

## *Letter to the Congregation*

### *Introduction*

This letter is being written on behalf of a group of Trinity members who have come together with the common desire to ensure that the process leading towards Trinity's Request for Dismissal from the PC(USA) is conducted in a fair and informed manner. For want of a better name, the group goes by "The Fairness Group." Most members of the group are long time Trinity members and many have been elders or deacons in past years.

We have been concerned that the process leading up to the straw poll was not balanced, was not sufficiently informative and did not provide alternative viewpoints. In an effort to ensure fairness, we asked Session to allow a presentation from both viewpoints - the viewpoint of leaving and the viewpoint of staying. Session graciously granted that request and the presentations by Rev. Tankersley and Rev. Watkins took place on September 29<sup>th</sup> and October 1<sup>st</sup>.

Many in the Fairness Group have a desire to remain with the PC(USA) and see the benefits of being affiliated with the Presbytery of Los Ranchos. Many feel that life under the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) is not well envisioned and that many important polity issues remain unresolved. Still others are concerned about the narrowing of Trinity to only certain Scriptural views and positions.

The purpose of this letter is to let the Congregation know that some at Trinity have concerns with regard to what seems likely at this point to be a Request for Dismissal from PC(USA). Based on the results of the straw poll, we realize that many of you may have already made the decision that leaving would be in Trinity's best interest. We believe, however, that there are some of you who have not had adequate information to make an informed decision and we hope that this letter will give you some points to consider. For those of you who are firm in your decision to leave PC(USA), we hope that this letter will allow you a better understanding of the different perspectives that are held by some of your fellow members.

### *Letter From Session*

Session sent members a letter called "Reasons for Considering Making a Request for Dismissal To Another Reformed Denomination" which we will refer to as the "Reasons document." From this letter and other letters sent by Session earlier this year, three main reasons emerge as driving forces behind Session's desire to leave PC(USA). These are 1) theological, ideological, political, social and moral shifts in American society that have

been reflected in PC(USA); 2) behavioral faithfulness, with the change in behavioral standards for officers being the focus; and 3) a claimed lack of forward focus and freedom in our denominational partnership. This letter will address all three main points.

### *Shifts in American Society/Effect on PC(USA)*

We submit that the degree of liberalization that has taken place in PC(USA) has been overstated by its critics, that its effect on Trinity is negligible to non-existent and that there is merit to remaining engaged in the debate from within PC(USA).

The PC(USA) is governed first and foremost by the Bible. This and its interpretation in our Book of Confessions is clear on the importance of unity within the church, the value of covenant fellowship and the call to love and support our brothers and sisters in the faith. This is seen in Jesus' instructions to his disciples and in Paul's letters to the churches in Asia Minor. (John 17:20-23, 1 Corinthians 1:10 and Ephesians 4:11-16) There is no evidence in scripture that Jesus or the apostles ever envisioned the church splitting into a multitude of factions.

It is true that Paul, as the early church encountered serious heresies and even pagan idolatry in some of its congregations, conceded that it would be necessary to expunge heresy from the Church (2 Corinthians 6:14-18, 7:1) and, of course, the Protestant reformation was launched in reaction to the (Catholic) church's perceived apostasy in important theological and ethical matters. However, these schisms are viewed as inherently undesirable and only to be taken in severe cases of heresy or unfaithfulness. Clearly, there have been actions taken by PC(USA) that upset some but do they meet the scriptural standards for schism – which in effect is what occurring by the request to leave PC(USA)? We think the answer is “no” and that our common grounds are much greater than our differences.

Trinity's reasons document implies that a Reformed understanding of Scripture informs us that cultural shifts should not have an impact on what we believe or how we believe. In contrast, we believe that cultural changes have affected our understanding and behavior in many ways beginning with Peter's ministry in Cornelius' house (Acts 10) and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. (See 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 for a guide to Paul's understanding of culture.)

In today's world, culture influences our understanding of divorce and remarriage (Mark 10:4-9), as well as the ordination of women (1 Corinthians 14:34-35) to give just two modern day examples. Attitudes are changing in our culture, specifically regarding the place of homosexuals. And, attitudes have changed at Trinity over the last decade or so,

not for everyone, but for a significant number of people, and will for more in the future. The capacity for this kind of change is consistent with Reformed thought.

