



The **FELLOWSHIP**
of Presbyterians

The **COVENANT ORDER**
of Evangelical Presbyterians

What did Session Vote to do in November?

The question asked to us by the Engagement Team of the Presbytery was:

Shall Escalon Presbyterian Church seek gracious dismissal from PCUSA to another reformed body?

Each Session member was asked to vote individually and the motion was affirmed by a unanimous vote of all twelve Session members.

What is the next Step in the Process?

The Session in consultation with the Engagement team will:

1. Determine which Reformed body to seek dismissal to.
2. Coordinate a congregational forum for explanation and for discussion around this decision.
3. Coordinate a congregational meeting in which a straw-poll of congregational members is taken.
4. If the threshold of the straw poll exceeds a super-majority, coordinate a congregational meeting in which a final vote of congregational members is taken. This vote will include two separate questions:
 - a. Do you affirm the decision to seek dismissal to another reformed body?
 - b. Do you intend to join another PC-USA congregation if the dismissal is approved?

Discernment concerning the Reformed Body

There are a variety of options available to our congregation concerning a Reformed body to which we could conceivably be dismissed to. Yet, the decision of many churches in our Presbytery to seek dismissal has been primarily motivated by the recent formation of the Covenant Order. In other words, the other denominations considered “Reformed” have been in existence for some time now but have not appeared as viable options for the churches of our Presbytery and many in the PC-USA. The most prominent options are the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). There have been PC-USA congregations dismissed into these bodies over the past decade, though most have gone to the EPC. Here are the reasons churches in California and throughout the PC-USA have primarily been considering ECO:

1. **Confessions:** Both the PCA and the EPC hold to the Westminster Standards as the confession of faith its officers uphold. This confession is probably the clearest explanation of Calvinist theology, and though many of us have affinities with it, it is not the sum total of Reformed theological tradition. Our own Book of Confessions includes additional gems such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Scots Confession which are clear expressions of the Reformed faith from different angles and pastoral lenses. We have too many Confessions right now which has added to the theological confusion - yet a plurality is a good thing.
2. **The Ministry of Women:** The PCA does not allow for female elders, female teaching elders, or (until recent leniency) female deacons. The EPC chooses to allow congregations the decision to decide, with the result that different Presbyteries have varying standards.
3. **A Conservative PC-USA?:** Many of us who are discouraged with and disagree with the trajectory of the organization of the PC-USA have not simply desired a conservative option. In other words, we haven't thought, “If only we could just simply replicate the structure of the PC-USA, just from a conservative theological angle.” Theology alone is not the problem. We believe strongly in a Presbyterian system of governance, yet the late 20th century mainline experiment of the PC-USA (1983) has largely failed in a structural way as well. This ordering indicative of the history of our tradition. So, if there were an organization to arise that would seek to return to the history and theology of our tradition while also seeking to be missional in a way that recognizes changes in our current culture - that would be appealing. And this is what ECO is presenting.

The Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

Here I will outline the reasons that some of the churches of our Presbytery are seeking dismissal in the Covenant Order (ECO).

1. **Covenanting together:** We wish to seek dismissal together. The nearest EPC churches are in Sacramento and the Bay Area. The PCA has little presence in California. ECO, as of now, is the only approved Reformed Body that our Presbytery has recognized for dismissal. California as a whole is likely to see many churches join the Covenant Order - the largest number of inquiries is from this state.
2. **Clarity in Theology:** The theology of ECO recognizes the Book of Confessions (approved by the PC-USA) as its confessional standards. It also outlines the “Essential Tenets” of those confessions into a readable and clear document of four pages. This document gives a clear expression of Jesus Christ as ~~the~~ God and our Savior, the authority of Scripture, and that salvation is by grace through faith. One may, at points, disagree with a particular theological or ordering tenet - absolute subscription is not required. Yet, one must be willing to serve knowing that these Essentials are the heart of what will be taught and adhered to in an ECO congregation.
3. **Recognizing the Gifts of Men and Women:** In the Essential Tenets document: “We affirm that men and women alike are called to all the ministries of the Church, and that every member is called to share in all of Christ’s offices within the world beyond the church.” Again, those who disagree with such a stance are allowed freedom of conscience to disagree but must passively submit to this particular way

in which ECO is ordered.

4. **Missional Focus and Structure:** ECO has familiar Presbyterian structures such as Presbyteries and Synods, yet is structured for mission. It does not require a massive central bureaucracy to be funded and for all of its major decisions to be funneled through. It gives Presbyteries certain boundaries to operate within, yet allows them to be entrepreneurial as well as missionally creative. ECO preserves many of the excellent portions of our Books of Order over the years, and continues the legacy of an educated clergy, a structure committed to good order and decency, congregational responsibility and integrity within an accountable structure. Yet it allows for greater flexibility at the Presbytery level rather than preserving a status quo that ceased to work decades ago.
5. **Evangelism and Justice:** ECO holds together in its Essential Tenets the necessity of and support of both Evangelism and Justice. These have tended to be, sadly, dichotomized with more liberal bodies emphasizing justice and more conservative bodies emphasizing evangelism. Scripture does not allow for such disparity. As you have heard me preach over the years, I have grown to emphasize both the need to believe in and follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and the need to reach out in social action - with such important issues as human trafficking, hunger programs and poverty. As you read the Essential Tenets document, this is kept in proper balance, asking each church to be committed to both.
6. **Continued Connection points with PC-USA:** This has been important for us. There are many churches and pastors in the PC-USA who are legitimate believers and committed to proclaiming and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ. For us to seek a course that aligns with our own consciences does not require us to denigrate or dismiss all things related to the PC-USA. There are congregations that will be joining the Fellowship of Presbyterians (thus not seeking dismissal from the PC-USA) either because they want to be missional in their own Presbytery or they simply do not have the permission to seek dismissal by their own Presbytery. I can, and will support ministers in both the Fellowship and ECO. National gatherings will include ministers and congregations of both organizations. Additionally, Fellowship and ECO congregations are likely to continue support of organizations such as Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Presbyterian Hunger Program.
7. **Property:** Congregations within ECO will have full control of all their financial assets. This ministry structure also allows the structure of ECO to focus on ministry rather than spend time, money, and litigation related to property concerns. This requires heightened responsibility of the congregation to make wise financial decisions - but that should have always been the case.
8. **Accountability and Support:** Pastors participate in pastoral accountability groups, determined to live out the "Pastoral Rule." Congregations participate in affinity networks with 2 to 3 other congregations providing mutual support and encouragement. Work on the "Narrative on Ministry" happens in these contexts. This is a deeper form of connectionalism than merely gathering together for stated business meetings.