

Reasons for Considering Making a Request for Dismissal

To Another Reformed Denomination

Trinity United Presbyterian Church (“Trinity”) was chartered in 1876 in the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Our rich Presbyterian heritage has been an integral part of our mission and ministry for all of these years. As a UPC member, Trinity became a part of the PC(USA) in 1983 when the denomination was formed through merger. Our DNA is Presbyterian and our allegiance is to Christ, the Scriptures and Reformed theology as expressed in the historic confessions and Presbyterian polity. We have always appreciated the confessional heritage, form of government (the polity) and the evangelistic and missional priorities of being Presbyterian, and that Presbyterian heritage has shone as a beacon of God’s love for His children as expressed through Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior for generations.

Increasingly, however, we have seen theological, ideological, political, social and moral shifts in American society that have been reflected in the PC(USA). According to our understanding of the Scriptures as interpreted through our Reformed confessions, these cultural shifts should not have an impact on what we believe and how we would seek to behave as God’s people. Yet, over this same passage of time, there has been a decided theological drift in these areas by the PC(USA) that has diverged further and further from Trinity’s mission calling, direction and theological position.

We acknowledge that at times we have spoken with too little precision in expressing our concerns and disagreements about the “General Assembly” and “the denomination.” We readily agree with those who say there are many faithful people serving at many levels in our denomination, beginning with the General Assembly headquarters in Louisville. We are grateful for the quality of fellowship and support we have experienced as a member of the Presbytery of Los Ranchos. Teaching elders and ruling elders of our congregation have been very active in the work and mission of the Presbytery. We have consistently supported the Presbytery financially. We share the vision for planting churches and calling people to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and therefore are glad to see the emphasis on developing new worshiping communities. We are grateful for our Presbytery Pastor’s influence in developing “Fresh Expressions” for outreach. We also want to go on record as appreciating the affirmations the denomination has made regarding the Lordship of Christ, particularly many of the statements in the paper “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” As we have said in other communications, these good things make our decision to consider making a request for dismissal to another reformed denomination and engage with the Presbytery in a Joint Discernment process more difficult.

Having acknowledged this, our primary concern can be more precisely stated as focusing on the specific pronouncements and decisions of the actual meetings of the General Assembly (the formerly annual and now biennial gathering of elected teaching and ruling elder commissioners from the presbyteries) and with what we might call the “general body politic” of the denomination at this time. The widening range of theological diversity has become a source of ongoing tension and, at times, conflict. We are concerned that the imperative of calling all people in the world to faith in Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation is not embraced by all.

We believe that, apart from faith in Jesus Christ, humanity is under the judgment of sin and will suffer eternal separation from God. God’s wrath is real, as Jesus warned us. We are also concerned that the wide range of interpretations of Scripture tends to result in situations where many are in continual conflict over a number of theological and polity issues. The most graphic example of this came with the passage of Amendment 10-A. But that is only symptomatic and illustrative of the deep divisions that exist over biblical interpretation and theological beliefs that are foundational to the formulation of any

behavioral standards and ministry practices. We do not share the same presuppositions for interpreting the Bible on the most basic issues, such as what the Bible defines as sin.

The change in behavioral standards for church officers that resulted from the passage of Amendment 10-A has created a crisis of conscience for those committed to what is commonly referred to as the expectation that church officers will maintain “fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness.” Those of us who hold this belief (in “fidelity and chastity” for church officers) have explored a variety of options for “peaceful coexistence” within denominational structures in order to maintain our convictions. We suggested concepts such as creating non-geographic presbyteries in which congregations sharing more congruent theological beliefs and behavioral standards could gather, or of forming a „17th Synod” that could be composed of and provide a connectional context for such congregations. These options were dismissed (as our Presbytery Pastor, Steve Yamaguchi, and teaching pastor Tod Bolsinger can testify) by the General Assembly in its rejection of the Mid-Council’s Task Force recommendations in 2012. The suggestion of allowing a presbytery to have “dual” COM5 and CPMs to allow congregations to be true to their consciences, as was proposed in the presbytery of Greater Atlanta, has also been ruled out as a possible way forward together.

We are left in a situation where we have less and less common ground with the majority opinions of PC(USA) Presbyterians, and at the same time realize that many of those with whom we find ourselves most closely aligned have already sought or are seeking dismissal. There no longer seems to be a theological fit with our denomination as it has become increasingly tolerant of theological pluralism that allows for a very broad spectrum of beliefs on all issues.

We believe that presenting the specifically defined essentials of the faith in the context of a culture that is increasingly confused and opposed to faith is our calling. We understand that the denomination will not define and agree on the specific essentials of our faith — such as the unique nature and work of Jesus Christ as the only way of salvation for all people and the unique inspiration and authority of the Bible as the written, infallible Word of God. This has been a long-standing issue that dates back to the 1920’s, but the practical consequences are now playing out in our common life in what we believe are unsustainable ways.

One of Trinity’s strengths has always been its ministry to children and youth. Our youth leaders have experienced great tension as they seek to evangelize, teach and disciple in an increasingly confused culture. This is made even more difficult with a denomination that has increasingly lacked theological and behavioral standards consistent with our understanding of Scripture.

We have found that much of the curricula and resources published and sponsored by the denomination are not written from a scriptural and theological viewpoint consistent with what we believe that we should offer in good conscience to our students, children or adult groups.

