

Administrative Commission for the Synod of the Covenant

Contact email: ac.covenant@pcusa.org

Anyone interested in addressing the Commission may contact the members at ac.covenant@pcusa.org with a statement, short video or request to meet via video conference. Please include your name, Presbytery and contact information. The Commission will receive this information until November 22, 2019.

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Members:

Patrice Hatley, Co-moderator
Brady Radford, Co-moderator
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Flor Vélez-Díaz, staff
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The full text of the Commission's task:

Alternate Resolution:

That the 223rd General Assembly (2018) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) form an administrative commission to address disorder in the Synod of the Covenant as provided in G-3.0109(b)(5) and in accordance with Standing Rule K.2.(a). The commission shall consist of not fewer than seven (7) persons appointed by the Co-Moderators and shall:

1. Honor the principles of *Seeking to Be Faithful Together* with the intent to restore trust and mutuality between the synod and its staff with its constituent presbyteries and their staff and elected leadership. All will:

a. Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that all desire to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

b. Share concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom there are disagreements in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teachings.

c. Seek to stay in community though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension.

2. Conduct a Special Administrative Review (G-3.0108(b)) for the purpose of inquiring into and settling allegations of disorder:

a. To review and recommend revisions to synod procedures, to institute changes that are necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the PC(USA) principles of participation and representation as outlined in F-1.0403 and G-3.0103. This will include but is not limited to a review of records, bylaws, procedures, policies, and manuals of the synod.

b. To assure effective consultation with the synod committees and commissioners, synod staff, racial ethnic caucuses, Presbyterian Women, presbyteries, presbytery executives, and others as it may determine helpful to its tasks.

c. To assure adequate support for the ministry and mission of its presbyteries as they seek to support the witness of congregations (G-3.0401).

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d. To assure adequate communication with and among its presbyteries, G-3.0401(a), through commissioners to synod, presbytery leadership, staff, and others as it may determine helpful to its task.

e. To assure pastoral care among its presbyteries in order that the synod may live in the unity represented in the Sacraments, G-3.0401(b).

f. To address conflicts in a pastoral manner that promotes reconciliation, healing, and restores unity between synod and its presbyteries using professional mediation services if necessary. They may use processes of D-1.0103 Conciliate and Mediate as needed.

g. To assume original jurisdiction if deemed necessary by the commission.

h. To have full authority to enforce the findings and recommendations with due process, granting fair notice and an opportunity to be heard by all parties.

This commission shall report to the 224th General Assembly (2020).

Book of Order guiding provisions:

"G-3.04 The Synod

G-3.0401 Composition and Responsibilities

The synod is the intermediate council serving as a corporate expression of the church throughout its region. It shall consist of not fewer than three presbyteries within a specific geographic region.

...

Synod is responsible for the life and mission of the church throughout its region and for supporting the ministry and mission of its presbyteries as they seek to support the witness of congregations, to the end that the church throughout its region becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness. As it leads and guides the witness of the church throughout its region, it shall keep before it the marks of the Church (F-1.0302), the notes by which Presbyterian and Reformed communities have identified themselves through history (F-1.0303) and the six Great Ends of the Church (F-1.0304).

In light of this charge, the synod has responsibility and power to:

a. provide that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard. This responsibility may include developing, in conjunction with its presbyteries, a broad strategy for the mission of the church within its bounds and in accord with the larger strategy of the General Assembly; assisting its member presbyteries when requested in matters related to the calling, ordaining, and placement of ministers of the Word and Sacrament; establishing and maintaining, in conjunction with its presbyteries, those ecumenical relationships that will enlarge the life and mission of the church in its region; facilitating joint action in mission with other denominations and agencies in its region; facilitating communication among its presbyteries and between its presbyteries and the General Assembly; providing services for presbyteries within its area that can be performed more effectively from a broad regional base.

b. provide that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received. This responsibility may include authorizing the celebration of the Lord's Supper at its meetings and at other events and

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gatherings under its jurisdiction; and exercising pastoral care among its presbyteries in order that the Sacraments may be received as a means of grace, and the synod may live in the unity represented in the Sacraments.

c. nurture the covenant community of disciples of Christ. This responsibility shall include providing such services of education and nurture as its presbyteries may require; providing encouragement, guidance, and resources to presbyteries in the areas of mission, prophetic witness, leadership development, worship, evangelism, and responsible administration; reviewing the work of its presbyteries; warning or bearing witness against error in doctrine or immorality in practice within its bounds; and serving in judicial matters in accordance with the Rules of Discipline....”

