

February 26, 2014

For almost two years, the Session of Rocky Grove Avenue Presbyterian Church has been engaged in prayer and discussion about recent changes and positions adopted by the Presbyterian Church USA, and, whether our congregation should consider leaving the PC(USA) to join another Reformed body (another way of saying, “Presbyterian denomination”). The Session has endeavored to keep church members informed of our discussions through newsletter articles and information meetings.

At a congregational meeting on December 8, 2013, a majority of church members attending the meeting were in favor of RGAPC going forward with the process of seeking to be dismissed. “Going forward” involves ongoing conversations between the Session, church members and the Presbytery Resolution Team.

One of the key questions in this conversation is, “If we were to leave the PC(USA), what denomination would we join?” While there are many different Presbyterian / Reformed denominations in America, few of these have congregations in our region, and few support the ordination of women. The two most viable alternatives are the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

Of these two, the Session is looking more closely at ECO, because ECO’s theological beliefs are closer to those of most RGAPC church members, and because ECO fully supports the ordination of women. Attached for your information is a brief comparison between these three denominations. This chart is based on materials circulated in Pittsburgh Presbytery in 2012 and in Santa Barbara Presbytery in 2013.

Comparison of Key Beliefs and Features of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA), the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO) and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)			
QUESTION	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
When was the denomination established?	In 1983, established by Reunion of two previous denominations, the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and the Presbyterian Church in the U.S..	Formally constituted as a separate Reformed body (denomination) in January 2012	Formed in 1981; split from the former United Presbyterian Church in the US, shortly before UPC and PCUS Reunion

QUESTION	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
Total number of churches?	10,262 churches (at Jan. 1, 2013)	114 congregations (Feb 2014)	“about 500” per EPC website
Churches within 50 miles of Franklin (as of Feb 2014)?	201	12	15
What Creeds and Confessions are used?	2 Creeds and 9 Confessions/Catechisms, found in <i>The Book of Confessions</i> (Part I of the PCUSA Constitution) .	ECO currently uses the same Creeds and Confessions as the PC(USA)	EPC uses only the Westminster Confession of Faith & the two Westminster catechisms
Does the denomination define what it considers to be “Essential Tenets of the Faith”? (Essential Tenets are foundational beliefs)	NO. At ordination and installation, church officers must affirm that they “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the Confessions of our church,” but there is no list or definition of what these essential tenets are. Thus, ordaining bodies and officers are left to decide what is essential.	Yes; ordained officers are required to uphold and teach the Essential Tenets	Yes. “Essentials of the Faith”
“Sola Scriptura” is the Reformed teaching that the Bible is the authoritative written word of God and the only rule (standard) of faith and practice in the Christian life. Is this view upheld?	Yes and No. This view is upheld by many (most?) but not by all ordained leaders. In practice, ministers and seminary faculty hold and teach a wide range of views about the reliability and interpretation of Scripture. ⁱ	Yes. This view of the authority of the Bible is part of the Essential Tenets.	Yes; this is part of the EPC “Essentials of Faith”
What does the denomination teach/believe about Jesus?	The Constitution (Book of Confessions and Book of Order) reflects orthodox understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, fully human and fully divine, the Savior of the world. Differing views are permitted, even those that deny Jesus’ resurrection or the necessity of his death in atonement for human sin.	Holds an orthodox, Trinitarian, Reformed understanding of Jesus as part of its Essential Tenets. Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life; the living Word of God who is to be adored, trusted and obeyed; “There is no other name under heaven by which humans may be saved.”	Jesus is God incarnate and the only way of salvation. Holds a traditional Reformed view of the person and work of Christ.

QUESTION	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
What is the common view of the basis of salvation?	PCUSA Confessions express the classic Reformed view that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Common view is that salvation is based on God’s universal love and acceptance of all God’s children. Many in the PCUSA believe that Jesus is only one of many ways to God. ⁱⁱ	Grace of God through the atonement of Jesus Christ, made known to us by the Holy Spirit and received by faith.	Grace of God enacted in Jesus Christ and received by faith. Official position is that God chooses some people for eternal life and some for eternal damnation. This doctrine is called “double predestination”
Understanding of the Trinity?	PCUSA’s confessional documents hold a clear, traditional Reformed understanding of the Trinity. However, the common belief that it is possible for people to come to salvation “some other way” than through the Son, is logically incompatible with an orthodox understanding of the Trinity.	Strongly upholds traditional understanding of the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed and other confessional documents	Strongly upholds traditional understanding of the Trinity
May women be ordained into positions of leadership?	Yes. Accepted across the denomination.	Yes. Affirmed as part of the Essential Tenets.	Yes and No. EPC allows each Session to decide whether or not to ordain female elders, and allows each presbytery to decide whether or not it will ordain female ministers.
Focus on mission and evangelism?	Traditionally very strong focus, with a period of decline in 1990’s / 2000’s. Recent increase in full-time mission workers and launched an initiative to establish “1001 New Worshiping Communities.”	Strong focus on evangelism, local and international mission. Prefers to partner with existing mission organizations rather than re-creating new (and costly) structures.	Strong emphasis on evangelism and church-planting.
Accountability / church discipline?	Church discipline is rarely exercised. Despite ordination vows, “freedom of conscience” is held to be more important than either confessions or polity. ⁱⁱⁱ	Community accountability seen as vital and central to the idea of covenant. Pastors and Sessions participate in peer groups for mutual support, accountability, and share best practices.	Accountability important and discipline wisely used

