the congregation involved. The three members are named, one each, by the session, the chair of the committee on ministry, and the moderator of presbytery. It shall be the responsibility of the moderator to name the last member, with attention to ensuring a balanced team. The intent of the selection process is to choose a response team that will enjoy the trust of the session, congregation and presbytery. The moderator and stated clerk shall maintain a list of ruling and teaching elders who are open to such service, although selection is not limited to those so listed.**
 - d. **When the discernment process determines that the congregation's continued ministry within the Presbytery of Boston will most clearly fulfill its call to further the work of the church of Jesus Christ, the response team will report this conclusion to the presbytery with thanksgiving.**
 - e. **When the discernment process identifies actions on the part of presbytery, the implementation of which might allow the congregation to continue in good conscience to witness to the Gospel within the Presbytery of Boston, the Team is empowered to recommend to the presbytery, through its Council, any such actions.**

- f. **If the response team and session, in their discernment process, conclude that an action contemplated in paragraph (a) of this rule is warranted, the response team is to work with the session and congregation to propose a plan of action that will 1) treat fairly the interests of both the congregation and the presbytery, including financial and legal interests; and 2) provide for actions to be taken in such a way that all involved will be able to affirm continued unity in the Church of Jesus Christ, regardless of the forms that their on-going ministries may take. Once a plan of action is formulated, the session and response team will communicate the plan to presbytery's council, along with a request for creation of an administrative commission (G-3.0109b) to implement the plan. No member of the response team will be eligible for election to any administrative commission so created.**
- g. **In the case of any of the outcomes identified in paragraphs d, e, or f, the response team and session are encouraged to plan an appropriate liturgical occasion to allow members of the congregation and presbytery to celebrate their history of ministry together, to offer each other blessings for the new forms of ministry towards which they are moving, and to join in recommitting themselves to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.**
- h. **Should the discernment process fail to reach a consensus, the response team shall report this conclusion to the Presbytery, which shall dismiss the team with its appreciation.**

14.

- 15. When the Presbytery Council learns from the session of a congregation, through direct communication to Council or through indirect communication with an officer, staff member or committee of the presbytery, that the congregation or the session contemplates ~~seeking Presbytery's approval of an action under G-110103(i) (division, dismissal or dissolution of the church) or G-16.0000 (creation of a union church)~~, **an action listed in paragraph (a) of Rule E 14, Council will advise the session of the opportunity to seek creation of a response team under that rule. If a response team is not sought, or if a response team is appointed and then dismissed under paragraph (h) of Rule E 14, Council will consider the need for the appointment of an administrative commission to support the congregation through its discernment process and, if an administrative commission is warranted will propose appointment**

of such a commission at the next stated meeting of the presbytery or at a special meeting called for that purpose.

Assumptions

While recognizing that any situation in which a congregation seeks to depart the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (USA) will have its own unique factors, Presbytery will be governed by the following fundamental assumptions in each specific situation, whether the situation proceeds with or without a response team as defined by the proposed amendments to the Standing Rules:

1. The resolution of each case will include clear provisions to resolve any outstanding indebtedness of the congregation.
2. The resolution of each case will include clear provisions to resolve all issues of real property (buildings and land).
3. All parties (presbytery, congregation and session) are called upon to avoid civil suits or actions.
4. The bringing of a civil suit or action by a congregation or session will force the Presbytery to stop the response team process and proceed as necessary to protect its interests and responsibilities, including the possible use of civil legal remedies.

Respectfully Submitted,

Ward Holder (chair)

Kevin Ford

Elliott Hipp

Cathy MacDonald

Bill McIvor

Mary Lou Smith

Perry Smith