

## A Process for Discerning God's Will

**Summary:** This document outlines a process which allows a congregation to freely and gracefully discern God's direction as we process complicated and controversial issues within the PCUSA and the Los Ranchos Presbytery. The process is intended to be graceful, loving and fair to both the congregation and the presbytery as they discern God's will for their congregation. It gives a chance for each side to voice their concerns and for the congregation to make an informed and Spirit-lead decision.

**Tone:** Departing covenant relationship is never something to be taken lightly and the process outlined allows for openness and honesty, serious reflection and opportunities to discern together. It is our hope that we will be a testimony and reflection of the grace and love of God especially when a congregation and presbytery are facing something as challenging as leaving.

### Process Overview:

- 1) Session votes to enter process and contacts presbytery and enters the "discernment process" for leaving the Los Ranchos presbytery and or PCUSA.
- 2) A discernment team will be put into place with four representatives of the presbytery.
- 3) The discernment team will meet with the Pastor of the church – focus of this meeting is explaining process, listening to concerns, direction and prayer.
- 4) The discernment team will meet with the session – focus of this meeting is explaining process, listening to the session's concerns and prayer, also four elder representatives from the church will be added to the discernment team.
- 5) Meet with the congregation (first meeting) – Focus of discernment team is listening to congregational concerns and everyone will pray.
- 6) Meet with the congregation (second meeting) – Presbytery members of discernment team will lead this meeting, explaining procedure for dismissal, making the case for the congregation to stay and also addressing any perceived theological errors.
- 7) The discernment team will have at least two follow up meetings to further discern God's direction for the congregation.
- 8) If necessary a vote for dismissal will be taken at another congregational meeting with at least 50% in attendance (third meeting) – If 66% or higher vote to leave, the discernment team will recommend that presbytery dismiss the congregation.
- 9) Presbytery will vote and if 66% concur the congregation is dismissed.

**Presbytery Compensation** – The congregation will leave with its property and pay 3 years of presbytery per capita and 2 years of mission giving to allow the presbytery of Los Ranchos to adjust. Other financial factors may be considered as well.

1 **A Process for Discerning God’s Will**

2 **In the Relationship between the Presbytery of Los Ranchos and Its Member**  
3 **Congregations**

4 **When Member Churches Consider Dismissal from PC (USA)**

5 October 20, 2011

6

7 **PREAMBLE**

8 The Presbytery of Los Ranchos seeks to serve the Lord by supporting, building up, and  
9 celebrating our common ministry with fellow disciples of Jesus Christ. Our work is best  
10 accomplished as we strive to outdo one another in honor and exemplify the grace of  
11 our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with our  
12 brothers and sisters in Christ.[1]

13 We recognize that all of our actions are a testimony of Christian faith to the Lord and to  
14 a watching world. In season and out, we commit to striving to uphold one another,  
15 edify one another, reciprocate grace and transparency with one another, respect one  
16 another, affirm freedom of conscience and Christ’s calling in one another, and love one  
17 another, with the goal of Christ’s mission to be satisfied. We strive to further the work  
18 of Christ, honor the sanctity of the Lord, not further tarnish the label of “Christian,” and  
19 be the light of Christ in an increasingly dark world.[2]

20 The Presbytery of Los Ranchos is committed to walking alongside pastors, Sessions,  
21 and congregations that are considering or seeking dismissal from the Presbyterian  
22 Church (U.S.A.). No matter the outcome, this Presbytery is determined to create a  
23 gracious context and process in which the will of God is sought for the life, ministry,  
24 and calling of the particular congregation. This Presbytery commits itself and invites all  
25 congregations within it to pursue a broad and true understanding of God’s mission with  
26 a graciousness befitting those who claim Christ as Lord.

27 The history of the church, from the beginning, has been a history of controversy. Men  
28 and women of good will and sincere faith sometimes disagree. Paul and Barnabas had  
29 to separate for a season in order to continue their respective ministries (Acts 15:39).  
30 The church of Jesus Christ is divided into three great traditions: Protestant, Catholic,  
31 and Orthodox. The Protestant tradition is again divided into Anglican, Lutheran,  
32 Reformed (Presbyterian), and Anabaptist communions. In recent generations, we have  
33 also witnessed the reuniting of bodies that were once separated. God, in His wisdom,  
34 has permitted the church to grow through, and in spite of, these actions.