“G-3.0403 Relations with Presbyteries

Each presbytery shall participate in the synod’s responsibility and service through its elected commissioners to the synod. The synod has responsibility for supporting the work of the presbyteries within its bounds and as such is charged with:

- a. developing, in conjunction with its presbyteries, joint plans and objectives for the fulfillment of mission, providing encouragement and guidance to its presbyteries and overseeing their work;
- b. developing and providing, when requested, resources as needed to facilitate the mission of its presbyteries;
- c. organizing new presbyteries, dividing, uniting, or otherwise combining presbyteries or portions of presbyteries previously existing, and, with the concurrence of existing presbyteries, creating non-geographic presbyteries, subject to the approval of the General Assembly, or taking other such actions as may be deemed necessary in order to meet the mission needs of racial ethnic or immigrant congregations. Such presbyteries shall be formed in compliance with the requirements of G-3.0301 and be accountable to the synod within which they were created.”

“G-3.0108 Administrative Review

Higher councils shall review the work of lower councils in the following ways:

- a. General Administrative Review

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- b. Special Administrative Review

If a higher council learns at any time of an alleged irregularity or delinquency of a lower council, it may require the lower body to produce any records and to take appropriate action.

- c. Directed Response

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The higher council may direct the lower council to reconsider and take corrective action if matters are determined to be out of compliance. In addition to administrative review, review and correction may be sought by initiating judicial process as described in the Rules of Discipline.”

“G-3.0109 Committees and Commissions

Councils may designate by their own rule such committees and commissions as they deem necessary and helpful for the accomplishment of the mission of the church, and may create such structures jointly with other councils, in consultation with the next higher council. In appointing such committees and commissions councils shall be mindful of the principles of unity in diversity consistent with the provisions of this Constitution (F-1.0403, G-3.0103).

...

A commission is empowered to consider and conclude matters referred to it by a council. The designating council shall state specifically the scope of the commission’s powers and any restrictions on those powers.

A council may designate two types of commissions:

a. Judicial Commissions

Judicial commissions shall consider and decide cases of process for the council or councils according to the Rules of Discipline. Sessions shall perform the function of a judicial commission for the congregation; each council higher than the session shall elect a permanent judicial commission (see D-5.0000). Cooperating synods may elect a joint permanent judicial commission pursuant to G-3.0404 and D-5.0101.

b. Administrative Commissions

Administrative commissions are designated to consider and conclude matters not involving ecclesiastical judicial process, except that in the discharge of their assigned responsibilities they may discover and report to the designating council matters that may require judicial action by the council.

Functions that may be entrusted to administrative commissions include, but are not limited to:

- (1) ...;
- (2) ...;
- (3) ...;
- (4) ...;
- (5) (by presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly) visiting particular councils, congregations, or agencies over which they have immediate jurisdiction reported to be affected with disorder^c, and inquiring into and settling the difficulties therein, except that no commission of a presbytery shall be empowered to dissolve a pastoral relationship without the specific authorization by the designating body (G-2.0901);

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...

A commission shall keep a full record of its proceedings and shall submit that record to the council or councils for incorporation into its records. Actions of a commission shall be regarded as actions of the council or councils that created it. A commission may be assigned additional duties as a committee, which duties shall be reported and handled as the report of a committee.

The decisions of an administrative commission shall be reported to the clerk of the designating council, who shall report it to the council at its next stated meeting. A council may rescind or amend an action of its administrative commission in the same way actions of the council are modified.

When an administrative commission has been designated to settle differences within a particular organization or council, it shall, before making its decision final, afford to all persons affected by its decision fair notice and an opportunity to be heard on matters at issue.”

SEEKING TO BE FAITHFUL TOGETHER

In accordance with the task mandated by the 223rd General Assembly, the Commission will follow the guidelines set forth in the document “Seeking to be faithful together” and encourage that it be read in its entirety.

Seeking to be Faithful Together:

Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement

In a spirit of trust and love, we promise we will...

