

Denominational Frequently Asked Questions and Resources

Sunset is a Presbyterian Church. What does it mean to be Presbyterian?

Presbyterian churches are based on a representative form of government and a connection to other churches. Each congregation appoints elders to sit with pastors on a Session which governs their own church. Each church belongs to a Presbytery, a regional body designed to supervise and serve the local churches in its area. Representatives from each Presbytery come together every other year at General Assembly, the national meeting for the denomination, where policies are created or modified by vote. The next General Assembly will be held in June of 2006.

What is the PC (USA)?

Presbyterian Church (USA) or PC (USA) is the Presbyterian denomination to which Sunset belongs. It was born of a merger between two Presbyterian denominations in 1983 to become the fifth largest Protestant denomination in the United States. The denomination's national offices are in Louisville, Kentucky.

PC (USA) is governed by its constitution, made up of *The Book of Order* and *The Book of Confessions*, which is decidedly evangelical; it is founded on a Biblical worldview. For more information on PC (USA), visit the PC (USA) website, www.pcusa.org. If you do not use a computer you may also see the attachment to this FAQ Sheet entitled "The Organization of Presbyterian Church (USA)."

Why are we part of the PC (USA)?

Sunset was founded by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and we remain part of that body to this day. The foundational beliefs and organization of PC (USA) are in line with our beliefs and values. Because we are Presbyterian, we are committed to always being in close relationship with other like-minded churches for support and accountability; we believe that this follows the example of the early churches and is one of our responsibilities as a part of the Body of Christ.

What influence does PC (USA) have over us?

Our Presbytery, The Presbytery of the Cascades, is the regional governing body consisting of 124 churches in Oregon and Southern Washington. It is responsible for oversight of the churches, providing support and resources and providing pastoral care, including ordination and disciplining. For more information, see www.cascadespresbytery.org.

The General Assembly, the highest level of Presbyterian government, is composed of representatives from all 173 Presbyteries in the United States and meets every two years. Decisions, directions and strategies that affect the whole church are considered and acted on at the General Assembly. It has a large, full-time staff working year-round on church issues.

So, what's the problem?

Right now, the governing book of PC (USA), the *Book of Order*, is strongly evangelical. Sunset's mission and essential beliefs are in agreement with the beliefs outlined in PC (USA)'s *Book of Order*. However, PC (USA) is sharply divided between "evangelical" and "liberal" views.

Some of the key differences are:

Christology (the lordship of Jesus Christ). Is Jesus THE way or one of many ways to the Father?
Authoritative Interpretation of Scripture. Is the Bible the final authority for spiritual truth or is it just a book of wisdom that is subject to interpretation?

Ordination Standards. Is it right to ordain pastors who disregard scripture and/or practice immoral behavior?

The Mission of the Church. Is the main priority of the church to bring people to Christ or to pursue a political and social agenda?

Sunset is considered an "evangelical" Presbyterian church, because of our strong biblical and moral beliefs. For more information on what we believe, see *The Essential Beliefs of Sunset Presbyterian Church* which can be found on our website at www.sunsetpres.org/go/essential_beliefs.

The problem is that the leadership of PC (USA)'s General Assembly—the top leadership of our denomination—is dominated by the liberal wing. General Assembly is not enforcing the constitution of PC (USA) and the liberal wing is pushing a social and political agenda that directly contradicts the current *Book of Order* as well as Sunset's essential beliefs.

For those interested in substantive reading regarding the Theological divide we refer you to the following website: www.presbyterysd.org/presbynews/santa-barbara-resolution-final.pdf This is a Declaration of Theology and Action written by the session of a church in Oxnard California, presented to and accepted by the Santa Barbara Presbytery in October, 2006. Tedious Reading but one of the best and clearest definition of the Theological Divide in PC (USA).

What about our pastors?

Currently, Ron Kincaid and Ken Mulder are the only Presbyterian ordained pastors on staff at Sunset. Pastors Ron and Ken are members of the Presbytery but are employed by Sunset. Their terms of call to minister at Sunset need annual approval by the Presbytery.

What about our property?