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1 In all matters relating to this subject, the following three questions will be deemed  
2 paramount:

3 1. Is God leading this particular congregation to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian  
4 Church (U.S.A.), or toward restoration of fellowship with the Presbyterian Church  
5 (U.S.A.)?

6 and

7 2. If God is leading this congregation to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church  
8 (U.S.A.), how can that dismissal be accomplished in a way that honors Jesus Christ  
9 and strengthens both the congregation and the Presbytery?

10 3. If God is leading this congregation toward restoration of fellowship with the  
11 Presbyterian Church (USA), how can that restoration be accomplished in a way that  
12 honors Jesus Christ and strengthens both the congregation and the Presbytery?

13 The Presbytery asks that any Session seeking or considering dismissal from the  
14 denomination will covenant with the Presbytery to enter into a defined process of  
15 mutual discernment to determine God's purpose. To seek God's will often require  
16 significant time and energy. We believe that a matter of this magnitude deserves  
17 focused attention and prayer by the Presbytery and local congregation whatever the  
18 specific outcome may be. This entire process should take no less than six months and  
19 may take more than one year.

20 The Presbytery is committed to this process and covenants to avoid litigation wherever  
21 and whenever possible. In fulfillment of Resolution 04-28 adopted by the 218th General  
22 Assembly, we recognize that the exercise of the process to "divide, dismiss, or dissolve  
23 churches in consultation with their members" (Book of Order, G-11.0103), if  
24 accomplished by litigation, "is deadly to the cause of Christ ... and our witness to Christ  
25 in the world around us." Therefore, we will carefully follow the principles of consistency,  
26 pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency.  
27 The presbytery also commits to not bring charges against any pastors that enter this  
28 process of discernment with their congregation.

29 The Trust Clause (G-8.0201) is meant to reflect the church's organic unity as it fulfills  
30 "The Great Ends of the Church," strengthening its ability to guide its member churches  
31 into their witness to the broader community. Because the Trust Clause is intended as a  
32 means of witness to our unity in the covenant of common mission, it is incumbent upon  
33 the Presbytery to act in a pastoral manner rather than in an adversarial manner to its  
34 member churches in regard to its provisions. The Presbytery of Los Ranchos commits to  
35 working toward avoiding the trauma of schism. For the sake of being a witness to the  
36 community, the Presbytery will deal with general issues of property in a pastoral way as  
37 a gracious witness rather than through strict legalism. Property is not the basis of our  
38 unity, nor is it to be the point of dissention among us.

1    **PROCEDURE**

2    A Session wishing to initiate this procedure shall put the matter to a vote. If the  
3    majority of the Session votes to initiate the discernment procedure, the clerk of Session  
4    shall contact the Presbytery office and inform the Stated Clerk of this desire. The  
5    Presbytery will then begin the work of recruiting Presbytery Member representatives for  
6    a Discernment Team.

7    The Discernment Team

8    The Discernment Team shall consist of four representatives from the congregation and  
9    four representatives from the Presbytery. Within one week of initial contact with the  
10   Stated Clerk, the Presbytery represented by the Moderators of Presbytery, Presbytery  
11   Council, and Committee on Ministry shall choose four representatives from the  
12   Presbytery from a pool of participants from Presbytery Council (or members of  
13   Presbytery chosen by Council as its representatives) and Committee on Ministry (or  
14   members of Presbytery chosen by Committee on Ministry as its representatives); this  
15   portion of the Discernment Team will begin its function immediately.

16   Meeting with the Pastor(s)

17   A meeting with the Pastor(s) of the congregation will be arranged within one month.  
18   During that meeting, the Presbytery members of the Discernment Team will introduce  
19   this process. The main functions of this gathering are to pray for the Pastor(s), listen to  
20   the Pastor(s), begin to understand the leading of the congregation, and start to  
21   determine whether the Session, the Pastor(s), the congregation, or another source is  
22   driving the desire for dismissal.

