

Frequently Asked Questions
Presbyterian Church of the Big Wood
Discernment Packet

A. Why are we considering moving our denominational affiliation?

1. What is going on in the PCUSA that concerns the Session of PCBW?

The Session of PCBW recognizes the faithfulness and witness of many individuals and churches in PCUSA. However we are also deeply concerned about what we see happening in the PCUSA. Our concerns fall into six main areas. We encourage you to read more about these on the denominational concerns tab of our website:

- Lack of deep conviction in regards to understanding Jesus to be our singular Lord and Savior through whose substitutionary atonement on the cross we are saved
- Drift away from affirming the authority of Scripture as our only rule for faith and life
- Lack of clear, unambiguous essential tenets of the faith
- Overemphasis on political and social issues to the neglect of the proclaiming of the gospel of Jesus Christ
- A denominational trajectory which seems to be moving further away from biblical orthodoxy and which is becoming less friendly toward evangelical churches like PCBW
- The PCUSA's claim on PCBW's property and assets

2. Are these issues important enough to lead us to consider leaving for another denomination?

The Session of PCBW believes that the answer is absolutely, yes. The issues involved are neither peripheral nor incidental, but are centered on essential beliefs, values, and ethics of the Christian faith, such as the role and authority of Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the need and means of salvation. After well over a year of prayer and study the Session believes these concerns to be serious enough to recommend that congregation move its denominational affiliation.

3. Are there good reasons to consider staying in the PCUSA?

Some of the reasons discussed by the Session for staying in the PCUSA included:

- a. It is the easier, safer and less risky course
- b. We can work to be a positive, faithful influence within the denomination.
- c. As a church we are currently free to worship and minister as we desire, making moving unnecessary at this time
- d. Our history of connection with the denomination, and the relationships we have formed within it.

The counterpoints to these that were convincing to the Session are:

- a. The Session believes the issues involved to be weighty enough to make this move, despite the possible hardships, as they believe this to be the wisest move.
- b. Over the past four decades countless people have spent countless hours seeking to be an evangelical influence within the PCUSA. Despite these efforts, the denominational trajectory continues to move in a direction which doesn't fit with the evangelical identity of our church. In addition, with more and more congregations like ours leaving the PCUSA, it is unrealistic to think that that somehow things will be different as time goes on.
- c. While we currently do have much freedom to minister as we see fit, the Session foresees a time in the not too distant future when this could change. As more and more evangelical congregations leave the PCUSA, the possibility of PCUSA decisions that negatively impact PCBW in areas like property, ordination standards, or political proclamations increases.
- d. While moving denominations would in some ways affect these relationships, we envision an ongoing relationship with the churches and ministries of Kendall Presbytery. In the past we have supported (through our mission giving) The Church of the Tetons new church development project, and have sent our choir and worship bands to sing and play in some of the smaller congregations in the presbytery. We foresee relationships like these continuing.

4. Why not stay in the PCUSA and align with the Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP)?

The Fellowship of Presbyterians (FOP) is an alliance of evangelical PCUSA congregation who for different reasons are staying in the PCUSA and are differentiating themselves by coming together under the banner of FOP. The Session looked carefully at this option, and while they respect what FOP is doing and what it stands for, believe that for PCBW moving to ECO is the best option, for the following reasons:

- a. Our concerns with the PCUSA (see #1) are big enough that we believe the appropriate response is not to isolate ourselves within the denomination, but instead to move to a denomination that better fits our identity as a church.
- b. Again, by all accounts the denomination is on a theologically more liberal trajectory that is moving away from churches like PCBW. It is reasonable to assume, then, that staying in the PCUSA would mean having to deal with ongoing decisions from the PCUSA that members of our church would find objectionable

and in an ongoing way negatively occupy Session's time and energy, and divert us from mission

- c. We believe that instead of diverting us from our mission (as has been our Session's experience in the PCUSA), that aligning ourselves with ECO, a denomination of like-minded congregations, would help catalyze our mission.

5. Is this about homosexuality and gay marriage?

No. While PCBW has not been hidden about its conviction that the Bible teaches that all sexual activity outside of marriage between a man and a woman is contrary to God's plan for humanity, we at the same time recognize we are all sinners in need of God's grace. However this conviction is not the reason for our recommendation, as this is who we have always been. Rather our recommendation is based on our concerns listed in 1 above.

6. Will PCBW continue to be a welcoming congregation to all people?

Yes. It is our deepest prayer that PCBW will continue to welcome all and help them find the life that we can only find through Jesus Christ. We are all sinners who need a Savior. We are all equally loved by God. And we are equally saved by His grace. For this reason, the only prerequisite for membership within PCBW has always been and will continue to be a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

B. Information about ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

7. What is ECO?

ECO is a Presbyterian denomination that formed in January 2012. It presents a viable, evangelical option for churches that wish to leave the PCUSA. It's theological core, missional focus, and entrepreneurial and creative focus make it a good match for PCBW.

8. How many churches are in ECO?

There are currently 236 churches in ECO, and likely hundreds more either in the process of joining or considering doing so. It is made up of both large "megachurches" such as Menlo Park Presbyterian Church to smaller, rural congregations like our sister church here in Idaho, First Presbyterian, Jerome.