QUESTION	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
Does polity and practice uphold the traditional view of marriage as a sacred covenant between one man and one woman?	Yes and No. The Book of Order upholds the traditional definition but this is being ignored by some church officers (see footnote iii). Supporters of same-gender marriage view this as civil rights issue. Even in our fairly moderate presbytery, there is considerable support for changing the definition of marriage. At the September 2013 meeting of Lake Erie Presbytery, the presbytery overwhelmingly voted <i>against</i> a proposed General Assembly overture that, if ultimately passed, would have strengthened the denomination’s traditional definition of marriage by changing the Book of Order to specify that Christian marriage is “ <i>always to be</i> ” between one man and one woman.	YES. This is one of the essential tenets (found under “living in obedience to the Word of God”). Because it is an essential tenet, this position is not being challenged and is highly unlikely to be changed in the future.	YES. The EPC also defines when divorce (and remarriage) may be permissible on biblical grounds. They recommend against ordination of persons who are divorced and remarried – though it is unclear how often this position is enforced.
Does the denomination permit the ordination of persons who are sexually active outside traditional marriage?	Yes. Ordaining bodies are prohibited from establishing a standard rule; each candidate for ordination must be considered on a case by case basis. While the discussion often centers on homosexual relationships, the new ordination standards would also permit ordination of heterosexual or persons who are sexually active outside of marriage.	No, and this position is not being challenged. Faithfulness in the covenant of traditional marriage and chastity in singleness is an essential tenet, found under “Living in obedience to the Word of God.”	No, and this position is not being challenged.
Who owns church buildings and other property?	All property is “held in trust” by the local congregation but actually belongs to the denomination. As of Feb. 2014 Presbyteries still have some flexibility in negotiating terms for property when a church has requested dismissal.	All property belongs to the local congregation.	All property belongs to the local congregation.

QUESTION	PCUSA	ECO	EPC
Position on abortion?	While the PC(USA) declares itself to be neutral – saying the issues are too complicated for anyone but the pregnant woman herself to decide what is best -- in practice the PC(USA) is effectively pro-choice. For example, in 2002 the General Assembly voted to affirm late-term (third trimester) abortions. PCUSA health insurance pays for any abortion requested, but also has a “relief of conscience” provision in which churches can designate the portion of their dues that would have been used to fund abortions, to be used to assist with adoptions instead.	Strongly pro-life. Covenant signed by the session of each congregation includes the statement, “We will honor the sanctity of human life above the claims of human freedom”	Strongly pro-life.
Payment of Per Capita or Annual Dues?	Churches are assessed a set amount per member on the active roll. A portion goes to the presbytery, a portion to synod and a portion to General Assembly. Amounts not paid by the member / church must be made up by the presbytery. The per capita rate for 2014 is \$29.50.	Each congregation pays fixed amount of one percent of their annual budget. This is intentionally kept low to avoid temptation to develop expensive administrative offices and processes.	Each presbytery establishes an annual “per member asking” amount. For 2014, this is \$10 per member in the presbytery of the Alleghenies

Endnotes:

ⁱ Regarding Scripture: The booklet “*Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture*” states there are at least five different perspectives in the PCUSA regarding the divine inspiration of Scripture. These views range from the “inerrancy” of Scripture to “the Bible is merely a record of moral and religious experiences of Hebrews and Christians.” No indication is given as to which (if any) of the five positions is to be preferred.

One of the strengths of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition is that we do not all have to think or believe exactly the same thing. But from the earliest days of the church, there has been broad agreement that some beliefs are simply essential. As St. Augustine said: “In the essentials let us have unity; in non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.” In recent decades, the loudest

(endnotes, continued)

voices in the PC(USA) seem to be saying, “In all things, let us have liberty.” This opens the door for what the Apostle Paul warned would take place: “The time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around themselves great numbers of teachers who will tell them what their itching ears want to hear.” (2 Timothy 4:3)

ii Regarding Salvation: Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Yet the July 2013 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, page 55, says: “Did you know? . . . 42 percent [of Presbyterians] believe that salvation is restricted to followers of Jesus Christ, with 37 percent affirming that all the world’s religions are equally good ways of finding ultimate truth.”

These statistics raise urgent questions about what is actually being taught in PC(USA) churches regarding the person of Christ and the way of salvation.

iii Regarding Church Discipline: As a case in point, the July 2013 issue of *Presbyterians Today*, page 54, says, “Even as the 220th Assembly (2012) declined to change the traditional definition of marriage in the *Book of Order*, opting instead for a season of discernment, there are officers of the church who have publicly said that their biblical understanding of justice and their pastoral-care responsibility make compliance unconscionable and that they will, and in fact already are, officiating same-gender marriages.”

By this action, such officers (teaching elders and commissioned ruling elders) are stating that their individual judgment is to be valued above the judgment of the saints of the past who wrote our Confessions; above the wisdom of those who wrote the definition of marriage as found in our *Book of Order*; and above the discernment of the 220th General Assembly. They are also knowingly breaking the vows they took at ordination, to be “continually guided by the Confessions and governed by our church’s polity.”

When a United Methodist pastor officiated at the same-gender “marriage” of his son, the Methodist Church took disciplinary action against that pastor, ultimately revoking his licensure as a Methodist minister. By contrast, disciplinary action is rarely if ever taken against PC(USA) officers who disobey our Constitution by officiating at same-gender “marriages.”