The “Voices of Sophia” conference in 1993 was a wake-up call to Trinity as to how far some leaders within PC(USA) had moved out of what we considered the mainstream of Reformed Theology. While there were corrective actions taken in response to that conference, we have been concerned over the trend of politicizing issues and seeing a non-evangelical theological influence over many of the programs and resources of the denomination.

As General Assemblies pass increasingly controversial overtures and presbyteries approve them, we question how well we fit in a denomination when so many of the pastors, church leaders and congregations differ in so many ways on the principles and Scriptural interpretation that Trinity affirms. We became part of the Confessing Church movement on August 15, 2001 in order to clarify publicly

what we believed in as a church body. We reaffirmed those principles again on May 26, 2004 and March 15, 2006. The Session of Trinity affirmed heartily the tenets of the Confessing Church Movement, that: “Jesus Christ alone is Lord of all and the way of salvation; Holy Scripture is the triune God’s revealed Word, the Church’s only infallible rule of faith and life and that God’s people are called to holiness in all aspects of life. This includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, the only relationship within which sexual activity is appropriate.”

Many in our congregation have been actively involved in the Presbytery of Los Ranchos and at General Assembly in efforts to affirm what we understand to be the orthodox Scriptural interpretation and biblical standards of behavior for church officers. When the “Peace, Unity and Purity” (PUP) Report opened the door to “local option,” we became more concerned with how this would affect our connectionalism and witness. We realize that every case must be considered on an individual basis and that every council may determine whom they will allow into membership. But we also believe that this is creating a political environment that necessitates engagement in the same disagreements and conflicts time and again. This ongoing tension over what seem to be irreconcilable differences has reached a point where it impedes fellowship, ministry and pastoral care. Ironically, this approach of leaving so many issues “open-ended” actually limits open conversation on sensitive topics because of the real potential for remedial and disciplinary cases. We have been seeing the inverse relationship between trust and control playing out for decades in the PC(USA). When trust is high, based on broadly-shared beliefs in core values, there is less need for control and politics. But where agreement and trust are low, power and politics emerge.

As the Bible mandates, church officers have always been held to a higher standard of belief and behavior. Pastors, Elders and Deacons all need to reflect a Christ-centered life and a full dependence on God’s grace. We are all repenting sinners—and continue to be so as church officers. Lord, have mercy on us all. With the passage of Amendment 10-A, however, we feel this standard has been significantly eroded. In a culture that is redefining sexuality and marriage relationships, our denomination no longer provides a clear statement of expectations and definition regarding sexual mores as we understand the Scriptural mandate. There is now a redefinition of behavioral faithfulness in the PC(USA).

The close vote in 2012 for redefining Christian marriage as between “two people,” rather than “between one man and one woman,” also causes us deep concern. We would be very troubled if this redefinition passed at the 2014 General Assembly, or any thereafter. We believe that God has defined marriage in the Bible for followers of Christ. Based on recent history and seeing the speed with which things are progressing now, we sense that if the current trends continue, our session and pastors may not be able to function according to their consciences and mutually-shared understanding of biblical faith and practice. This has not only been a distraction from ministry but a difficult situation to explain to our members who are urging us to hold true to our theological beliefs and core values as articulated in the Confessing Church statements. This theological, ideological conflict has been a growing source of tension and a growing distraction to the immediate needs of ministry and pastoral care.

While we do not presume to know the future, we do try to understand the signs of the times. We see the trends pointing to a continuing widening of the gap between what we believe about faith and practice and what the broader constituency of the PC(USA) believes. We grieve this departure from our rich traditions and heritage, and we are sad that we no longer “fit” within the PC(USA). We are not mad; we are not angry. We are seeking to communicate in measured tones our mutually discerned conviction that the time has come for us to realign our denominational affiliation. We want to align our primary affiliation with an association of congregations (a reformed body of congregations) who uphold the

theological tenets and redemptive behavioral standards for church officers that we believe are true to Scripture.

We would like to explore ways to maintain continuing fellowship and missional partnerships with the congregations of the Presbytery of Los Ranchos should we be formally dismissed to another Reformed body. We believe there can be a unity that is not structural and that is actually more healthy and productive. We desire to live in a Kingdom-based unity that respects deeply-held convictions of Presbyterians in a multiplicity of denominational settings. By separating our governance, we can release those politicized concerns and focus instead on Kingdom partnership. This is a “new thing” we believe the Lord is doing.

The decision to enter into a Joint Discernment process in order to consider being dismissed from the PC(USA) has not been made lightly. Trinity’s leadership has been prayerfully discussing and processing these matters for years, and we have greatly appreciated the presbytery’s process of allowing congregations to explore these matters. We now believe the Lord is calling us to move forward in a way that is faithful to Scripture, to our core beliefs and to our calling as a missional, evangelical congregation. We believe that this can best be accomplished by seeking dismissal from the PC(USA) and affiliating with a denomination that provides a more congruent theological fit with Trinity. We seek an affiliation which is more biblically consistent in calling us all to faithfulness in our belief and behavior and which will give us freedom from politicized and polarizing conflicts, allowing us to focus on fulfilling God’s mission entrusted to us.

It is for all of these reasons that we now request the Presbytery of Los Ranchos to enter into a Joint Solution process which could lead to the transfer of Trinity (with property) to another Reformed Presbyterian denomination.