<p>Give them a hearing... listen before we answer</p> <p><i>John 7:51 and Proverbs 18:13</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — we will keep our conversations and communications open for candid and forthright exchange, — we will not ask questions or make statements in a way which will intimidate or judge others. 2 Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement. 3 State what we think we heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other.
<p>Speak the truth in love</p> <p><i>Ephesians 4:15</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4 Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements in a spirit of love and respect in keeping with Jesus' teachings. 5 Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — we will not engage in name-calling or labelling of others prior to, during, or following the discussion. 6 Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement so that others may more fully understand our concerns.
<p>Maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace</p> <p><i>Ephesians 4:3</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7 Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well as where we disagree. 8 Seek to stay in community with each other though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — we will be ready to forgive and be forgiven. 9 Follow these additional guidelines when we meet in decision-making bodies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — urge persons of various points of view to speak and promise to listen to these positions seriously; — seek conclusions informed by our points of agreement; — be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those who do not agree with the majority and respect their rights of conscience; — abide by the decision of the majority, and if we disagree with it and wish to change it, work for that change in ways which are consistent with these Guidelines. 10 Include our disagreement in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.

As Presbyterians, we are called to work for the “peace, unity and purity of the Church” (Book of Order) as we seek to be faithful to God’s work in the world. However, disagreements and conflicts are inevitable in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as we try to be faithful. They exist within committees, congregations, presbyteries, synods, at General Assemblies and in the national life of the denomination.

Conflicts are inevitable in all of life and certainly in the church. The history of the church is filled with conflicts and disagreements. Several of Paul’s letters address the conflicts which were common in the early church. There have been and are going to be disagreements as Christians attempt to discern God’s work in the world and as we interpret scripture.

Conflicts can be harmful and even destructive. They can cause individuals a great deal of pain and the community of faith immeasurable damage. Congregations have been divided; denominations have experienced schisms.

At the same time, conflicts can be an opportunity for new insights, learning, and individual and corporate growth. Disagreements can illuminate a topic in helpful ways and can present solutions to problems which previously had not been seen. The successful resolution of conflict can also bind people together in a powerful way.

The Bible contains many stories of conflict and disagreement and much advice about how they can be addressed. As those stories indicate, God is already present wherever there is brokenness, granting wholeness and peace. God promises to be with us in times of disagreement and calls us to reconciliation, trust, love and forgiveness.

We realize that our perspectives are limited, so to help us affirm each other, enhance our community, stay open to the viewpoints of others and be sensitive to cultural diversity, we commit ourselves to the Guidelines in a spirit of prayer, trust, and love, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Questions and answers about the Guidelines for use by sessions and congregations

1 What are the Guidelines and how did they come about?

“Seeking To Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement” is a response to requests from many Presbyterian congregations which have experienced pain and brokenness resulting from disagreements that were not dealt with in a healthy and productive way. Some of these disagreements were about issues important in our national life (e.g. abortion and human sexuality), while some of them were about matters dealing with the life of the congregation (e.g. should we start a building campaign?).

Every congregation has conflicts. They will either be occasions for divisiveness and harm or they will provide opportunities for growing and learning. The Guidelines may help congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) use conflict in a creative and productive way.

The 204th General Assembly (1992) adopted the Guidelines for its own life and provided this tool to congregations and the other bodies of the Presbyterian Church to help them deal with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements which occur.

2 What is the biblical basis for the Guidelines?

The Bible contains many stories of conflict and offers a great deal of guidance for dealing with disagreements. It is also rich in its description of God's peace-giving and reconciling work.

- God, through Jesus Christ is reconciling the world and gives us the ministry of reconciliation. (II Corinthians 5:17-20)
- We are one body. (I Corinthians 10:7)
- We are called to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)
- Make peace with your brother and sister when you have a conflict. (Matthew 5:23-24)
- Bless those who persecute you; live in harmony with one another. (Romans 12:14-16)
- Be kind to one another and forgive one another. (Ephesians 4:13-16)
- Listen carefully before you speak. (Proverbs 18:13)
- Speak the truth in love. (Ephesians 4:13-16)
- Work for consensus. (Acts 15:1-31)

3 Why should your session and congregation agree to use the Guidelines?

Conflicts and disagreements occur in congregations. Where there are people who care deeply, there is bound to be conflict.