Our Presbytery, the Presbytery of the Cascades, holds the deed to our property, in accordance with *The Book of Order*.

What are we doing about the agenda of the liberal wing?

Sunset has been involved with reforming PC (USA) for a very long time. In 2003, Sunset hosted The Gathering of the Presbyterian Coalition (visit www.presbycoalition.org for more info.) where over 300 Presbyterian pastors and leaders gathered from all over the country to discuss the integrity of the Presbyterian Church in America. We are also a voting member of the New Wineskins Association of Churches.

What is the New Wineskins Association of Churches?

The New Wineskins Association of Churches is a growing network of evangelical Presbyterian ministers and churches within PC (USA) who share essential Bible-based beliefs and values. New Wineskins exists to support and encourage Presbyterian churches who stand firm in their beliefs that the Bible is the true word of God and that Jesus is the only way to Him. Because the congregations involved in the New Wineskins Initiative believe that PC (USA) is in need of significant structural reform, New Wineskins has created a proposed constitution, evangelical in nature, that was attempted to be presented at PC (USA)'s General Assembly in June of 2006. For more information about the New Wineskins Initiative, visit their websites at www.newwineskinsassociation.com.

For those who do not use the computer we have included a hardcopy in an appendix notebook of a rather lengthy document entitled “New Wineskins, *a Time For Every Purpose Under Heaven*.” (You can pick this up at a “Town Hall Meeting” or contact Cindy at cindyheinz@sunsetpres.org). This is the report of the Commissioned Strategy Team of The New Wineskins Association of Churches presented to and accepted by the New Wineskins Convocation in Orlando, Florida on February 8-9, 2007. It is presented to those who want to know more about what New Wineskins is and why Sunset is committed to their vision. (*More specific FAQs re: New Wineskins later in this document*)

What direction are we heading at Sunset?

In June of 2007 two decisions were made in different places that have led the Session of Sunset Presbyterian Church to decide to invite the Presbytery of the Cascades to begin talking with us regarding being dismissed to another denomination:

1. The first decision was made at General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This was in the form of a vote to create a non-geographical Presbytery for any and all New Wineskin Churches who wish to be dismissed from PC (USA). Since this decision there have been approximately 30 churches across the United States that have been dismissed or are in the process of being dismissed from the PC (USA).
2. The second decision was made at the regular presbytery meeting of the Presbytery of the Cascades in June, 2007. The Presbytery has developed “A Process For Congregations Considering Leaving the PC (USA)” and it was presented to and accepted by the Presbytery. This has opened the opportunity for a gracious process for leaving if we desire.

On September 20, 2007, Session approved an official “Position Statement of the Session of Sunset Presbyterian Church” and they voted to begin the process of conversation with the Presbytery of the Cascades.

In October, the first Presbytery team called the Conversation Team, met with Session for discussion about our desire to be dismissed. This team, in turn recommended that the second Team, the Resolution Team, be scheduled to begin meeting with a team that Session has commissioned as the Negotiation Team. Those meeting have begun in April, 2008.

Both the Position Paper and the Process Papers are available on www.sunsetpres.org or are included in the appendix notebooks.

What is the Evangelical Presbyterian Church?

Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) began in 1981 when they founding churches and leaders determined that on the basic essentials of the Christian Faith, they would not disagree, but on anything that was not essential they would give liberty. Above all, they committed themselves to loving each other and not engaging in quarrels and strife. The result is that when they are together they spend most of their time in worship and fellowship and almost none in arguing with each other.

EPC consists of a little over 200 churches and about 85000 members. They have a world missions program with priority on sending missionaries to unreached people groups. They eagerly desire to plant new churches across the United States, especially in urban communities and college towns. It is their desire that every one of their congregations will be an outpost of the Kingdom in post-Christian America with every member viewing himself or herself as a missionary on a mission.

They began when a group of pastors and elders held meetings in St Louis, MO in 1980-81 for planning and prayer. They came from mainline Presbyterian denominations like the United Presbyterian and the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the two denominations that merged in 1983 to form PC (USA)). These leaders had become increasingly distress by liberalism within their denominations. They wanted to form a church that took seriously the words of Scripture, the theology of the historic confessions of the faith, and the evangelical fervor of Presbyterian founders.

