



**GRACIOUS
SEPARATION
AGREEMENT**

THE ROAD AHEAD



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Process And Principles For Tropical
Florida Presbytery

In The Transference Of A
Member Congregation To Another
Reformed Body

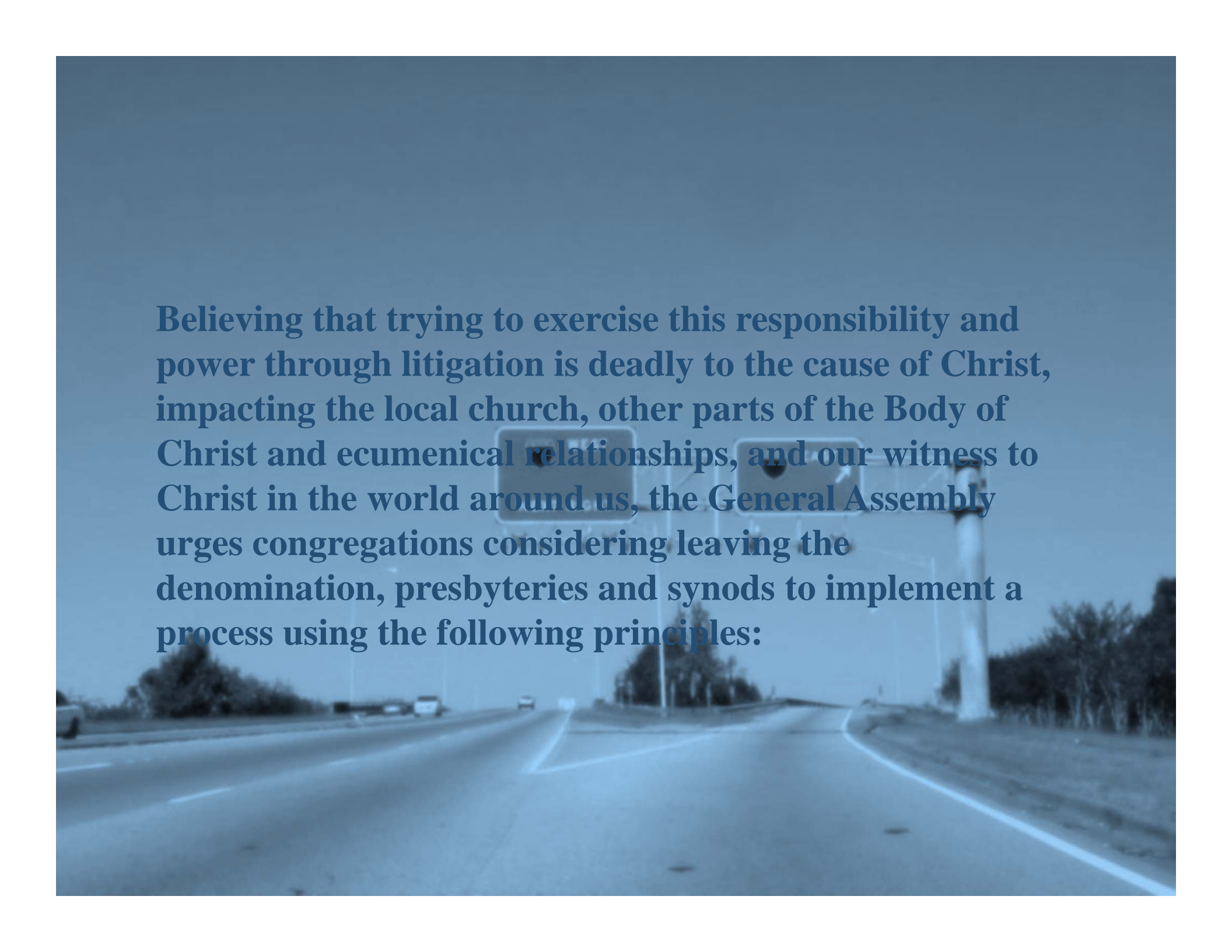
The 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved Commissioners' Resolution Item 04-28 which urged:

"...that presbyteries and synods develop and make available to lower governing bodies and local congregations a process that exercises the responsibility and power

'to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members'

(Book of Order, G-11.0103i – parallel reference in new Form of Government, G-3.0301a) with:

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- 1 Consistency
 - 2 Pastoral Responsibility
 - 3 Accountability
 - 4 Gracious Witness
 - 5 Openness
 - 6 Transparency

A blue-tinted photograph of a multi-lane highway. In the distance, there are traffic lights and a road sign. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Believing that trying to exercise this responsibility and power through litigation is deadly to the cause of Christ, impacting the local church, other parts of the Body of Christ and ecumenical relationships, and our witness to Christ in the world around us, the General Assembly urges congregations considering leaving the denomination, presbyteries and synods to implement a process using the following principles:

Consistency

- The local authority delegated to presbyteries is guided and shaped by our shared faith, service, and witness to Jesus Christ

Pastoral Responsibility

- The requirement in G-3.0301a to consult with the members of a church seeking dismissal highlights the presbytery's pastoral responsibility, which must not be submerged beneath other responsibilities.

Gracious Witness

- ...Scripture and the Holy Spirit require a gracious witness from us rather than a harsh legalism

Accountability

- For a governing body, accountability rightly dictates fiduciary and connectional concerns, raising general issues of property (G-4.02) and specific issues of schism within a congregation. (G-4.0207) But, full accountability also requires preeminent concern with 'caring for the flock'..

Openness and Transparency

- Early, open communication and transparency about principles and process of dismissal necessarily serve truth, order, and goodness, and work against seeking civil litigation as a solution."

The rationale supporting this resolution stated that it is easy to:

"emphasize the property trust responsibilities of presbytery/synod oversight to the exclusion of the pastoral responsibility of caring for the congregations (members staying and leaving) and the responsibility of public witness to Christ with the larger body of Christ and the community and world."



Secondly, it was suggested that presbyteries should be:

consistent in communicating how they will respond to congregations seeking dismissal and that all parties should engage in a more grace-filled exchange.



THE PRINCIPLES AND PROCESS

As followers of Jesus, He calls us to live lives that glorify God; that advance the work of the Kingdom of God and that show forth his love in how we honor and relate to one another as colleagues and friends in the service of the Lord.

While we desire to preserve the Peace, Unity and Purity of the PCUSA as long as is possible, we realize that, in these days of controversy, friends and colleagues may differ.

The PRINCIPLES AND PROCESS

Yet Jesus calls us to exercise his love even in the midst of disagreement. This love may be tested when some of us may come to the place where we sense that faithfulness to our understanding of Jesus' call and to our denomination may seem at odds.

