

## **PROCESS FOR THE MERGER OF CHURCHES IN THE PRESBYTERY OF GIDDINGS-LOVEJOY**

### **STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:**

The Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy has had a number of successful mergers that have taken place in recent years. The provisions in the *Book of Order* (G-11.0103h and G-14.0504) describe the ways in which the presbytery, in consultation with the two merging congregations, has authority to unite two churches.

A merger takes place when two congregations in the same geographical area find that they are ready to refocus and redevelop their ministries, and they come to the realization that they can best serve their community of faith and the larger community by combining their resources. Normally, the merging congregations are nearly equal in size, resources and assets. Ideally, a merger will involve a new location for the merged church, a different name and a change in pastoral leadership in addition to a new mission statement that is a strong indication of intent to develop new ministries and community outreach or mission.

If a smaller membership church wishes to surrender the use of its building and decides to combine its membership with a larger congregation and the church receiving the smaller congregation remains basically the same, that is, in location, program, name and pastoral leadership, that process is an assimilation not a merger. In that case, the guidelines for the process are different than those for a merger (see Guidelines for Assimilations).

Note: Occasionally the suggestion for a merger of congregations will come from a presbytery strategy group. In such cases, the possibility is then normally raised with the sessions of the two congregations.

### **STEPS TO BE TAKEN:**

The merger process takes place in two phases: the Inquiry Phase and the Merger Phase. Both of these phases together will normally take at least six to eight months. The Inquiry Phase requires a minimum of four months from the date of the first meeting of the Merger Dialogue Committee.

#### **The Inquiry Phase:**

1. The process begins with informal conversations between the sessions of the two congregations. At the same time, a conversation with the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy is initiated through the Congregational Development Ministry Team as part of the overall strategy of the presbytery.
  - A. Both sessions call congregational meetings on the same Sunday to seek the approval of the two congregations to enter into a period of dialogue and to elect a representative team of four people from each congregation to form a Merger Dialogue Committee. The sessions will choose the four representatives to be elected.
  - B. If both congregations vote to enter the Dialogue Phase, the clerks of the two sessions will send a letter to the Stated Clerk of the presbytery and copy the letter to the chairs of the Congregational Development Ministry Team, Property Committee, Committee on Ministry and Financial Management. This letter will indicate the result of the vote of the two congregations and will ask the four committee chairs to designate or appoint a representative from their respective committees to serve on the Merger Dialogue

- Committee as resource people.
- C. Once the presbytery's representative team has been named, it will be approved by presbytery with an empowering motion that will carefully delineate what authority and responsibility is given to the sessions and what authority and responsibility is lodged with the presbytery team.
  - D. When the Merger Dialogue Committee and the presbytery team meet for the first time, a chair and a secretary of the committee will be chosen. The chair of the Merger Committee will be selected from the representatives of one of the churches and the secretary will be selected from the other church representatives. The presbytery representatives will serve as resource people and consultants, i.e., none of the presbytery team members will serve as chair or secretary of the Merger Dialogue Committee. This committee will also plan the four worship services and the four social events (see 2C below).
2. During the four months of the Inquiry Phase the following steps will be taken:
- A. A mission study will be completed using all available data and resources of the presbytery (e.g., Percept Revision materials) and the community (questionnaires, census data, interviews, demographic material about the surrounding area).
  - B. A plan for redevelopment or mission will be drawn up and a mission statement will be formulated for what will become the merged church.
  - C. Once a month for the four months of the Inquiry Phase the two congregations will conduct a combined Sunday morning worship service and will participate in a monthly social event such as a dinner, spaghetti supper, trivia or game night. These worship experiences and social events will alternate with two events in the each church.
  - D. At the end of the four month Inquiry Phase, the Merger Committee will determine by vote whether or not to recommend proceeding to the Merger Phase. The result of this vote will be sent to the two sessions. If the vote is affirmative, the Merger Committee will also send the mission statement and redevelopment plan to the sessions. If the vote of the Merger Committee is negative, the Merger Committee will recommend to the sessions that the committee be dissolved.
  - E. At a joint meeting of the two sessions, the elders will then vote on proceeding to the Merger Phase or they will vote to dissolve the committee.
  - F. The vote of the sessions will be announced to the congregations on the same Sunday, that is, whether or not the committee will proceed to formulate a Plan of Union. If merger is proposed, a brief timeline will also be given to the congregations.
  - G. Once the sessions have voted to enter the Merger Phase, the Merger Dialogue Committee will then become the Merger Committee. The representatives from the churches and the presbytery remain the same.