The Guidelines offer clear, simple suggestions for dealing with differences, so they become occasions for growing in grace and understanding, not times of divisiveness and separation. Though use of the Guidelines cannot prevent conflict from happening, they might help develop an open, helpful climate where differences are dealt with productively.

4 What are some suggested steps for considering the use of the Guidelines in your congregation?

- **Leadership**...Ask a committee of session or several elders to lead the session in a study of the Guidelines.
- **Bible Study**...Suggest that an adult church school class or Bible study group study the biblical insights on conflict and what to do about it. It would also be useful if the session would have their own similar study. One resource you might use is *Behold the New Has Come: Peacemaking in Corinthians* (DMS 225-90-202; 75 cents, phone 800-524-2612).
- **Skill Building Sessions**...If the session has not recently used a portion of their meetings for learning skills for dealing with conflict, consider using and adapting this resource. Also consider using this resource in your adult education program.
- **Study the Guidelines**...Ask the session to study the Guidelines by examining each one of them. The session might ask these questions about each Guideline:
 - How might the use of this Guideline help create a healthy atmosphere for dealing with conflict?
 - How might the use of this Guideline help deal with an existing conflict?
 - Would you like to change this Guideline or remove it from the list?

- **Vote on the Guidelines...**The session might vote to use the Guidelines in its own life and to encourage and help members of the congregation make use of them. The session might also wish to overture the presbytery to agree to use the Guidelines for its life together. Ask a committee of the session to help the session and the congregation make use of the Guidelines.
- **Report to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program...**Please tell the Peacemaking Program if your session agrees to use the Guidelines, about your experience with them, and other efforts to deal with conflict and disagreement.

5 How can our session actually use the Guidelines?

Once your session has agreed to use the Guidelines, there are several ways they might be used:

- Encourage all members of the session to take responsibility for using the Guidelines during the meeting.
- Urge session members to use the Guidelines and remind others to use them during informal conversations in the congregation.
- Read a simple prayer together prior to the start of the session meeting which asks God's help in dealing with conflict effectively.

One possible prayer:

Gracious and Loving God, You have called us together to do the work of Your church. Be present with us during this meeting, guide us that we may make decisions that will reflect Your loving presence in this world. Create within us open minds and hearts, that we will not fear conflict or run from it, but embrace it, knowing that it is an opportunity for growing in faith and a fuller understanding of Your will for us. Help us to listen to each other, share our thoughts in loving, honest ways and do all we can to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

- Pray before voting on a matter which has created significant disagreement, reminding all present that some will be happy about the decision and some will be disappointed.
- Use the Guidelines in ways which encourage open candid discussion. Discourage using the Guidelines in ways which would stifle the sharing the disagreements and impede session members from sharing their opinions.
- Display the Guidelines poster in the rooms where the session and other committees meet.
- Review and evaluate the session's use of the Guidelines each year. Help each new class of the session understand the Guidelines and their use.

6 How can the Guidelines be used in our congregation?

- Reproduce the first page of this form and include it in a Sunday bulletin or in your congregation's newsletter in an effort to give copies to as many members as possible.
- Display the Guidelines poster on several of your church's bulletin boards.
- Present the Guidelines to the committees of session, other committees, the choir, Presbyterian Women, Presbyterian Men and the youth fellowships.
- Invite members of these groups and other leaders in your congregation to a training session on the Guidelines. Use some of the resources listed on the back page of this brochure in the training session.
- Include training on the Guidelines in new member classes and officer training classes.

- Ask the worship committee of session to work with the pastor to find ways that the Guidelines might be emphasized in worship.
- At a congregational meeting, ask the congregation to decide if they will use the Guidelines.
- If a congregation votes to use the Guidelines, consider having an evaluation annually at a congregational meeting on how effectively the congregation has used them. This evaluation might produce suggestions for using them better.

7 Why inform the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program of any actions taken by your session on the Guidelines, as well as your experience and your concerns?

The information received by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program will help it and perhaps the General Assembly evaluate the Guidelines and their use. This information may lead to the strengthening of this tool and the development of resources which will help congregations use the Guidelines.

The Presbyterian Peacemaking Program will send information about new resources and other assistance to congregations which are using the Guidelines as well as good ideas and suggestions received from other congregations.