

January 7, 2023

A letter from the elders of Parkwood Church to the congregation ...

From its origins in 1964 as a Christian community in Parkwood Hills, Parkwood Church has been a congregation of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Presbyterian churches are governed by a group of elders, elected by the congregation, who serve together with the pastor or minister to provide spiritual care and oversight and leadership for the congregation in its witness to Jesus Christ.

Presbyterian congregations are joined together in presbyteries — which are composed of the ministers of local congregations, together with a representative elder from each congregation, who share together in the oversight of churches. The Presbytery of Ottawa connects 20 congregations in the National Capital Region, and meets regularly six times a year. Whenever a congregation is without a pastor, the presbytery names one of the neighbouring pastors to assist the session and congregation, and oversees the calling of a new minister. It is to the presbytery that ministers are accountable, and share in providing mutual support and oversight.

Once a year, each presbytery names approximately one-sixth of its ministers and an equal number of elders representing the local churches to meet together in the national General Assembly, which is the highest governing body of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

As the enclosed “Brief” explains, certain recent developments on the part of the national church have given the elders of Parkwood Church (known as the session) cause to consider our present and future relationship with The Presbyterian Church in Canada. As part of the discernment process, the session of Parkwood Church believes that it is appropriate at this time to provide the congregation with a summary of these developments, and to give members and adherents an opportunity to comment and offer input.

To facilitate this, two opportunities are planned — one “in person” and one “online” — for the following dates and times:

Saturday, January 28th at 7 p.m. - in person, in the Fellowship Hall
Sunday, January 29th at 3 p.m. - online, via Zoom conference

We would encourage all members and adherents to review the enclosed “Brief”, and, if interested in discussing it and in offering input, to plan to either to attend the in person gathering on the Saturday evening or to connect to the online one on the Sunday afternoon.

We are **not** asking the congregation at this time to make any decisions, and we are not planning any votes at these meetings. We are seeking to provide opportunities for the congregation to be informed of recent developments and to offer input to the elders.

We would also value your prayers at this time as the elders seek wisdom and discernment in striving to offer leadership for the congregation, present and future.

Sincerely, in Christ’s service,

The session of Parkwood Church.

The General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in Canada held in June, 2022 adopted two significant changes to church doctrine and practice which are now the substance of Appendix L of The Book of Forms. These changes were in the form of Remits B and C, initially put forward in 2019 and sent to the presbyteries for consideration and approval.

These changes:

- (a) affirm that there are two “parallel” definitions of marriage operative in The Presbyterian Church in Canada: one as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman and the other as a covenant relationship between two adult persons;
- (b) permit those who are LGBTQI persons (married or single) to serve as ministers and ruling elders;
- (c) grant liberty of conscience and action regarding marriage to congregations, sessions, ruling and teaching elders; and
- (d) provide for liberty of conscience and action regarding participation in ordinations and inductions for ministers and ruling elders.

These “policies” are significantly different from the subordinate standards of the church — the Westminster Confession of Faith (section 24.1) and Living Faith (section 8.2.3) — which both define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

The General Assembly was asked by several presbyteries and sessions, including the session of Parkwood Church, Ottawa, to consider changes to the structure of church government to permit congregations to be grouped together in presbyteries or synods on the basis of the particular definition of marriage, to work together for the furtherance of Christ’s mission without the distraction and division occasioned by conflicting definitions of marriage or standards of practice for ordinations and inductions. The Assembly spent scant time considering these requests and denied them.

The General Assembly was asked by several presbyteries and sessions, including two sessions within the Presbytery of Ottawa (Grace Church, Orleans and Knox Church, Manotick), to consider a process for the gracious dismissal of congregations, which would permit congregations to leave The Presbyterian Church in Canada and retain their properties. The present provisions of ecclesiastical and civil law in Canada, from the establishment of the Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada in 1939, specify that the assets of any congregation which is dissolved by a presbytery vest in the Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The General Assembly declined to grant the requests to provide for gracious dismissal. Instead, the General Assembly is offering congregations disagreeing with the adoption of Remits B and C a limited opportunity to voluntarily withdraw from The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

There are three major features of the “Procedures for Voluntary Withdrawal”:

1. A session must resolve to consider “voluntary withdrawal” and notify the presbytery between November 1, 2022 and May 31, 2024.
2. The presbytery must determine that there is “sufficient support” within the congregation for such an action — “sufficient support” being defined as 67 percent of all members on the roll of professing members of the congregation, and approval by 80 percent of all such members in attendance at 2 separate meetings of the congregation, held six months apart.

3. Those withdrawing after forming a new registered charitable organization outside The Presbyterian Church in Canada would receive 50 percent of the value of the net assets (property and cash) of the former congregation, the other 50 percent being retained by the Trustee Board of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

In view of the foregoing, the session of Parkwood Church, Ottawa is presently seeking to determine what is the best course of action to recommend to the congregation. Specifically, the session is seeking to discern and consider the implications of remaining within or withdrawing from The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

What are the implications of remaining?

First, there would be no change to the ownership and use of the property.

Second, relationships within the existing presbytery may be strained in the future if and when the minister and representative elder exercise liberty of conscience in declining participation in future inductions and ordinations.

Third, there is a real risk of the loss of current elders, members, and adherents who in good conscience may find that they are unable or unwilling to associate with and support ministry and witness through a denomination which is functioning with two “parallel” but contradictory definitions of marriage and which affirms and permits practice by ministers and elders at odds with the confessional standards of the church as historically understood to be in keeping with biblical teaching and authority.

Fourth, there is uncertainty as to the available pool from which future ministers may be called when the congregation is in need of calling a new minister.

Fifth, it is likely that the congregation’s effective outreach to newcomers and young people seeking a church home that respects and upholds biblical authority in matters of marriage and lifestyle standards for Christian leaders will be impeded.

What are the implications of withdrawing?

First, a focus on the process would necessitate the expenditure of time, energy, and resources, diverting such time, energy, and resources away from ministry to the congregation and outreach to the community.

Second, the action of withdrawing holds significant potential to be divisive, as members and adherents are not all of one mind on the underlying issues, nor on the appropriate response.

Third, a withdrawing congregation is left with a significant loss of assets (50 percent), and if wishing to obtain the property the need to raise half of its appraised value.

Fourth, there is a risk that the future ministry of the congregation to the community will be undermined by a reputation of being anti-LGBTQI.

Fifth, it is not clear what the best options are for future denominational affiliation for a congregation holding and practicing reformed theology and presbyterial church government.

Neither option — remaining with the status quo nor voluntary withdrawal under the procedures offered — is very attractive. Neither is presently compelling.

One further footnote. Your minister continues willing and eager to serve as pastor, but also believes that the present options or other possibilities should be considered independent of his incumbency. The best decision needs be one with strong support of the session, independent of the current minister, and ideally with strong congregational support.