**The Merger Phase:** If the sessions vote to proceed, a **Plan of Union** will be completed. This process will normally take four to six months depending on the frequency of the meetings and the season in which the work takes place. The following items should be included:

#### **A. Election of Officers**

1. The Plan of Union needs to contain the process for the election of officers of the merged congregation (both elders and deacons). There are a number of options that

have worked quite well in former mergers in the presbytery. The Merger Committee needs to remember, however, that it is very important to have equal representation from both the former churches on the session, the Board of Deacons and all committees.

2. One possibility would be to have all the members of the sessions and deacons from both congregations (less those whose terms end at the merger) elected to the session of the new congregation. It may be that the plan for merger allows for an expanded session until such time as the terms of all the elders serving at the time of merger expire. After those terms have expired, the numbers of the session may be reduced to the number considered optimal.
3. Another possibility would be to have all the members of the sessions and deacons from both congregations elected to the session of the new congregation. Starting at the end of the first year, the boards would be reduced by increments until the desired amount of officers serving was reached. For instance, each year perhaps eight officers would rotate off the session and only four would be elected to the new class.
4. An entirely new session may be elected at the organizing congregational meeting. The nominating committees of the respective congregations may nominate persons from “their” church. The nominees will need to be elected to one, two and three year terms to begin a nominating rotation.

#### **B. Church Property:**

1. The Plan of Union will include plans for the location of the new church.
2. The Plan of Union will contain a provision for the transfer of all current property, real and personal. It also needs to make reference to the fact that the new congregation is the successor in interest so that any testimonial, trust, or foundational gifts can be received by the successor congregation. All such transfers need to include a reference that all property is held “for the use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.”
3. If one of the former merging congregations is a PCUS congregation and it wishes to maintain exceptions claimed under G-8.0701, that congregation will need to exercise care to assure that their corporate and ecclesiastical existence continues under the new merged congregation.
4. If one or both of the church properties are to be sold, the property committee of the presbytery should be involved as soon as possible to facilitate that process and assist and advise in the sale of the property.

#### **C. Personal Property:**

1. The plan should also contain provision for the handling and disposition of personal property. This is often very important for the continuing congregation. Many items have emotional impact for the members. A number of options can be explored. Items may continue to be used by the new congregation. Those items that cannot be used can be shared with other congregations in the presbytery. Personal property items may be assigned or given to the presbytery for disposal or use. In any case, the Plan for Union needs to deal with such property and its disposition in a pastoral manner.
2. This is an area in which the *Book of Order* allows for great flexibility. In many ways, those mergers that result in an entirely new physical plant have the easier task, because all members are starting out from the same position with the same history in the

building. For those mergers that will utilize one, both or parts of each physical plant, great care needs to be exercised. Often the facilities, even particular personal property, carry almost sacred connotations for members. Wise sessions will seek input from a wide range of members. This is the area that most profoundly affects the success or failure of a merger.

#### **D. Pastoral Leadership:**

1. The *Book of Order* allows the pastor(s) of the former churches to continue as or become the pastor or pastors of the new congregation. The Plan of Union needs to describe the initial pastoral staffing plan. The sessions of the merging congregations, the Merger Committee and the presbytery merger representatives will work with the Committee on Ministry to consider the various options available and desirable.
  - a. The presbytery or the COM, if such authority has been specifically delegated to them, needs to act on changes in pastoral relationships.
  - b. If new positions are created or existing ones are deleted, the presbytery will take specific action in precisely the same manner it would in normal pastoral staff redesign.
  - c. Pastoral leadership is an area of direct presbytery involvement or intervention. How well the presbytery handles this transition is another significant determiner of the success or failure of the merger.
  - d. The COM will counsel the respective congregations on pastoral leadership needs for the future. It will also give guidance in the viability of one or both of the present pastors continuing.