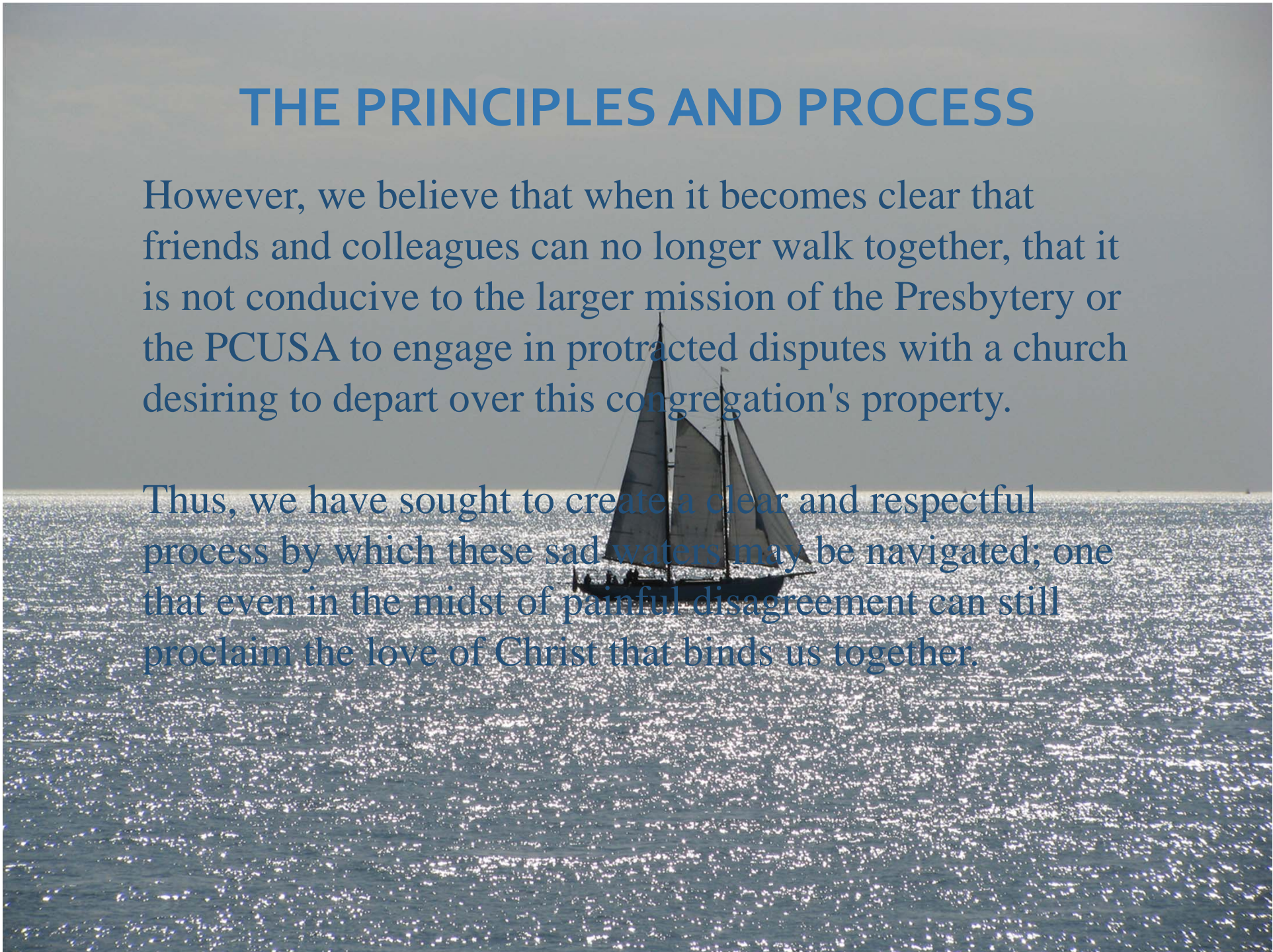
We may even feel the conviction that continued shared ministry within the boundaries of the PCUSA has become untenable.

We do not believe it is proper to divide churches and denominations if it is avoidable. Separation should not be done lightly.

THE PRINCIPLES AND PROCESS

However, we believe that when it becomes clear that friends and colleagues can no longer walk together, that it is not conducive to the larger mission of the Presbytery or the PCUSA to engage in protracted disputes with a church desiring to depart over this congregation's property.

Thus, we have sought to create a clear and respectful process by which these sad waters may be navigated; one that even in the midst of painful disagreement can still proclaim the love of Christ that binds us together.



STATEMENT OF VALUES OF THE PRESBYTERY OF TROPICAL FLORIDA

A. Unity

The congregations and members of the Presbytery of Tropical Florida seek to uphold one another, respect each other's integrity, and affirm freedom of conscience, even as we acknowledge significant differences in our views of what the Bible teaches about a number of issues.

We desire to encourage peace and unity, while minimizing confrontation between our congregations and members, as we seek together to find and represent the will of Christ.

STATEMENT OF VALUES OF THE PRESBYTERY OF TROPICAL FLORIDA

A. Unity

In all that we do, it is our prayer to strive to be a church modeled on the body of Christ, a church made up of many different parts, all of which are necessary "for its mission in the world, for its sanctification, and for its service to God." (F-1.0202)

Our spiritual unity is derived from the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

B. DECISION MAKING

Presbyterians have always celebrated and recognized significant differences of opinion on issues that matter. This ethos is currently noted in the historic language found at F-3.0105: ...

“We also believe that there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ. And in all these we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.”

Our covenant demands that we strive to work together in peace and unity, even in the midst of our diversity.

B. DECISION MAKING

continued

The duty is always to attempt to bring the estranged member back into the covenant community, and we promise to carry out that duty in our ordination vows.

Through our theology we understand that:

"Presbyters are not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ."

