

## PASTORAL ADVICE – MEMBERSHIP DEPARTURES

Synod Wyoming 2016 adopted the following motions (Article 121).

Amended in Point 4 by Synod Niagara 2022 (Article 35).

- That Synod receive Section 6 of the majority report, as herein amended, as pastoral advice (*Regulations for Synodical Procedure*, Appendix D. 2).
- That the Stated Clerk provide this pastoral advice to the consistories in a publishable format.

Following is that pastoral advice. The churches are free to publish it in whatever manner best suits their needs.

### **1. Membership Transfer**

A consistory may transfer a person's membership only to churches with whom the URCNA has established Ecclesiastical Fellowship<sup>1</sup> or with whom we share membership in NAPARC.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when a member asks the consistory for transfer to such a church, he or she should clearly identify the receiving church (see URCNA Church Order Article 64).

When the consistory accedes to the member's request, it should send appropriate membership information (i.e. the dates for birth, baptism, profession of faith, and/or marriage, as applicable) directly to the elders of the receiving church, including an attestation to the member's good standing or disciplinary status. Attestations should be written to orient the receiving elders to the member we are asking them to receive and oversee.<sup>3</sup>

The consistory should request the elders of the receiving church to provide confirmation that the person has been received into their membership by use of the synodically approved Certificate of Membership.<sup>4</sup> The consistory should not consider the member transferred until it has received the requested confirmation. Once confirmed, the consistory should inform the congregation that the member has been transferred to another church, giving the name of the church.

### **2. Membership Release**

A consistory may release a person's membership to churches that have neither Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the URCNA nor membership in NAPARC. Apart from Synodical actions (see URCNA Church Order Articles 34, 35 and 36), a consistory may charitably consider another church to be a true church (Belgic Confession Article 29) if therein the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached and the

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<sup>1</sup> Acts of Synod London 2010, Art. 68.1, pp. 31, 213-215

<sup>2</sup> See *NAPARC Agreement on Transfer of Members and Congregations*; adopted at the 13th (1987) meeting of NAPARC (North American Presbyterian & Reformed Council); <http://www.naparc.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/InfoDoc-10-NAPARC-Agreement-on-Transfer.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Scripture provides many examples of such attestation by the apostles; e.g. 1 Corinthians 16:10-11, Ephesians 6:21-22, Colossians 4:7-9, 2 Timothy 4:10-15, 1 Peter 5:12, and 3 John 12.

<sup>4</sup> Acts of Synod 1997, Article LB.3, synodically approved Certificate of Membership, p.53.

two sacraments Christ instituted are administered under the oversight of elders who exercise church discipline. Therefore, a member who asks the consistory for release to affiliate with such a church should not only identify the particular church (see URCNA Church Order Article 64), but also should allow time for the consistory to carefully consider it. The consistory should then act in the way it is convinced will best serve the Lord's honor, the purity of the church, and the member's welfare.

If the consistory accedes to the member's request, it should send appropriate membership information (i.e. the dates for birth, baptism, profession of faith, and/or marriage, as applicable) directly to the elders of the receiving church, including an attestation to the member's good standing or disciplinary status.

A member should be disciplined rather than released if he or she has embraced heretical doctrines or is seeking to join a false church.

Many churches not in Ecclesiastical Fellowship function with a different understanding of church membership, and these may not acknowledge the reception of members released to their care. Even so, the consistory should request the elders of the receiving church to provide confirmation of the person's affiliation there. The consistory need not await a confirmation before informing the congregation that the member "has been released in order to affiliate" with another church, giving the name of the church.

If the consistory has publicly announced the name of a member under discipline, prior to releasing them, then the consistory should not only inform the congregation that the member "has been released under discipline in order to affiliate" with the named church, but also urge the congregation to continue to pray for his or her repentance.

In the event that a member becomes affiliated with a church without first asking the consistory to release his or her membership, the consistory should initiate correspondence with the other church to confirm whether the elders there have assumed, or are willing to assume, responsibility for the person's spiritual care. Upon confirmation, the consistory should release the member to affiliate and inform the congregation.

### **3. Membership Exclusion**

Consistories may exclude from membership those who persist in separating from the church by way of resignation, recognizing them to be outside the communion of the saints.

A member seeking resignation is taking premeditated and deliberate action. It is a grievous sin to forsake Christ's church by resigning one's membership in order to escape church discipline or to openly reject Jesus Christ and/or his church. The Heidelberg Catechism (Lord's Day 21) and the Belgic Confession (Articles 28 and 29) rightly condemn this sinful attempt to escape the spiritual oversight of elders and mutual accountability in the communion of saints.<sup>5</sup> The consistory must warn members against it, not encourage anyone to resign in order

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<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:42, 20:28; 1 Corinthians 12; Hebrews 10:24-25, 13:7; 1 Peter 5:1-5

to avoid church discipline, and not infer from one's mere absence that a member has resigned.

Church members cannot escape the authority and oversight of the consistory by an act of resignation. Jesus Christ gave the keys of the kingdom to the church.<sup>6</sup> He ordains elders to establish and terminate membership in the church, welcoming believers to commune with Christ at his table and excommunicating those bound by unbelief or hypocrisy. Therefore, the consistory should not refer to resignation as "self-excommunication."

Some may seek to resign membership in the church for very clear reasons: e.g. to escape the discipline of the church for what they profess and/or how they live; or to openly reject Jesus Christ and/or his church. Others may do so because they lack understanding and/or maturity to recognize their obligation to join and unite with the true church (see Belgic Confession Articles 28 and 29) and/or to recognize the ramifications of resignation.

Those acting out of ignorance and/or immaturity should be instructed in the doctrine of the church and warned at least twice (Titus 3:10) against the grievous sin of separating from Christ's body. Members that heed the consistory and desist from resignation should continue to receive appropriate instruction and care. Those who persist in resignation by refusing and/or disregarding the consistory should be treated in the same manner as those who resign in order to escape church discipline or who openly reject Jesus Christ and/or his church.

If a member seeks to resign while under church discipline, the consistory needs not advance in the discipline process while warning the member against resignation. If the member remains impenitent and persists in resigning, the consistory should seek the advice of classis before acting to exclude him or her from membership. The consistory needs not seek advice if classis has previously advised it to proceed to the second step of public discipline.

Having been advised by classis, the consistory may proceed to exclude from membership someone who forsakes Christ's church. The consistory should notify the person of this action, admonishing him or her and urging repentance. The consistory should also inform the congregation of this action and solicit their prayers for the former member. In this way, the congregation is also warned against this grievous sin.

#### **4. Membership Erasure**

Consistories may erase the membership of those with whom they have had no contact for at least two years, thus rendering consistories unable to assess that member's doctrine or life. Lack of contact must not be for lack of effort on the part of the consistory, but may be because the consistory cannot locate the member, or because the member is too distant to visit and will not respond to communication attempts. Consistories may, with the concurring advice from classis, erase a membership, demonstrating due diligence in its efforts to contact and give pastoral care to the member. The consistory should inform the congregation of this action and the reasons for it.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 22:22; Matthew 16:19, 18:18