#### **E. Financial Review:**

1. The Plan of Union should provide for some mechanism of financial review involving the Financial Management Committee representative of the team.
2. There should be an opportunity for an audit or internal financial review of all church accounting and statements to insure the smooth assimilation of funds. The contents of safety deposit boxes should be included in the review. Plans for stocks, bonds and ongoing endowment funds should also be addressed.
3. Appropriate auditing of outstanding obligations should be reviewed in case there are liens or unsettled items in the combination of church assets.

#### **F. Process for voting on the Plan of Union and adopting By-laws for the new congregation:**

1. The Plan for Union should carefully describe the organizational structure of the new church. The key is a balance between sufficient detail and binding the future without adequate knowledge of future structural needs.
2. The Merger Committee must determine the way in which a name for the new church is chosen. It is advisable to involve as many people as possible from both congregations in order to help ensure a wider ownership or better adoption of the new name. Often, merger committees have held a “name the church” contest and have solicited names from members of the two congregations.
3. The Plan of Union needs to empower the session or some other group to create a new corporation or modify the Articles of Incorporation and/or By-laws of the corporation to accurately describe the new congregation.

4. When the Plan of Union is finished and before any group votes on it, it needs to be sent to the Stated Clerk of the presbytery for review.
5. The Plan for Union needs to place the responsibility of planning the final services of the two former congregations and the planning of the initial worship service and celebration for the new congregation. It is very important to the life of the merger to bring closure and celebrate new beginnings.
6. The voting on the Plan of Union takes place in this manner:
  - a. Once the process is completed, the Merger Committee votes on the Plan of Union. This is, in essence, the Merger Committee's vote on merger. The committee will then request a joint meeting of the two sessions to allow those groups to vote on the Plan of Union. Along with the approved Plan of Union, the Merger Committee sends to the sessions a timeline for voting. This will include the dates for sending the Plan of Union to the congregations, the date for an informational time during or after a worship service prior to the day for voting and the call for the congregational meetings to vote on the Plan of Union.
  - b. The two sessions meet jointly and vote on the Plan of Union and call for the congregational meetings (which will be held on the same Sunday).
  - c. The Plan of Union is voted on by the congregations at meetings called for that purpose.
  - d. If the congregations vote in favor of the Plan of Union, it is sent to Mission Council for review and approval.
  - e. Mission Council places the Plan of Union on the docket of a stated meeting of presbytery.
  - f. Presbytery votes on the Plan of Union.

**G. The Report of the stated Clerk:**

1. The Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy will report the dissolution of the congregations and the creation of the new congregation to:
  - a. The Office of the General Assembly. The OGA will issue a new PIN number for the new church.
  - b. The Board of Pensions using the new PIN number.

## **CHURCH ASSIMILATIONS FOR THE PRESBYTERY OF GIDDINGS-LOVEJOY**

### **BACKGROUND:**

Occasionally, there are churches within the presbytery that find they are no longer able to sustain a viable ministry in their existing configuration. These churches are those that have diminished in size (usually but not always with less than fifty members and under 35 people in worship on an average Sunday). In this situation, the congregation finds it is unable to afford either a full-time or part-time minister, and the upkeep of the building and grounds is beyond the financial means of the congregation.

When a congregation finds the above description to be true, merger will not be an option according to presbytery standards and guidelines. Therefore, the decision for the congregation will be either to dissolve or to assimilate with another Presbyterian congregation in the same area of the presbytery. Of necessity, the partner church in the assimilation must be a congregation that is financially and numerically viable with full-time pastoral leadership and mission and programs in place.

In the presbytery's recent history, a number of successful assimilations have occurred. Mitchell Presbyterian was assimilated by Granite City First, Normandy Presbyterian joined itself to Northminster Presbyterian, and New Providence and John Knox enacted an assimilation. Because the presbytery did not have a process for assimilation in place at the time, these combinations of congregations were referred to as "mergers."

