



The SPC Post

May 2010
Volume IV, Issue V
Spotsylvania Presbyterian Church



Presbytery Action on Dismissing Churches

By Alan Hager

At the last meeting of the Presbytery of the James (the Presbytery of which SPC is a member) a proposal was adopted to handle churches that were intending to depart the Presbyterian Church USA denomination. The approved process was the result of over a year long reflection by a designated study group. While only one of the 113 churches of the POJ has sought to leave the denomination, the proposal was a response to the reality that dozens of PCUSA congregations have attempted to depart with their property over the last several years.

The approved plan begins with a statement that it is hoped it will not actually need to be implemented and that alternative solutions of remaining together as a unified body can be reached. The document includes an overall process for the format and sequence of meetings that need to occur as a congregation deliberates about leaving and then negotiates a departure. There are no predetermined figures or formulas for financial arrangements that might be imposed on departing churches. Such a cost has become the norm for churches that seek to leave the denomination. A copy of the policy can be found in the church office.

Why is such a policy necessary and why are churches leaving the PCUSA? In some respects, the nature of churches leaving can be seen as a “wave” that has been preceded by previous waves of departure, such as when a group of Presbyterian churches left the mainline denomination in 1973 to form the PCA, and again in 1982 to form the EPC. These are Presbyterian denominations that share a similar form of government and heritage as the PCUSA, but have taken a more conservative stance on issues of morality and doctrine. In general, the previous waves of departure related to a growing sense that the Presbyterian Church (it actually was not called the PCUSA until 1983) had drifted away from a clear understanding of the authority of the Bible. This doctrinal shift was reflected in particular examples of morality and teaching.

The recent “wave” of churches leaving the PCUSA continues the general concern about the authority of the Bible, but has unique applications as well. In the area of morality, the debate has centered on the issue of considering candidates as officers of the church who are sexually active outside of marriage. This has expanded to debates on the nature of marriage itself. Other “hot topic” issues include the PCUSA’s stance on political matters such as the environment, business, and the nation of Israel.

Besides the specific contention over morality and doctrinal issues, there is a growing sense of weariness by people within the denomination. This is not simply a matter of growing tired of contending for Biblical truth -- for we will always be engaged in that battle until we enter the rest of Heaven. Rather, the weariness that has prompted people and congregations to depart is the feeling of not being able to have a fair debate and process to handle the challenges that every denomination and body of believers will face.

A specific case in point has been the incorporation of Authoritative Interpretations to determine the church’s important position on ordination standards. While the traditional process for handling important matters like this yielded what many felt was a clear Biblical position, namely, that officers of the church had to live in fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness, the obscure tactic of Authoritative Interpretation (AI) was employed as a means to circumvent that requirement. Of course people will disagree with this assessment of the situation, but that is what it feels like to many who have left or are considering leaving. I think it is no coincidence that when this “approach” was adopted in 2006, dozens of churches began the process of withdrawing even though it was (and is) still far from certain what the exact significance of the AI actually entails.

In general, it appears that churches leave because they cannot fulfill their mission within the context of the denomination of which they are a member. For Presbyterians, that often means building on the historic legacy of reformed faith and teaching that has had a positive impact on both the church and our country. So it is not necessarily departing congregations that are changing their views and ministries, but the changes of the denomination that prompt considerations of leaving. As some have stated it, “I do not feel like I am leaving my denomination, but that my denomination has left me.”

Our General Assembly meets this summer and the session will be not only be following these deliberations closely, but will provide opportunities for prayer and reflection concerning the important matters facing our church. As you continue to pray for SPC and our denomination, take some time to review some previous articles on who we are as a church called “SPC in Focus”, which you can find at the church website to find more helpful background information.