

## **What Do We Do Now?**

### **Reflections on Our Situation in the Presbyterian Church (USA)**

David Dawson, Shenango Presbytery Executive (February, 2012)

We all know that these are extraordinary times in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I suspect that historians will someday say that these were the most unusual times that those of us living today faced in our lifetime in the PC(USA). The “broadening church” has become unworkably wide.

If that is so, it is important to be faithful to the best of our ability by the grace of God. We must neither over react nor under react. It would be best, if possible, to do together whatever we can. As the West African proverb says, “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” The churches of Shenango Presbytery are blessed with a broad consensus. We should not neglect this blessing.

This brief paper represents my recommendations to Shenango Presbytery and its 68 churches. I want to make clear what we have done as a Presbytery, what options there are for our churches, and what I recommend. Remember, I am not “the Presbytery.” This simply represents the direction which I propose. My role as Presbytery Executive is to be faithful in my responsibilities to Shenango Presbytery and the PC(USA). This includes assisting each church with their particular situation. I want to be transparent with you so that you know what you can expect from me. What I advise here will necessarily evolve over time depending on developments, but I will continue to be transparent with anyone who asks. This is how I see the situation. This is the direction in which I am committed to leading as your Presbytery Executive. There is nothing here that I have not discussed with a variety of individuals, but this is the time to put it in writing.

Presbytery Council met on February 7 and discussed these matters. This paper was shared subsequently with the members of Council. I am now making it available on the Presbytery website and during my report at the February 28 Presbytery meeting.

### **What has Shenango Presbytery done?**

Following the change in the *Book of Order* with the passage of Amendment 10-A, the Presbytery:

- Reiterated its commitment to “fidelity and chastity” as the position that it would continue to follow (June 28, 2011)
- Formed a committee to write a policy and process for sessions to follow if they would like to consider recommending to their churches that they request dismissal to another Reformed Body (July, 2011)
- Approved a policy and process and began responding to requests from sessions. (November 15, 2011) As of February 13, ten sessions have requested teams to visit.

- Presbytery Council approved sending five persons to the Fellowship of Presbyterians meeting in Orlando. (October 25, 2011)
- A total of nineteen persons attended the Orlando meeting and a report will be given during the February 28, 2012 Presbytery meeting, followed by discussions on:
  - Sunday, March 11 at Northminster Church, New Castle 7 – 8:45 pm
  - Thursday, March 22 at First Church, Sharon 7 – 8:45 pm
- Presbytery Council approved engaging a discussion on joining the Fellowship of Presbyterians as a Presbytery. (February 7, 2012)

### **Options for churches that wish to consider leaving the PC(USA)**

I do not recommend that churches leave the PC(USA), but sessions that are considering requesting dismissal to another Reformed Body have basically two options:

1. Evangelical Presbyterian Church (1981) – Presbytery of the Alleghenies (2011) – information found at [www.epc.org](http://www.epc.org)
2. Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians [ECO] (announced at the January 18 – 20 Fellowship of Presbyterians meeting in Orlando) – information found at [www.fellowship-pres.org](http://www.fellowship-pres.org)

Both EPC and ECO are credible Reformed Bodies to which churches of Shenango Presbytery might appropriately be dismissed. There are significant differences in these two options. I will focus my comments here on ECO rather than the EPC for the following reasons:

1. EPC is well-established and its identity has been established over the past 30 years
2. ECO has emerged as an option in the last 6 months and was launched in the past month

### **What do I recommend?**

I recommend that Shenango churches that are convinced that integrity requires them to leave the PC(USA) strongly consider ECO. Faithful friends will disagree with me. I make this recommendation, not because the EPC is unfaithful. I do prefer ECO as an option for the following reasons:

