

PRESBYTERY OF MIDDLE TENNESSEE ISAIAH 1:18 TEAM FOR
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CLIFTON
FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

In June 2013 the First Presbyterian Church of Clifton expressed a desire to leave the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. As required by the Presbytery's Policy Governing Dismissal of Congregations, the Coordinating Committee appointed a seven-member Isaiah 1:18 team to represent Presbytery in dealing with the church. The members of the team were Bill Barger, TE, First Dickson; Betsy Bond, RE, Historic Franklin; Steve Douse, RE, First Nashville (moderator); Jeff Eason, TE, First Lewisburg; Joe Evans, TE, First Columbia; Elinor Foster, RE, First Lewisburg; and Doyle Trigg, RE, First Lynnville.

The team met three times with members of the church. The first was with the church's representatives; the second was in a town hall meeting to which the entire church family was invited. At both of these meetings we engaged in spiritual discernment exercises, exchanged views and information, discussed grievances, and explored options that would allow the church to remain within the PCUSA. After allowing time for prayer and reflection, the session called a congregational meeting, as required by the presbytery's dismissal policy, to vote on whether the church should seek dismissal to the EPC.

That meeting was held on March 16, 2014, with Tom Walker, an honorably retired teaching elder of this presbytery, moderating. After purging its rolls, the church had 24 members. Ten of them attended the congregational meeting, which satisfied the policy's required quorum of one-fourth of the membership. Members of the team were allowed to address the congregation. The vote was by written ballot (copy attached), and members of our team acted as tellers. The vote was 10-0 in favor of dismissal.

The Clifton church followed the Presbytery policy on dismissal of congregations and complied with all of our requests. We were given a fair opportunity to present information and arguments. There was an adequate period for prayer and spiritual discernment. The procedures followed in ascertaining the views of the congregation were fair and open, and we believe the vote accurately reflects the sentiment of the members.

When more than 90% of a congregation votes to leave, our policy provides for dismissal of the congregation with its name and property, as the church has requested. Based on all the circumstances, we believe the church's request should be granted.

Because none of the members expressed a desire to continue as a congregation of the PCUSA, there are no conflicting claims to either the name or the property, and there is no need to provide for a meeting place or financial support for a remnant congregation. Clifton is not a likely location for our denomination to plant a new church. Presbytery therefore would have no use for the property other than to sell it, and we estimate the amount that could be realized from a sale to be modest at best.

On the other hand, the existing congregation, while struggling and much diminished, feels a strong connection to its history, including its historic building. We believe they are committed to carrying on a Christian ministry in the Reformed tradition under the auspices of the EPC. The EPC is a Reformed denomination to which one of our congregations may properly be dismissed. The best and highest use for the church's name and property, in our view, is as part of that congregation's ongoing ministry within the EPC.

The Clifton church was founded as a Cumberland Presbyterian Church and only later joined this denomination. In a sense this brings them full circle.

The church has also requested that it be allowed to keep the originals of its minutes and other records and that copies be sent to the denominational archives. Seeing no good reason to deprive the church of its records, and believing that copies are fully adequate for archival purposes, we endorse the church's request.

MOTION

The Isaiah 1:18 Team for First Presbyterian Church of Clifton therefore recommends that pursuant to the Presbytery's Policy on Dismissal of Congregations and all of the surrounding facts and circumstances, the Presbytery of Middle Tennessee grant the request of First Presbyterian Church of Clifton that it be dismissed to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church with its name and property and that it be allowed to keep the originals of its records.