



## el montecito presbyterian church

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To the Congregation of El Montecito Presbyterian Church

Dear Church Family:

In my last letter to you, I announced that our Presbytery has agreed to restart the Gracious Dismissal Process by hosting an event at our church on May 1. Many of you attended that gathering and listened to your Session present the reasons that the leaders of the church have recommended that we depart from the PC(USA) denomination and join the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO). We also heard from representatives of the PC(USA) denomination suggesting why we might want to stay. At the end of the meeting, the members in attendance were asked to vote to approve Session's recommendation and continue the process toward the transfer or terminate the process and remain affiliated with the PC(USA). For those of you that could not attend, the members voted overwhelmingly (93 percent) to continue the process.

I would like to outline to everyone what that vote means for El Montecito Presbyterian Church and summarize the main reasons that your Session made the recommendation.

First, what does it mean? We will now enter a three- to six-month period where we will discern God's will for our church. This will include a series of meetings where representatives of ECO and PC(USA) will provide additional information about each respective denomination. The goal is to unite as a church around a choice and enter a new chapter as a grounded, healthy, and ministry-focused congregation. At the end of the discernment period, we will schedule another congregational gathering where we will learn the terms of our dismissal (including the cost) and vote to accept the terms and join ECO or remain with our current denomination, the PC(USA).

Second, why did Session make this recommendation? The recommendation was based on the following two fundamental issues.

- Differences in theology
- Concerns for the vitality of PC(USA)

Regarding theology: we are and have been concerned about a drift in the PC(USA) denomination away from reformed theology and towards a progressive theology where the authority of scripture and the centrality of Jesus have been questioned. This change within the PC(USA) was not the result of one decision made during one General Assembly. This has taken place over a number of years based on a series of decisions and actions that are not consistent with our essential beliefs. The result has been a denomination that is smaller, less financially secure, less missional, and less relevant in the world and in our community. This decline leads to our concern about the denomination's vitality. The PC(USA) has lost members every year since it was founded in 1983. It has declined in membership from more than 3 million people in 1983 to fewer than 1.7 million at the end of last year. We are concerned that a denomination focused on survival will struggle to provide the support necessary for the mission of the local church.

I would like to close by commending the members of Session for their leadership on this issue, but more importantly, thank you for your faithfulness and praise God for His guidance. The issue is not over, but this was a major step toward its resolution. I believe the remaining steps will be informative and provide an opportunity to unite around the final decision. But while this process continues in the background, we need to move forward in our ministry. With that in mind, I would like to again invite you to attend our CARE WORKSHOP on May 15 at noon, where Pastor Barry Moller has offered to equip us in the skill of Christian care. This is one way we can live out our vision: "Following Christ, we Love, Connect, Care, and Serve." Please join us and may God continue to bless this church.

Blessings,

Pastor Jay Shirley