23   Meeting with the Session

24   A meeting between the Presbytery members of the Discernment Team and the Session  
25   will be scheduled for the church’s next regular Session meeting. Official membership for  
26   the congregation will be frozen at the time of that Session meeting until such time that  
27   the work of the Discernment Team and/or the Administrative Commission is completed.  
28   The main purposes of this gathering are to pray for the Lord’s leading, introduce the  
29   process, listen to the Session members, begin to understand the leading of the  
30   congregation, and start to determine whether the Session, the Pastor(s), the  
31   congregation, or another source is driving the desire for dismissal. At this Session  
32   meeting, a request will be made for four representatives from the congregation (ruling  
33   or teaching elders) to join the Discernment Team for the remainder of the Team’s work.  
34   The Session of the congregation shall choose the elders from the church (at least two  
35   active elders must participate); the Session will be asked to provide the names of the  
36   four representatives to the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery within two weeks’ time. At  
37   this Session Meeting, a date will be set for two open meetings with the congregation to  
38   be held within a four- to six-week period.

1 **Open Meetings with the Congregation**

2 An announcement will be made in all worship services at least once before the  
3 scheduled open meetings with the congregation; where possible, a Presbytery member  
4 of the Discernment Team will make at least one announcement advertising the  
5 upcoming open meetings. It will be made clear that these two open meetings are not  
6 official congregational meetings but are discernment and informational meetings; there  
7 will be no votes taken at these open meetings.

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9 Open Meeting #1

10 The pastor will begin this meeting with prayer, then a representative(s) of session (an  
11 elder or the pastor) will state very briefly (less than 5 minutes) a history of the  
12 congregation that brings the group to this point; in this history, it will be helpful to  
13 include the information that the Presbytery has met with the Pastor(s) and the Session  
14 regarding this issue, and has formed a Discernment Team, which is made up of 4 elders  
15 from the congregation and 4 members from the Presbytery. After the session  
16 representative(s) has brought the group to this point, the meeting will transition to an  
17 open forum, and it will be moderated by a Presbytery member of the Discernment  
18 Team. This portion of the meeting will center on the question: What specifically are the  
19 issues as you see them? At the end of the open forum, time will be given for earnest  
20 prayer for the congregation, its leadership, the Presbytery, and the Lord's work in all  
21 involved.

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23 Open Meeting #2

24 A Presbytery member of the Discernment Team will open this meeting with prayer. This  
25 meeting will focus on information. A brief understanding of polity, and a description of  
26 this process, will be given. Presbytery members will address any possible perceived  
27 theological error(s) present, as well as advantages of membership and compelling  
28 reasons to remain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) denomination. Prayer will be  
29 integral to this meeting.

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1    **Discernment Team Meetings**

2    The Presbytery Council shall appoint the moderator of the Discernment Team from the  
3    four Presbytery members of the Discernment Team; the moderator’s purpose is to  
4    facilitate the conversation so that each team member has an equal chance to  
5    participate. The moderator shall have an equal voice and vote with the other members  
6    of the Discernment Team. The Presbytery Pastor, Associate Presbytery Pastor, the  
7    Moderator of Presbytery, and the Stated Clerk of the Presbytery shall be ex officio  
8    members without vote of the Discernment Team and shall attend meetings as  
9    available. These shall be open meetings, with active members of the congregation  
10   welcome to attend and observe, but having neither voice nor vote.

11   Following the open meetings, the Discernment Team shall meet together at least two  
12   times within a six-month period. Team members should expect to spend two hours at  
13   each meeting.

14   **First Discernment Team Meeting**

15   During the first meeting, Discernment Team members will exchange extended  
16   introductions, sharing a portion of their faith stories and their understanding of the  
17   spiritual and theological issues at stake in the conflict between the church and the  
18   denomination/presbytery. The first meeting will primarily be a listening session.

19   Scripture teaches us to “honor everyone” (1 Peter 2:17). We recognize each participant  
20   in this process as a child of God, possessing a conscience formed by the Spirit of Christ  
21   under the guidance of Scripture. Presbyterian tradition recognizes that there are “truths  
22   and forms with respect to which persons of good character and principle may differ”;  
23   and with regard to these differences, it is our Christian duty “to exercise mutual  
24   forbearance toward each other” [G-1.0300 (5)].

25   **Second Discernment Team Meeting**

26   The second meeting will consist of a guided dialogue, facilitated by the moderator of  
27   the Discernment Team, on foundational theological issues. Members will be invited to  
28   share their personal understanding of various theological issues. The purpose of this  
29   discussion is to determine how much common theological ground exists between the  
30   congregation and the denomination/presbytery. Are the theological differences confined  
31   to certain issues, or do the conflicts run deeper to ecclesiological, Christological, or  
32   other foundational theological issues?