### **DEFINITION OF ASSIMILATION:**

Assimilation occurs when one congregation determines that it can no longer sustain ministry in its present form and location, and the leadership of the church determines that it can best carry on its mission and ministry by combining its membership with an existing congregation. The congregation being assimilated must be willing to accept the minister(s), the location, name, activity structure, programs and mission of the existing congregation. Although it will be recommended that the remaining or existing congregation adopt new programs or rewrite their mission statement in some way in order to better incorporate the assimilated congregation into its life and ministry, there may not be changes in the programs and missional structure of the existing congregation.

In addition, the assimilated congregation will be formally dissolved by the presbytery, and the disposition of all assets and property will be determined by the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy consistent with its mission and ministry. While the presbytery may approve a Plan for Assimilation that includes provisions for transfer of personal and sentimental items from the vacated building, the assimilating congregation must understand that use of the proceeds from the sale of the building or any future use of the former building will be solely determined by the presbytery.

### **THE PROCESS FOR ASSIMILATION OF A CONGREGATION:**

The Plan for Assimilation of a Congregation will normally take no more than three or four months from the date of the first meeting of the Assimilation Committee. The steps for the process are:

### **INITIATION OF PROCESS:**

1. The clerk of session (and the pastor if one is still in place) of the assimilating church

contacts the pastor and clerk of the receiving church to request a conversation about the possibility of assimilation.

2. If that group determines that an assimilation between the two churches is viable and desirable, a joint session meeting will be called to discuss the possibility and process.
3. At the joint meeting of the sessions, the following items of business will be conducted:
  - a. Both sessions will vote to enter the process and develop a Plan for Assimilation.
  - b. Each session will select three members from its body to become a part of the Assimilation Committee.
  - c. The sessions will formulate a letter of intent to be sent to the Stated Clerk of the presbytery with copies sent to each of the chairs of the Congregational Development Ministry Team, the Property Committee, the Committee on Ministry and the Financial Management Committee.
4. The Mission Council will:
  - a. Appoint a team of resource people to work with the Assimilation Committee. These four resource people will represent Congregational Development Ministry Team, Property Committee, Committee on Ministry and Financial Management.
  - b. Delineate the authority given to the group of presbytery representatives.
  - c. Choose the chair and secretary of the Assimilation Committee from the four presbytery representatives.
5. During the time the Assimilation Committee is meeting, a number of social events and worship experiences will be jointly planned and conducted by the two churches.

#### **THE PLAN FOR ASSIMILATION:**

1. The Plan for Assimilation will include:
  - a. Provision for the closing of the assimilating church.
  - b. Plans for transferring property to the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy.
  - c. A list of personal or sentimental items to be transferred from the closing church building.
  - d. A list requesting any other items to be transferred to the assimilating congregation. This list of requests will be sent to the Property Committee of the presbytery for approval.
  - e. Plans for the closing worship of the assimilating congregation.
  - f. Plans for the receiving worship service and celebration at the assimilating congregation's "new home."
  - g. Plans for the ways in which the assimilating congregation will be incorporated into the full life of the existing congregation.
2. During this time of planning, the status of the minister of the dissolving church will be considered and worked through with the COM
3. After any necessary fees, fines, loan payments, severance pay or repayment of indebtedness are subtracted from the balance, any remaining assets in the bank account of the assimilated or closing church will be transferred to the account of the church receiving the assimilating church. In addition, any memorial funds or endowments will be transferred to the account of the assimilating congregation.

#### **COMPLETION OF THE PROCESS:**

1. When the Plan is completed, it will be sent to the Stated Clerk for final review.
2. Once the Stated Clerk has given approval, the Plan will be submitted to the two sessions for approval.

3. When the Plan is approved by the sessions, they will call congregational meetings to be held after worship service on the same Sunday.
4. After the congregations have approved the Plan for Assimilation, the plan will be sent to Mission Council for approval. If changes are made in the Plan for Assimilation, the sessions of the two churches will be empowered to approve the changes on behalf of the congregations.
5. Mission Council will then submit it to the presbytery for approval at a stated meeting.