9. Is there concern over the newness of ECO?

No. While there are always some growing pains in a new organization, ECO is showing itself to be a strong, healthy place for churches. Congregations and pastors we have spoken to all say the move has been a good one.

10. What are ECO's goals and mission?

ECO's mission is "To build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ."

11. How is ECO similar to the PCUSA?

- ECO has the same Book of Confessions, a collection of nine creeds and confessions that have historically guided the church.
- ECO has a similar, though streamlined, polity. The local church is governed by a board of elders (the Session) and local churches unite for mission, encouragement, and accountability to form a Presbytery.
- ECO fully affirms the ordination of women.
- ECO is a member of the World Communion of Reformed Church (WCRC)
- ECO has a health plan and a retirement plan for Pastors and staff.

12. How is ECO different from the PCUSA

- ECO is evangelical in its theology, affirming the indisputable Lordship of Jesus, namely that his atoning death on the cross is the only means of salvation for humanity.
- ECO clearly expresses the essential tenets of our faith. By contrast, the PCUSA does not list essential tenets and a majority of leaders believe that theological essentials cannot be named with any certainty or agreement.
- ECO affirms the Scripture to be the unique and authoritative Word of God and thus able to declare the nature of our faith, the character of our lives, and the shape and work of the church.
- ECO is built around the idea of covenant and is committed to supporting relationships between pastors and congregations. Both congregations and pastors are required to be in accountable, covenant relationships with other churches or pastors.
- ECO maintains that marriage is between a man and a woman, a concept that is perpetually debated within PCUSA.
- ECO is less institutional, less bureaucratic, and is gathered around a core theology, shared mission and relationships.
- ECO affirms property is owned and controlled by the local church.

13. Over time won't ECO suffer the same spiritual drift that we see in PCUSA?

ECO is has set up several mechanisms to prevent a theological drift from the core teachings espoused by the denomination today:

- The constitution of ECO includes Essential Tenets to which all officers must adhere. This limits the spectrum of theological interpretations that are considered appropriate in the new denomination. The PCUSA asks only that pastors be "guided by" Scripture, without clarifying the essential tenets of faith.
- ECO's Form of Government and Rules of Discipline can be changed only by a two-thirds vote of presbyteries. This makes changes more difficult to achieve and ensures that the theology and polity we see today in ECO will likely be in place for a long time to come. In the PCUSA, such changes are normally achieved with a majority vote, which is a much lower bar.
- Within each ECO presbytery there is a requirement for a 1-1 voting parity between elders and pastors. Pastors are only eligible to vote if they are connected to a local congregation holding them accountable to the denomination's Essential Tenets. In the PCUSA, many votes are cast by ministers not serving local congregations

(academics, staff, etc.) and therefore not held directly accountable in any tangible way.

14. Would there be any noticeable changes to the life and ministry of PCBW?

No. This proposed move is not about changing who we are, but moving to where we fit better. Our current ministries and worship services will continue on as they are.

15. Where can I find out more about ECO?

The ECO website is www.eco-pres.org. We believe that being informed about this congregational decision is important, and so we urge you take time before turning your straw poll ballot to study these resources and prayerfully consider the Session's recommendation.

C. Other questions

16. Will I have a say as this process proceeds?

Yes. The session believes this is a congregational decision, and is committed to a process that includes them, including (if we get to that point) a final official vote of the congregation.

17. Would we be able to retain our property and assets?

Yes. A decision to move would involve a negotiated settlement with Kendall Presbytery, that would be negotiated before any vote. We would not vote to move and then find out whether we are able to keep the property. We anticipate that any vote would involve not only a vote to move, but would include the terms which would enable us to keep the property. While it might be possible that a settlement could not be negotiated, it is unlikely. In any case, we would not put a vote before the congregation before such negotiations were completed.

18. Would there be any financial cost?

Yes, though we don't know yet what it would be at this point. Any financial cost would have to be negotiated with Kendall Presbytery, and would need to balance the interests of Kendall Presbytery and the ongoing ministry of PCBW. While past actions are no guarantee of what to expect, Kendall Presbytery has in the past worked fairly with congregations who have desired to leave the PCUSA

19. Would our pastor and staff move with us? Will they lose any pension or benefits?

Mark has indicated that he would be willing to move to ECO if that is what the congregation chooses. He would not lose pension credits, but would move from the Presbyterian Board of Pensions into ECO's benefit plan. The rest of the program staff is not from the denomination, and so their compensation is not connected to a move. All have, however, indicated a willingness to continue should the church decide to move.

20. What is next?

Congregational Straw Poll (non-binding): Dec. 14 - Jan. 10:

Members, affiliates, and attenders are invited to provide input to the Session by indicating their voting preference on the straw poll ballot included in this packet.

Session Discernment: January

Session members will study congregational responses, and then decide whether to move forward with preliminary negotiations with Kendall Presbytery.

21. If the straw poll indicates support for the move, what would be next?

Negotiations with Kendall Presbytery

Session would begin to negotiate with Kendall Presbytery about terms of dismissal, including any financial settlement.

Congregational vote

If the Session is able to negotiate a settlement, it would be brought to the congregation at a called congregation meeting for an official vote. Only members of PCBW present at the meeting would be eligible to vote (no proxy or absentee voting). Because of this, the Session anticipates giving as much time as possible to allow for people to make plans to participate.