The Reasons document suggests that Trinity has a way of interpreting the Bible that differs from the majority of PC(USA). No such hermeneutic (theory of textual interpretation) has been laid out that is notably distinct from others. Reading just in context does not tell us all we ought to know about language and culture, history, natural science, etc., in order to fully understand the text we read. This kind of extra-biblical information is regularly invoked at Trinity and correctly so. Even Tim Fearer, in his talks about the passages relevant to human sexuality, invoked cultural background to develop an understanding of those texts. We submit that differences may exist regarding the import of culture when it comes to understanding how the scriptures guide us in our faith and practice.

We believe that PC(USA) remains orthodox in its theology. The Presbyterian Church is a confessional church which means that we have written statements that clarify what we believe and how we interpret scripture. For PC(USA), these statements consist of creeds and confessional documents that are collected in our Book of Confessions. All of the theological statements you will find in the Book of Confessions are aligned with orthodox Reformed theology. This same Book of Confession (part of the constitution of the PC(USA)) is endorsed by ECO and the Fellowship of Presbyterians.

It is conceded by leadership that the homosexual issue is the flashpoint for the movement towards a Request for Dismissal. While different conclusions may be reached on a wide variety of issues, such as ordination standards, differing conclusions do not amount, necessarily, to different theologies. We suggest that a better course for Trinity would be to open up the discussion rather than isolating Trinity (by moving to ECO) from those with whom Trinity supposedly differs (PC(USA)).

Many of us believe that the claimed “theological drift” and the liberalization of policies regarding the relationship of the church to homosexual members has not proceeded far enough to warrant a schism, especially given the scriptural standard for unity in covenant fellowship. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Ephesians 4:3. Disagreement and conflict are not pleasant but God often calls us to do things which are uncomfortable. Many believe that we should not consider leaving until matters progress to a point where our leaving would meet scriptural standards. As a practical matter, there will always be disagreements. More conservative denominations continue to have conflict and unrest over just how conservative is conservative enough. As stated by Pastor Jerry Tankersley in a paper he wrote in June of this year, titled ‘Pastoral Report on the Presbyterian Church (USA)’:

We may not be of one mind on all issues. I am fairly sure that will not happen until Jesus returns to perfect the creation. Until then, we are called to “clothe ourselves in love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” Colossians 3:14  
....Those who withdraw from the PC(USA) seeking like-mindedness will inevitably confront their differences and be required to patiently forbear as they work together to build their fellowship. The truth is that all who transfer their churches into other Reformed congregations will also transfer their strengths and weaknesses, their gifts and their sins. ...

From a purely practical point of view, there is nothing compelling us to act now, other than our sense of discomfort with trends in PC(USA). We suspect that too few members are adequately informed about the true state of affairs in PC(USA), or about denominations we might want to join, to make an informed decision. We believe we should strive to identify and consider all the reasons for staying with PC(USA) as well as the reasons for changing our affiliation. Proceeding more slowly, taking time to make sure that all members really understand the issues, makes sense.

PC(USA) is by far the largest denomination in the Presbyterian family in America. When others examine the witness of Presbyterians in America, they look first and foremost to PC(USA). Conservative voices are needed to strengthen our witness to the world. To depart from PC(USA) would be to abdicate our role and to further diminish the voice of conservatives within PC(USA). Further, leaving PC(USA) will diminish the ability of the Presbytery of Los Ranchos to assist struggling, smaller churches.

The Bible calls the church the Bride of Christ. And, schisms are like divorces. We may be having a troubled marriage, but is divorce the best answer?

***Behavioral faithfulness, with a focus on the change in behavioral standards for officers***

One of the “reasons” given for Trinity’s desire to leave is: “Based on recent history and seeing the speed with which things are progressing now, we sense that if the current trends continue, our session and pastors may not be able to function according to their consciences and mutually shared understanding of biblical faith and practice.”

Interestingly, the Book of Order, which is one important part of the government of the PC(USA), has several passages on “freedom of conscience.” (Sections F 3.0107 and G 2.0105.) Section G 2.0105, states that “It is to be recognized...that ...one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church...”

The point is that while PC(USA) allows freedom of conscience, the Word of God governs the extent to which freedom of conscience is allowed. There cannot be any serious contention that so far, Trinity has been required to do anything that was against the conscience of its pastors or Session. In fact, Trinity's reasons document admits this. The desire to leave is based on some vague thought that this might happen in the future, rather than something that is happening now.

In contrast to PC(USA), which has substantial protections regarding freedom of conscience, ECO, the new denomination to which Session seems headed, does not go by the Book of Order. Rather, it has its own rules which do not provide for the same freedom of conscience that is enjoyed under PC(USA).