It is the belief that God created the Evangelical Presbyterian Church to be a significant part of his plan for the renewal of believers and for witness to those outside the faith. It is their conviction that, like the ancient Queen Esther, God has brought them together for such a time as this.

For further information about this church go to www.epc.org. or the appendix notebook.

Why Would We Go To EPC?

In 2005, this denomination commissioned a Long Range Planning Team to evaluate progress on Vision 21, a plan put in place in 2001 (see appendix or go to www.epc.org. click on “about us” and go to long range plan). They wanted to begin envisioning the EPC’s mission beyond 2010. The Long Range Planning Team is focusing on developing missional ethos and practice in the denominational life.

It is this intentionality that connected this team with New Wineskins. Through a mutual group of people, this team was introduced to the writings and vision of New Wineskins. They began meeting to talk. A year later, The Leadership of the denomination offered to create the non-geographical presbytery for New Wineskin churches who wished to leave the PC (USA). This was passed by the 2007 GA (see above).

In addition, however, this action went hand in hand with the creation of a Transitional Team (called “New Wineskins/EPC Joint Commission”), made up of members of the Long Range Planning Team and members of the leadership of New Wineskins Association of Churches. This team is now working on blending he two visions together to become one in the next five years. *See paper in appendix notebook.*

Sunset’s overall vision is very close to what EPC and NWAC believe is to be the purpose and direction of the 21st Century Church. For these reasons Sunset’s leadership believes we would be better aligned with EPC than with PC (USA).

Why Not Go To New Wineskins Instead of EPC?

The constitution of PC (USA) gives each Presbytery the power and the right to dismiss any church seeking to be leave but it has to be to another Reformed Group with which they have communion. PC (USA) does not recognize New Wineskins as an organized reformed group but they do recognize EPC.

See Dave Henderson's "The New Wineskins Initiative" on page 9.

Would Church membership transfer automatically?

Yes, once Sunset has been released to EPC, every member who states they want to go with Sunset to EPC will automatically be transferred.

What is relative size of EPC & PC(USA)?

PC(USA) is has just under 11,000 churches and has approximately 2,300,000 members
EPC has approximately 200 churches with about 85,000 members.

Questions relative to Congregational vote

Will only members be allowed to vote?

Yes

What % of Sunset's attendance are members?

On any given Weekend about 65 or 70% of the attenders of the weekend services are members.

Will representatives from the Presbytery of the Cascades be allowed to speak to Sunset members?

Yes. In fact, they have already expressed a desire to do so when we have our Congregational Meeting for a vote.

Does the vote have to be taken in a single meeting?

Yes.

When will the membership know more of the details regarding being dismissed to EPC? What will be the process?

The Session appointed Negotiation Team from our church (all Elders except for one Pastor) is currently meeting with the Presbytery of the Cascades appointed Resolution Team. It is not known how long the entire negotiations will go on. It could be several months.

When the two teams come to an agreement, that agreement is then taken to Session for their approval or disapproval. If the Session approves then they will call a series of informational meetings where the entire membership will be able to hear and discuss the details of the agreement. Then a special called congregational meeting will be scheduled where the entire membership will be asked to be present to vote.

If Session disapproves the agreement from the Team, they will either have the teams continue negotiations or seek to wait until a later time to make a change. A time when the Lord will allow us to leave with our property in a manner acceptable to everyone.

The Congregational approval will need to have 51% of the congregation voting to leave. That is the requirement of the denomination. Sunset's leadership however, is seeking a much high vote percentage to affirm that which they believe God is leading us. A vote of no less than 90% is an affirmative vote.

What happens when the Congregation approves to go to EPC?

The Resolution Team from the Presbytery of the Cascades become Sunset's advocates and brings the motion to Presbytery for a vote of the Presbytery.