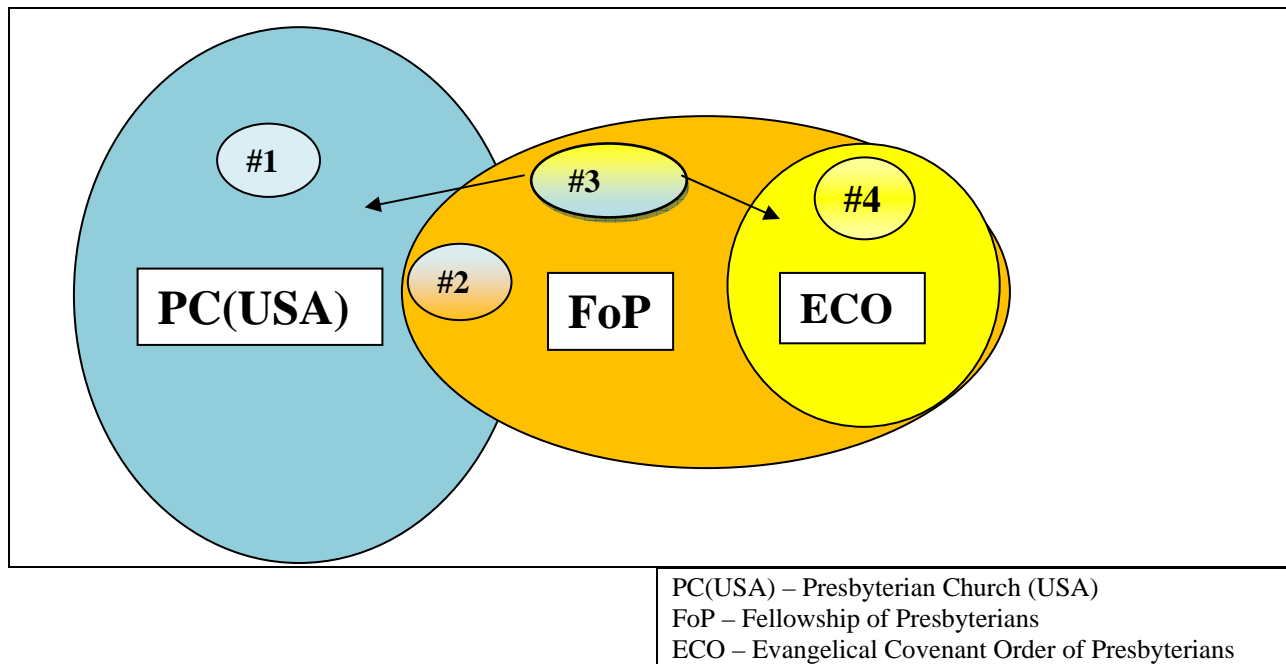
1. Several individuals who did not expect much out of the Fellowship of Presbyterians attended the Orlando meeting and were surprised and impressed.
2. Your congregation’s presbytery will be much more important to your future than will your denomination. Joining ECO may well provide a way for you to continue in fellowship with Shenango Presbytery. Our Presbytery is not perfect, but I believe that it provides the best option of support and accountability for a congregation’s future. (See more details below under option #3.)
3. A significant risk for churches in situations like this is to act based on what we are “against” rather than what we are “for.” We have good reason to question the approval of Amendment 10-A because it changes a 2000 year unchallenged tradition of Christian

ethics. The PC(USA) action can be described as “schismatic” because represents a position taken by tiny minority of Christians. 98% of the world’s Christians persist with the historic position. However, it is very important to be defined by what you are “for” rather than what you are “against,” otherwise we are susceptible to living simply as a counter-culture, sealing ourselves off from the world. ECO is founded on a positive missional vision.

4. ECO provides a theological framework which is more in tune with our core values. I encourage you to explore this in detail on the website. I mention these:
  - a. ECO does not limit itself to one confession from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Westminster Confession is a very important part of our *Book of Confessions*, but not all of the important theological questions were asked in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.
  - b. ECO makes strong affirmation of the role of women in leadership. This issue is not considered a “non-essential” in ECO.
  - c. The Shenango Presbytery “Millennium Plan” of 2000 and the updated affirmation of that vision (2011) have much in common with ECO. This is particularly true of our commitment to the missional church agenda.
  - d. ECO provides a much larger opportunity and connection to the world Christian community. This is particularly important for a congregation that might go to ECO and continue in fellowship with Shenango Presbytery. Our Sudan Partnership, support of missionaries of the Nile Valley, opportunities in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam...all are absolutely essential to the future of your church. American Christians are not the normative Christians of the world today. We deeply need fellowship with the dynamic church of the Global South.
5. The very practical matter of the geography and number of churches in Shenango Presbytery makes it more likely that your congregation will be supported through the ups and downs of a congregation’s life. The twenty-four members of the Committee on Ministry are close at hand for pastoral transitions and moments of crisis.

### **Options with ECO that will allow your church to stay in Shenango Presbytery**

Much more could be said about the reasons for a church to seek a future related to Shenango Presbytery, even if you require complete separation from the PC(USA). However, each church is in a different situation and each has different interests and intentions. ECO provides for those options. This graphic will give a point of reference for describing the options below.



Notice that:

- a church can be a member of the Fellowship of Presbyterians and still remain in the PC(USA)
- a church can completely leave the PC(USA), join ECO, which is entirely within the Fellowship

PC(USA) and ECO are separate denominations, but the Fellowship of Presbyterians overlaps with common membership for those churches which wish to do so.

Now that we have seen the outcomes from the Orlando meeting, the following options are reasonable possibilities for your church. I personally support these. Some are possible now and I fully expect that all will be possible as we move ahead. I will continue to work to see that these options are available to you.