The ECO polity is governed by what are called "Essential Tenets" and these Tenets have been elevated to the point that they are "indispensable indicators of confessional convictions about what Scripture leads us to believe and do." (Second paragraph of page 1 of the Essential Tenets.) The ECO Essential Tenets go beyond what many of us consider to be foundational doctrines, such as those found in the Apostle's Creed, and include some on scriptural interpretation, e.g. matters of human sexuality. While some may find this comforting, many of us are concerned that the ECO rules go too far in restricting individual conscience in scriptural interpretation. We are concerned that the Essential Tenets elevate one form behavior it calls sin over all others and is a form of selective enforcement.

Trinity's reasons document says that "There is now a redefinition of behavioral faithfulness in the PC(USA)." So, how "new" is the new standard? Trinity's reasons document does not mention that the real change came in 1995/1996 when the behaviorally focused paragraph *was inserted*. 10A left the main paragraph intact but eliminated the behavior specific language. So, yes, there was a change with 10A but the standard is not new. It is the same criteria that was in place before 1995/1996.

G-2.0104 states, in part, that those called to special functions in the church, such as teaching or ruling elder or deacon:

"should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. ***Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.*** They must have the approval of God's people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church."

Trinity states in its reasons document that, "In a culture that is redefining sexuality and marriage relationships, our denomination no longer provides a clear statement of

expectations and definition regarding sexual mores as we understand the Scriptural mandate.” What about the understanding of Trinity’s leadership regarding applicable Bible passages or the mandate in G-2.0104 that an elder’s or deacon’s life *should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel*? Clearly, that has not changed.

Further, the ordination vows for elders and deacons in PC(USA) (Book of Order W-4.4003) commit each candidate to the essentials of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confession of the church. Subsection c asks each candidate to affirm the following:

Do you sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and will you be instructed and led by these confessions as you lead the people of God?

While there is no specific mention of sexual conduct in the new Book of Order section, the above provisions make clear that the life of a pastor, elder or deacon must be a demonstration of the Christian gospel. Importantly, *Trinity still has control over its leadership*. Selection of any pastor, elder or deacon is expressly contingent upon the approval of the congregation AND the session. While Trinity’s leadership may disagree with the 10A changes, the standards of the Bible and the confessions still apply. PC(USA) allows conservative congregations, like us, to choose their own leaders and handle homosexual relationships in a fashion that accords with our beliefs. Given these safeguards, the life of Trinity will not be affected.

### ***A claimed lack of forward focus and freedom in our denominational partnership***

Without explanation, Trinity’s reasons document claims that the “ongoing tension over what seem to be irreconcilable differences has reached a point where it impedes fellowship, ministry and pastoral care.” Are we not called to persevere through adversity? Will not the God who has guided us through previously difficult times guide us through this one? In reality, nothing at Trinity is being threatened. Trinity has the ability to choose its leaders and train its youth as it wishes. Simply put, Trinity’s reasons document expresses a desire to leave to be with similar minded people and avoid being on the minority end of some issues. Whether that is a valid reason to seek dismissal is a different question from whether there is a “crisis” or some harm to Trinity’s way of life.

As stated by Pastor Tankersley in his June 26, 2013 Report on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

The prophets of the Old Testament raged against Israel's unfaithfulness. The Apostle Paul addressed many issues of sin in the Corinthian church, but never advanced schism from the body of Christ. Just the opposite, he argued for the unity of the body of Christ, for the use of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit, and for the better way of love. He had the humility to confess that all of our knowledge is partial and that we see reality only dimly. Paul called the church to grow up into spiritual maturity, a maturity that could embrace, accept, forgive, and work for reconciliation.

## Conclusion

Thank you for taking the time to consider the points in this letter. We seek a continuation of the discernment process with dialogue on all the issues, to include those with a diverse viewpoint, so that the decision that is ultimately reached will be an informed one.

### Fairness Group Members authorizing the use of their names as signatories:

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Bruce Boyer (Elder)	Pam Frohreich	Michelle Lindfors (Elder)
Lois Boyer	Hugh Galt (Elder, Deacon)	Bonnie Meyer
Greg Cops	Lynn Galt	Melody Mosley (Elder)
Linda Cops	Chet Horton (Elder)	Chris Woods Moulson
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	Sandi Ishii	Irene Pietsch (Elder)
Eric Christensen (Former Teaching Elder)	Steve Ishii	Dave Solomon (Elder)
Richard Derby	Bob Johnson (Elder)	Mary Solomon
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