Resource List

Information about Sunset:

The following pages can be reached from the “about us” page on Sunset's website (www.sunsetpres.org/go/aboutus):

Sunset's Mission and Vision	www.sunsetpres.org/go/vision
Sunset's Essential Beliefs	www.sunsetpres.org/go/essential_beliefs
Sunset's Core Values	www.sunsetpres.org/go/values
Sunset's Philosophy of Ministry	www.sunsetpres.org/go/philosophy_of_ministry

Information about our Denomination:

Presbytery of the Cascades' Website	www.cascadespresbytery.org
PC(USA)'s Website	www.pcusa.org

Additional Resources:

Presbyterian Coalition—an alliance of evangelical renewal groups. Presbyterian Coalition coordinates with individuals and groups who share evangelical convictions and who are working for revitalization of PC (USA). www.presbycoalition.org

The Layman—a publication that monitors and reports on news and issues within PC (USA) from an evangelical perspective. The Layman is published by the Presbyterian Lay Committee. www.layman.org *The Layman* is also available in print as a free subscription; request a subscription by emailing your name, mailing address and telephone number to art@layman.org.

New Wineskins Initiative (NWI)—a growing network of Presbyterian ministers and churches within PC (USA) who share essential Bible-based beliefs and values. NWI has created a proposed constitution to be presented at PC (USA)'s General Assembly in 2006. www.newwineconvo.com and www.presbywine.com

The Confessing Church Movement—a collection of independently gathered churches and individuals within PC (USA) who have agreed to assert the reaffirmation of three basic confessional statements. www.confessingchurch.homestead.com

Presbyterians for Renewal—an organization committed to the renewal of PC (USA). www.pfrenewal.org

Other Renewal Groups as listed on the Presbyterian. www.presbycoalition.org/partners.htm

The Book of Order—one of two books that make up the constitution of PC (USA). www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/boo-04-05.pdf

The Organization of Presbyterian Church (USA)

Session

Each church has a Session which is composed of the pastors, often referred to as "teaching elders", and lay people who are elected from the membership of the congregation and are often called "ruling elders". Both teaching and ruling elders are ordained for life, although ruling elders serve for a period of three years on the Session.

The Session has supreme authority in all matters in the local church such as:

- Receiving, disciplining and dismissing members.
- Overseeing the worship services.
- Supervising all activities of the congregation including the deacons and trustees.

Presbytery

The Presbytery consists of an equal number of clergy and laity from each church in a specific geographical area. The "Presbytery of the Cascades" is composed of 124 congregations, one of which is Sunset Presbyterian Church. Some of the responsibilities of the Presbytery are:

- Ordaining and disciplining teaching elders. All teaching elders have their membership in the Presbytery rather than the local church.
- To oversee and supervise churches within the Presbytery.
- To elect commissioners to Synod and General Assembly.

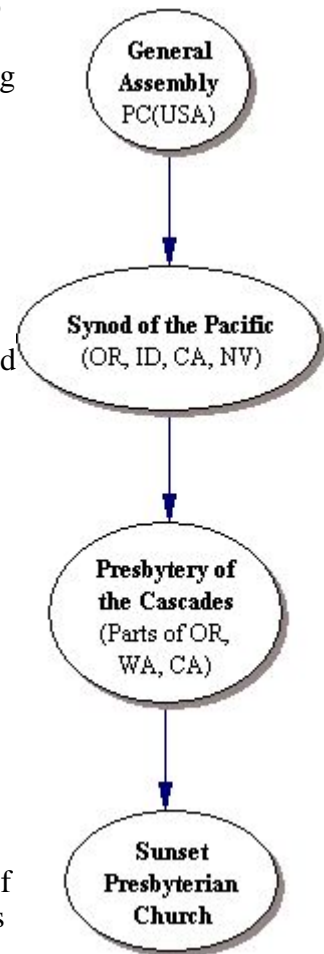
Synod

The Synod consists of a geographical group of Presbyteries. The Presbytery of the Cascades is a part of the Synod of the Pacific, which includes Presbyteries in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, and California.

General Assembly

The General Assembly is a representative body composed of an equal number of ruling elders and teaching elders who have been elected by the various Presbyteries. The General Assembly meets biannually and it is the final authority in all matters affecting the interests of the entire church.