1. Your congregation may choose to continue without any change in your affiliation with Shenango Presbytery and the PC(USA). (#1 above) This is likely to be the position of a majority of the churches in Shenango Presbytery. As long as the denominational changes do not directly affect your church, you would prefer to do nothing. Frankly, this is why I personally will continue with the PC(USA) as the executive in Shenango Presbytery. I do not foresee Shenango Presbytery voting to leave the PC(USA) anytime soon. That may happen someday, but I do not see a vote sufficient to make it happen now.

You may ask, “Are you not scandalized by the PC(USA)?” I can honestly answer that yes, I am. Actually, I probably know more of the deep-seated problems with the PC(USA) than anyone else in the Presbytery. I have been around a long time and I have

been in a lot of places where most of you have not gone. But my theology of the church includes an historical realism that believes that corruption in the church is nothing new. In fact, it has been much worse at times in the past than it is now. Constant reformation is required. Some would say that we are beyond “renewal” in the American church and our situation requires “conversion.” Others have said that the PC(USA) is “apostate” (a very serious charge which I am not ready to make), but that even this is not a reason to leave. These are very large and difficult questions, but they have been with us since the early centuries of Christianity. We need historical perspective and a deep sense of humility as we engage them.

2. Your congregation could choose to join the Fellowship of Presbyterians. (#2 above) This does not require any action except by your session. However, you had better read closely the documents of ECO. As one speaker said in Orlando, “It may be too dangerous for your church to join!” This action would make a statement that you intend to embrace the missional vision of the Fellowship. It also raises the bar for being the kind of churches that Jesus intends.

Presbytery Council decided on February 7 that it would lead the Presbytery over the next few months in considering taking action as a Presbytery to affiliate with the Fellowship of Presbyterians. I recommend that we give serious consideration to doing this. We need to take some time to do so because it is more than simply signing a document. Furthermore, some of our pastors and elders may not agree with the Fellowship of Presbyterian’s positions. This is not something to do lightly, but I believe that the Fellowship is in agreement with the commonly held positions in Shenango Presbytery.

3. Your congregation may choose to join ECO and become a “union church,” with dual membership in PC(USA) and ECO. In this way you could continue in Shenango Presbytery. (#3 above) There is language found in the *Book of Order* that allows this. It has been used in the past for “federated churches” (those holding membership in two denominations).

There is some difference of opinion about the “legality” of this but it would be very difficult to prevent it in some form if Shenango Presbytery agrees to embrace a church in this way. There is more work to be done on how this works, but I am committed to working to make it happen on the national level as well as here in our Presbytery.

I mention here another possible scenario that is even more contested. I do not see this happening anytime soon, but I do believe that it will be possible for Shenango Presbytery to become a “union presbytery” (the *Book of Order* has this provision) in the PC(USA) and ECO. I do not recommend this now, but it is hard to tell how the situation will change in the months and years ahead.

4. Your congregation may be among those that decide that you need to cut all ties with the PC(USA). (#4 above) In that case you could request of Shenango Presbytery that you be dismissed to ECO and leave PCUSA.

Here is where it gets really strange. In taking this action, your congregation might also request that ECO assign your church to the ecclesiastical oversight of Shenango Presbytery, at least until the ECO presbyteries get formed and become viable. That may sound strange because your church would have left the PC(USA), but I personally believe that it is possible and I will encourage ECO to allow that arrangement. In conversations with those who have written the ECO polity, this seems likely. How would the details work? I have some ideas and there are also questions for which I have no answers. But as I said, I believe that historians will someday declare that this was among the strangest times ever in American Protestantism. The old patterns for denominations no longer work. We are in an unprecedented situation and we need to think “outside the box.”

The reason that I support all four options above is that they all allow a congregation to remain in Shenango Presbytery. As I said earlier, your presbytery of the future is much more important than your denomination of the future. Shenango Presbytery is compatible for all 68 churches. It provides to your church the best support and accountability available. That is why I encourage you to consider the Fellowship of Presbyterians and ECO as a resource to your church.

## **Conclusion**

If what I have written here is not clear or if you see some gaping hole in these proposals, please let me know so that we can consider them together. I am committed to assisting your congregation to move ahead on terms that are faithful to God, have integrity with our ordination vows and serve your church’s needs for the decades ahead. The churches of Shenango Presbytery have every reason to be distraught about how the situation in the PC(USA) has changed. Our “presbyterian” system has always affirmed that the “presbytery” is the foundational governing body for support and oversight of churches. We have options (like those above) and I intend to work to make them viable for all 68 of our churches.

Options to Consider  
Draft 2/13/12