"Decisions shall be reached in councils by vote, following opportunity for discussion and discernment, and a majority shall govern." (F-3.0204 and F-3.0205)

B. DECISION MAKING

continued

At the same time, the church is committed to being open to voices sharing minority opinions. At some points in our history, minority views eventually became those of the majority. Thus, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes

"The church reformed, always to be reformed according to the Word of God' in the power of the Spirit". (F-2.02)

B. DECISION MAKING

continued

There are also times when members find it impossible to go along with the majority. The Presbytery encourages all presbyters and congregations to

"...concur with or passively submit to" the vote and wisdom of the majority. (G-2.0105, footnote 1)

If their consciences will permit neither, the Presbytery will be generous in allowing congregations and presbyters with strong issues of conscience to pursue peaceable withdrawal through dismissal to another Reformed body in accordance with our interpretation of the Trust Clause.

C. DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

The goal of this Presbytery will always be reconciliation and continued engagement in relationship for all congregations within the Presbytery, without the threat of isolation, estrangement or blame.

The Presbytery is to be a servant to the congregations God has entrusted to us, encouraging and supporting them toward becoming healthy, growing congregations.

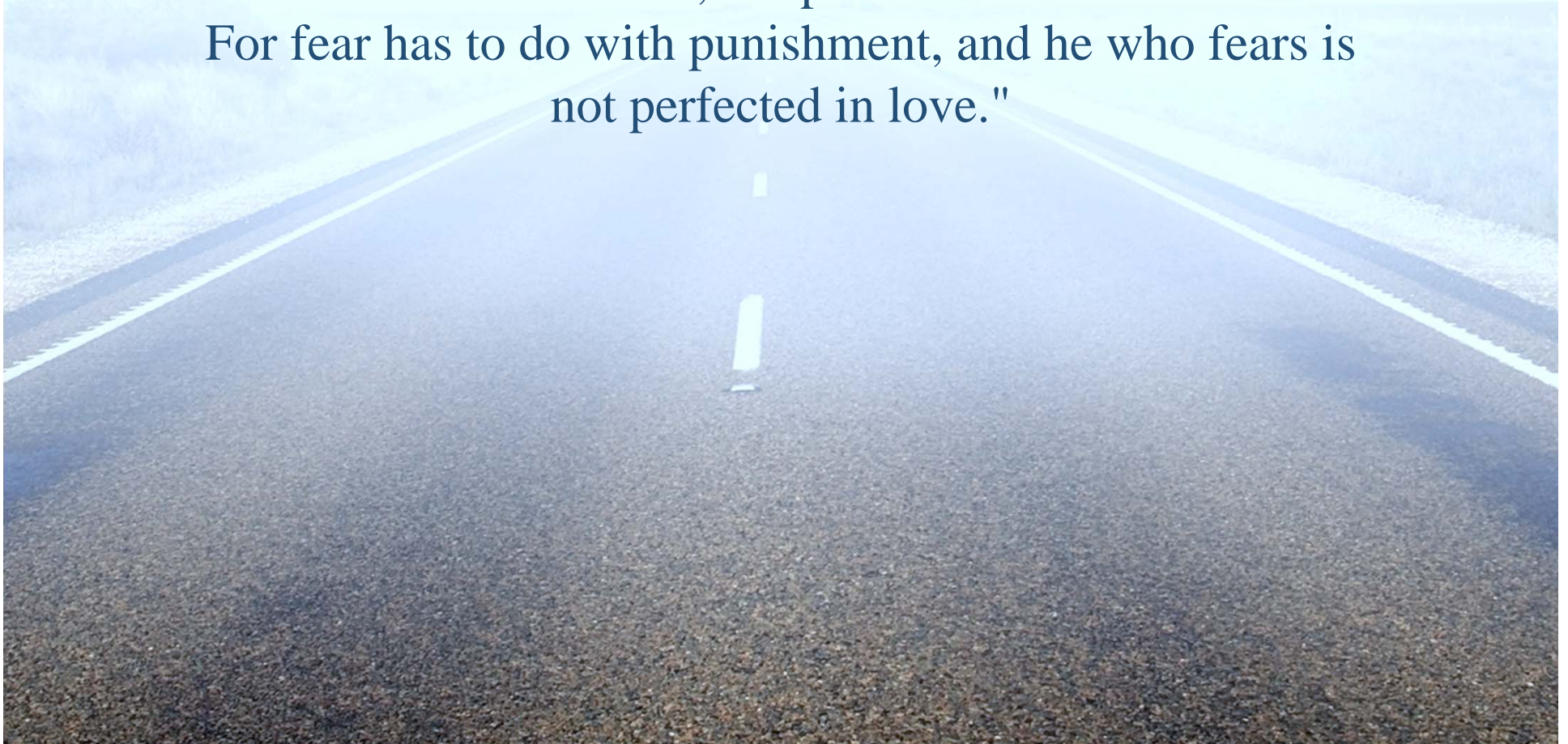
This is especially true for those congregations for whom the bonds of unity are stretched and ecclesiastical connections are frayed over issues of conscience to the point of considering disaffiliation.

C. DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

continued

1 John 4:18 states:

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love."



C. DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

continued

The Presbytery's commitment to this passage (1John) in how we dialogue with each other means that

- we are committed to engage the leaders of a congregation or the congregation as a whole, without threat of punishment.
- It is likewise incumbent upon the leaders of congregations wrestling with issues of conscience to share their concerns with Presbytery leadership in a timely manner, being assured that the response will not be hostile,
- but instead one of prayerful dialogue and a commitment to act in love and in the best interests of the congregation as well as the Presbytery's mission.

C. DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION

continued

Dialogue recognizes that our Reformed tradition includes broad historical differences between:

- the great doctrines and themes of the church
- the specific theories and models which different communities have found useful in seeking to understand those doctrines in the practice of their faith.

A Reformed stance allows room for a variety of legitimate perspectives and valid models of "essentials" that allow an understanding of underlying mysteries.

Graciousness on both sides acknowledges this validity and seeks to honor rather than to demonize one another.

D. THE PROPERTY TRUST CLAUSE

According to the Book of Order
of the Presbyterian Church
(U.S.A.) (G-4.0203):

All property held by or for a particular church, a presbytery, a synod, the General Assembly, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), whether legal title is lodged in a corporation, a trustee or trustees, or an unincorporated association, and whether the property is used in programs of a congregation or of a higher council or retained for the production of income, is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church 2011 / 2013 (U.S.A.)

D. THE PROPERTY TRUST CLAUSE

continued

As a Presbytery, we recognize that chapter four of the FOG states that except where otherwise provided, "all property held by or for a particular church, a presbytery, a synod, the General Assembly, or the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). .. is held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)"

and that congregations may leave the PCUSA in possession of their property.

(FOG G-4.0204; G-4.0205; G-40207)

D. THE PROPERTY TRUST CLAUSE

continued

- We affirm the responsibility of the Presbytery to provide for and insure the mission and government of the Church throughout its geographical district.
(FOG G-3.0301)
- We also affirm to each congregation their right to seek dismissal under chapters three and four, and we ask all of our congregations to act with love, forbearance, dignity and discretion in pursuing this right.
(FOG G-4.02; G-3.0303f)
- We further affirm that formerly PCUSA churches have additional property rights under G.4.0208 that may not be amended.

D. THE PROPERTY TRUST CLAUSE

continued

Provided this policy and its procedures, guidelines and standards are followed by all members of the Presbytery, the Presbytery and congregations desire and intend to avoid litigation against one another in secular courts in light of our mutual recognition of these respective rights in this regard, as defined and set forth in the FOG.

In the Spirit of the Apostle Paul, we peacefully seek to first resolve any disagreements as brothers and sisters in Christ before seeking any civil remedies afforded by law in the State of Florida.

D. THE PROPERTY TRUST CLAUSE

continued

When it becomes clear that friends and colleagues can no longer walk together, it is not conducive to the larger mission of the Presbytery or the PCUSA to engage in protracted disputes with a church desiring to depart over this congregation's property even though that property is held in trust by the PCUSA.



D. THE PROPERTY TRUST CLAUSE

continued

The Trust Clause should not be used as a weapon to threaten civil action against a congregation. In considering enforcement of the provisions of the Trust Clause, it is important that Presbytery and its member congregations act graciously rather than adversarial with one another.

Scripture calls us to seek in all humility to resolve our disagreements and avoid the harm that is done to the Gospel and Christ's body when Christians resort to civil litigation and public disputes over property.