Note: Presbyterian Church (USA) is often called PC (USA).



The New Wineskins Initiative

*Frequently asked questions
answered by David Henderson*

Q: *Why New Wineskins? What is really motivating your work?*

A: The vision of the New Wineskins Initiative is that our life together as Presbyterians would be characterized by theological and ethical integrity, missional faithfulness, and structural effectiveness. This vision has as its major components a newly drafted reformed statement of faith essentials and of ethical imperatives, as well as a streamlined missional/relational structure which, while true to our Presbyterian heritage, will allow us to be more effective and faithful in our kingdom mission in this world. You can find those statements and our proposed constitution at our website: www.newwineconvo.com. We believe the picture we are holding up before the denomination is one that will be attractive to the broad majority of Presbyterians.

Q: *Some say that the statements of faith essentials and ethical imperatives that your group has drafted are too narrow and restrictive.*

A: Our present *Book of Confessions* gathers together many exceptional expressions of reformed faith to guide us in our Biblical interpretation. We desire that the body of historically recognized reformed confessions and creeds would continue to serve in this capacity. However, the present *Book of Confessions* is so broad that, while it serves us as a guide in matters of instruction and interpretation, it does not adequately serve us as a basis for discipline. We need a shorter Biblically-grounded reformed statement of theological and ethical essentials upon which we (the great majority of us) can agree together, and on the basis of which we are willing to discipline one another and to be disciplined ourselves. That is why we have drafted a fresh expression of essential classic reformed theological beliefs and ethical practices.

Obviously not all will agree with the statement of faith essentials and ethical imperatives we put forward. There are some within the PCUSA whose theology and ethics departs so profoundly from what the church has historically affirmed in its classic orthodox expressions of faith for twenty-one centuries that they will not find our theology comfortable, or perhaps even recognizable. But it is they who have departed, not we, not the vast majority of the PCUSA. It is they who have stepped outside the bounds of orthodox theology and morality.

Q: *You say that you desire us to experience greater theological unity. But doesn't the work of New Wineskins push us further apart rather than bringing us closer together?*

A: In spite of the structural model for unity that has dominated our denominational thinking for the past one hundred and fifty years, we who are part of the New Wineskins Initiative continue to believe that our unity should be found first and foremost in our shared theology, ethics, and mission, not in a shared structure. This necessarily means that we need to be willing to identify some theological and ethical convictions as being out of bounds, and some practices as being unfaithful to our mission, and some aspects of our structure as being ineffective. This means being willing to call for reform that does not *a priori* require that everyone who is now part of the PCUSA happily fit within a new structure or articulation of orthodox faith and ethics.

Insisting that we keep the PCUSA together in precisely the form and make-up in which we now see it is *not*, as we understand it, the meaning of Biblical unity. To insist that we preserve and maintain an institution is not the same thing as upholding the peace, unity, and purity of the Church. Do we not uphold the notion of a Church reformed and always being reformed according to the word of God? What does our resistance to reform say about our beliefs about the denomination? Have we turned things around, such that we view the word of God as fallible and the PCUSA infallible?

Q: *What do you say to the criticism that the New Wineskins Initiative threatens the peace and unity of the Church that Jesus describes in his high priestly prayer?*

A: Critics of our work often will point to Jesus' prayer in John chapter 17. They say, "Anything that threatens the present institution of the PCUSA threatens the unity of the Church to which Jesus calls us." There are two aspects of our response to that.

First, the denomination is not the Church. It is part of the Church; it helps to organize a portion of the Church. But where the Church is God's creation, the denomination is merely a human institution, one that exists to serve the Church – and it needs to be preserved and strengthened to the extent that it is faithful to what God intends for the Church, and reformed where it is not.

Secondly, I think we need to take a closer look at the nature of the unity to which Jesus calls us, and for which He prays. It is unity based *not* on shared structure but on shared theology, ethics, and mission. Look at the text. Jesus talks about shared beliefs in John 17:8: "I gave them the words you gave me, and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me." He prays for shared ethics in 17:17: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." And calls the Church to a common mission in 17:19: "As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." According to Jesus, what defines our unity is not being in the same institution but sharing the same theology, ethic, and sense of call. Without those things in common, we simply *cannot* experience the unity to which Jesus calls us, regardless of what structure we may share.