33   Estrangement and alienation between Christians are a consequence of sin. We cannot  
34   say to one another “I do not belong to the body” or “I have no need of you” (1  
35   Corinthians 12:14, 21). All of us must be willing to hear from each other the ways that  
36   we have hurt, excluded, and offended. Then we must admit our sin and ask God for the  
37   grace of repentance and the mercy of forgiveness.

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**Third and Subsequent Discernment Team Meetings (if necessary)**

The content of the third and subsequent meetings will be determined mutually by the members of the Discernment Team. In determining the content of these meetings, the team will consider feedback received from congregants and other Presbytery members. The Discernment Team will discuss at this meeting provisions for the Presbytery of Los Ranchos to provide pastoral leadership and ministry resources for those members wishing to remain united to the Presbyterian Church (USA).

It is the Presbytery's hope that through this process we will remember the consolation we have from love, the sharing in the Spirit we have enjoyed, and the compassion and sympathy we have for one another. Further, we will strive to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than ourselves. We will not look to our own interests but to the interests of others. Above all else, we will seek to have within us the mind of Christ who came as servant to all. (Philippians 2:1-11)

**Findings/Discernment Team Final Meeting with Congregation**

At least 30 days prior to the Discernment Team's final meeting with the congregation, written and verbal notice will be given to congregation members announcing this meeting. The purpose of this gathering is to determine the extent to which the congregation is unified in the decision to be dismissed from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At least 50% of the active role must be in attendance.

If the congregation vote is 66% or greater to be dismissed from the presbytery and/or denomination, then the congregation is considered to have met the threshold of unity and is, as one body, feeling led by the Lord to be transferred to another presbytery and/or denomination. At this point, the Discernment Team will recommend to the Presbytery to charge the Administrative Commission to begin the terms of dismissal (see Appendix A), including caring for those that desire to remain in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The Administrative Commission will be responsible for respecting and serving the interests of the Presbytery, and being humane and compassionate to the congregation. Once this process has reached the place of an Administrative Commission being called, the assumed outcome is dismissal. A time frame of no more than six months will be granted for the Administrative Commission to complete its business, generate terms of dismissal, and have the Presbytery and the congregation fully prepared for dismissal to a receiving denomination.

If the congregation fails to meet the threshold of unity, then the recommendation of the Discernment Team will be to not dismiss the congregation, and the issue will be referred to the Committee on Ministry to work for peace and reconciliation between the congregation and the Presbytery and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

1 **Report and Recommendations**

2 After completing the required sessions, the Discernment Team shall make a report and  
3 recommendation of its findings to the congregation and to the Presbytery regarding the  
4 future of the relationship between the Presbytery and the congregation.

5 At no time in the Discernment Team process will the congregation be officially  
6 dismissed from the denomination. Dismissal occurs only upon the vote of the  
7 Presbytery. If the final recommendation is dismissal the presbytery shall hold a vote at  
8 the next presbytery meeting and if 66% of the presbytery concurs with the team, the  
9 congregation will be graciously dismissed.

10 If at any time in these proceedings a majority of the Discernment Team determines  
11 grievous theological error on the part of the Session and/or pastor(s) and/or  
12 congregation, the process will be immediately halted and an Administrative Commission  
13 will be requested.

14 These policies and procedures shall take effect immediately upon approval by the  
15 Presbytery.

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17 **APPENDIX A: Process of Seeking Dismissal to another Reformed Body**

18 Upon completion of the discernment process described previously, a Session and  
19 congregation desiring to enter into the process of dismissal shall follow this procedure:

20 1. In an attitude of gracious expectation for a congregation that desires to  
21 withdraw with its property from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and desiring  
22 not to impede the ministry of either the departing congregation or the  
23 Presbytery, the departing congregation shall remit to the Presbytery a sum equal  
24 to three times the annual amount of the presbytery portion of per capita at the  
25 time the initial congregational meeting is held and it's average presbytery  
26 mission giving for two additional years. The discernment team may under  
27 extraordinary circumstances take into consideration the financial situation of the  
28 church and presbytery and any recent grants or monies given by either party to  
29 lessen or increase this amount. The use of these monies shall be determined by  
30 the Presbytery Council.

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32 2. The Administrative Commission shall work with the congregation to take all steps  
33 possible in order to provide for the pastoral care and congregational life of those  
34 members who do not wish to depart the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Their  
35 protection and nurture shall be a matter of paramount concern to both the  
36 departing congregation and the Presbytery.