Q: *What is your response to those who say New Wineskins is schismatic?*

A: Those who have called New Wineskins schismatic misunderstand our work. The New Wineskins Initiative is not a separatist movement. We have no desire to gather together a small band of miffed members and leave. In fact, just the opposite is true. We intend the NWI to be a uniting movement. In the face of forces that threaten the unity of the body of Christ, we are presenting a vision for the denomination that is faithful to its past and that can continue to unite us into the future.

But we are seeking to uphold the unity of the Church around those things which we believe the Scriptures tell us are to be the basis of our unity – around beliefs and practices, not name or structure. Is it schismatic to seek to restore theological, ethical, and missional unity to our life together as Presbyterians?

We don't have any desire to split off. Neither do we believe God would have us passively accept things as they are now. We want to encourage the radical reform of a denomination that has a beautiful heritage but which has lost its way.

It is true that we have talked at points about the possibility of various scenarios in which the PCUSA would not continue as it is presently. But those possibilities have been discussed only as responses, as steps that may be required if the denomination were to continue in its slide away from faithfulness and toward compromise.

Continued muddiness in the proclamation of the Gospel and disagreement about the life to which Christ calls us, continued bitter battling between factions within the denomination, continued struggle to join hands in meaningful mission to our world, continued loss of members and waning financial support: we can't go on like this – not if we wish to honor God.

The New Wineskins movement has been labeled as schismatic because we are willing to say that continuing indefinitely as we are now is not an option. But should it be an option? Is what we have – what we are experiencing together – what we want for ourselves? More importantly, is it what God wants for us? Perhaps the fact that we are willing to say it is not is an expression not of schism but of wisdom.

Q. *Another concern about New Wineskins is that it threatens to abandon our Presbyterian and reformed heritage. How would you respond?*

A. We believe the draft constitution that we are proposing is thoroughly Presbyterian in structure and solidly reformed in doctrine, though perhaps not in a way that is obvious to those whose only exposure to Presbyterian structure and reformed theology is the late twentieth-century version with which we are most familiar.

For instance, the form of government stands upon the spiritual leadership and authority of those who are recognized for their wisdom and spiritual maturity (elders); it joins congregations in constitutional association for mutual encouragement, accountability and mission; and it provides for a series of wider governing bodies whose responsibility it is to support and serve the smaller and more local expressions, all distinctively Presbyterian hallmarks.

Likewise, the theology espoused in our declarations is fully consistent with the theological emphases of the Reformers, including the sovereign reign of God over human history and the lives of individuals; the inability of persons, because of the taint of sin, to please God or to seek Him of their own accord; the Trinitarian nature of redemption, including the gracious election of some to salvation by a loving Father, the substitution sacrifice of the Son to purchase redemption, and the empowering work of the Spirit to effect new life; and the Church's missional call to embody the loving reign of God and engage the world with God's redemptive purposes.

As we believe you'll see in the documents we've proposed, the work of New Wineskins is completely faithful to our heritage as reformed Presbyterian believers, and seeks to uphold and reform it, not dismantle it.

Q: *Why should we take the New Wineskins proposal seriously?*

A: The denomination persists in addressing symptoms rather than the source of our problems. As long as we do so, we will be frustrated with our results. Only a thorough reform of the denomination from belief to behavior to structure to practice will allow us to experience the unity of spirit and purpose for which we long. We believe we offer a workable blueprint for reform that will help bring about needed change.

Clifton Kirkpatrick's request for suggestions concerning the present *Book of Order* shows that the need for significant change is recognized by those who work with it most closely. We offer our work as a serious response to that request, and believe that it warrants close consideration by our fellow Presbyterians.

The Rev. Dr. David Henderson is Co-Moderator of the New Wineskins Initiative, Senior Pastor of the Covenant Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana, and author of the book [Culture Shift: Communicating God's Truth to Our World](#) (Baker Books).

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