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- 1       3. The Administrative Commission shall work with the congregation to pay off any  
2       loans outstanding to any entity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Any  
3       bequests or endowments naming the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as the sole  
4       beneficiary shall be transferred to the Presbytery of Los Ranchos, all others will  
5       be graciously negotiated. Matters of loans of the congregation held by non-  
6       Presbyterian entities are the responsibility of the congregation, and the  
7       Presbytery shall be legally relieved of any responsibility related to such loans.  
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- 9       4. The Administrative Commission shall work with the congregation to close out its  
10      financial and membership books as of the official date of dismissal. Such records  
11      shall be submitted to the Presbyterian Historical Society to be copied at the cost  
12      of the departing congregation (G-9.0406). The original documents shall be  
13      returned to the congregation when such copies have been completed.  
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- 15     5. The Administrative Commission shall work with the congregation to assist in the  
16     transfer of membership of members who do not desire to remain with the  
17     disaffiliating congregation.  
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- 19     6. The Administrative Commission shall work with the congregation regarding the  
20     following practical considerations:
  - 21     1. The status of minister(s) currently called or employed by the congregation:  
22     whether they shall remain with the congregation and transfer their ministerial  
23     status to the new denomination; or choose to remain within the Presbyterian  
24     Church (U.S.A.), and may need to look forward to seeking a new call.
  - 25     2. The status of any insurance policies held by the congregation with  
26     instrumentalities of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may need to be changed.
  - 27     3. The tax status of a congregation as a non-profit tax-exempt organization may  
28     need to be re-established under the new denomination to which the  
29     congregation is being dismissed.
  - 30     4. The corporate status of the congregation may need to be revised.
- 31     The Administrative Commission shall work with the congregation to offer a final worship  
32     service of commissioning, to celebrate our common life in Jesus Christ, and to pray for  
33     the effectiveness and well-being of both the congregation and the Presbytery. Those  
34     departing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) may be commissioned by the Presbytery to  
35     further their work for the kingdom as they go forward in ministry. The service may be  
36     jointly planned by members of the Presbytery Council and the Session, and all  
37     congregations of the Presbytery of Los Ranchos may be invited.
- 38     8. If at all possible a continued graceful relationship should be offered to the  
39     departing church from the presbytery.  
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1 9. If a congregation or its leadership preemptively files suit in a civil court against  
2 the Presbytery, the Presbytery of Los Ranchos will answer the suit. If a  
3 congregation or its leadership abandons these processes before completion, the  
4 Presbytery reserves the right to release itself from the principles of this policy  
5 and charge the Administrative Commission to work toward resolution of these  
6 matters consistent with protecting the interests of the Presbytery.

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8 The writers of this document on Gracious Separation for the Presbytery of Los Ranchos  
9 hereby express their appreciation to other presbyteries, especially the Central  
10 Washington Presbytery that have walked this path before us. Their hard work has  
11 provided the major building blocks on which we have crafted this process.

12

13 [1] 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV)-Therefore *encourage one another and build each other*  
14 *up, just as in fact you are doing.*

15 Romans 12:10 (ESV)-*Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in*  
16 *showing honor.*

17 **2 Corinthians 13:14**-*May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and*  
18 *the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

19 Matthew 28:18-20-*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on*  
20 *earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing*  
21 *them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching*  
22 *them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to*  
23 *the very end of the age."*

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25 [2] 2 Corinthians 2:15-*For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those*  
26 *who are being saved and those who are perishing.*

27 Matthew 5:13-15-*" You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how*  
28 *can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out*  
29 *and trampled underfoot.*

30 14 *"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Neither*  
31 *do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it*  
32 *gives light to everyone in the house.*

1 Mark 9:33-41- *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them,*  
2 *“What were you arguing about on the road?” 34 But they kept quiet because on the*  
3 *way they had argued about who was the greatest.*

4 *35 Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must*  
5 *be the very last, and the servant of all.”*

6 *36 He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he*  
7 *said to them, 37 “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes*  
8 *me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”*

9 *Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us*

10 *38 “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we*  
11 *told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”*

12 *39 “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in*  
13 *the next moment say anything bad about me, 40 for whoever is not against us is for us.*  
14 *41 Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you*  
15 *belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.*

16