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Position Statement of the Session of Sunset Presbyterian Church

As approved by Session
September 20, 2007

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I. The purpose of this Statement is summarized here:

The Session of Sunset Presbyterian Church approves the initiation of a process. The process will allow Sunset Presbyterian Church to separate from the Presbyterian Church USA and transition to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church / New Wineskins transitional presbytery. The principle cause of this decision is due to the practice of natural theology by the PC(USA), as explained in section III. The process for transition has been provided by the Presbytery of the Cascades.

II. Our process for reaching the above decision to initiate separation was as follows:

Since the founding of Sunset Presbyterian Church, our elders and staff have participated in the PC(USA). From the beginning we discovered troubling theological differences, and stayed involved in the denomination to try to resolve those differences.

Sunset Elders and staff have also participated in committees of the Presbytery of the Cascades, seeking to impact the decisions made at each General Assembly, and to seek renewal of the denomination to orthodox theology.

To try to join forces to achieve renewal, Sunset participated in a variety of reform groups within the PC(USA), sponsored meetings of those groups on our property, and provided leadership and financial resources to the groups. These groups have included the Confessing Church Movement, New Wineskins, Presbyterians for Renewal, and the Presbyterian Coalition. We continue to be active in these groups.

As the internal conflict in the PC(USA) continued to grow over time, Sunset's leadership and Session went through a number of periods of information collection followed by Session meetings, study and prayerful consideration. The purpose of this activity was to evaluate our relationship to the denomination.

It was Sunset's hope that the appointment in 2001 of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity (known as "the PUP report") would bring resolution to the key theological issues that today are tearing the PC(USA) apart.

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The final PUP report was issued and accepted in 2006, and did not bring resolution. Instead, it resulted in a great deal of discussion, prayer and study by groups throughout the denomination, and attempts to leave the PC(USA) by several churches. For Sunset the PUP report ultimately leads our Session to recommend to the congregation that we undertake the process of separating from the denomination.

Session has carefully considered this course of action to assure we are not promoting schism within the PC(USA) or the body of Christ at large. Schism is a sin. Sunset's pursuit of integrity is not schism, and therefore not sin, because we are seeking to fulfill the call of Christ instead of worldly interests or personal preferences. Furthermore, we are making a decision only for our congregation; we are not trying to lead other churches with us.

III. Our basis for making the recommendation is this:

Sunset Presbyterian Church's mission, vision, core beliefs, and values are summed up in the Great Commission: **Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."** (Matthew 28:18-20, NIV)

The constitution of the PC(USA) acknowledges the Great Commission, referring to it as one of the "great ends of the church": "The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world." (The PC(USA) Book of Order G-1.0200)

Unfortunately, the PC(USA)'s practice has not followed its constitution for many years. The resulting internal strife, between those who want to follow the constitution and those who do not, has taken a toll, and now Sunset's ability to effectively pursue the Great Commission is compromised.

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The basis for PC (USA)'s internal strife is irreconcilable theological perspectives. The two perspectives are known as Natural Theology and Evangelical Theology:

In Natural Theology, humankind discovers God primarily through the natural world. Statements about what God is like are drawn from evidence gathered from observing people, animals, and the rest of the visible creation. This puts humankind in the position of making ultimate, authoritative decisions on the character of God and our relationship to Him. In particular, in Natural Theology it is acceptable to declare that Jesus is only one way among many to reach God, and that therefore Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and other world religions stand on equal footing with Christianity. It logically follows that people who follow one of those other religions have no need to become followers of Jesus Christ.

In Evangelical Theology, humankind discovers God primarily through God's deliberate revelation of Himself to us. Statements about what God is like are drawn from the Scriptures. This puts God in the position of making ultimate, authoritative decisions about how humankind should perceive and relate to Him. In particular, Jesus's declaration "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through me" must be taken at face value as an exclusive claim, meaning that Christianity is the only way to God. It logically follows that all non-Christians everywhere are in need of the salvation provided by sacrifice of Jesus and the hope provided by the resurrection of Jesus.

Natural and Evangelical theologies are mutually exclusive: "One can not declare Jesus "the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the only way to the Father"¹ and simultaneously declare that he is but one way among many. One can not affirm the authority of the Scriptures over all matters of faith and practice² while simultaneously proclaiming that experience, emotions, and opinions have equal (or greater!) voice. One can not hold that the ethical standards of Scripture are to be required while simultaneously holding that truth is uncertain and each must choose their own course, beliefs, and behaviors. There is always room for diversity within the church when these beliefs deal with non-essentials or are not mutually exclusive." (Ventura Church Declaration, pg 3-4 lines 67-72.)

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¹ John 14:6. 8.10, *Book of Confessions*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part I.

² 5.003; 6.001-006, *Book of Confessions*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part I.

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Existence of differing theologies within the denomination is acknowledged by the PC(USA) itself. (See the PUP Report, page 12, lines 320-328.) This is the source of the tension within the PC(USA), as stated above. There is tension in attempting to “adhere to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind the faithful into the body of Christ while also respecting freedom in nonessential matters of belief, worship, piety, witness, and service”. (See page 28, line 699 of the PUP Report)

IV. While the PUP Report acknowledges the tension, it stops short of providing authoritative definition of essential beliefs – thereby failing to resolve the tension. Still worse, the PUP Report arguably provides for a local option in deciding what is essential truth and what is not; this means that each individual PC(USA) church can decide for itself to follow Evangelical Theology, Natural Theology, or a completely arbitrary mixture of the two, without concern for discipline by the denomination. It also heightens the tension: if each local church can decide essential truths, then each church can ordain any pastor or elder with any theological beliefs that are (locally) acceptable. The Book of Order of the PC(USA) requires that a church like Sunset accept the ordination of any pastor and/or any elder from any other church in the denomination. This would require Sunset to put such a person into a position of power within our church, in spite of our disagreement with their beliefs. Although these decisions are subject to review and correction by higher governing bodies, the record shows that these sort of decisions are rarely overturned. The result would be strong, crippling disagreements among our leadership, and confusion about our message among our membership and our community.

This issue of tension within the denomination over theology and its practical effects was brought home to Sunset leaders very forcefully when we received a letter dated August 28, 2007, from Southminster Presbyterian Church - a church that is part of the Presbytery of the Cascades along with Sunset. Southminster announced that for the sixth straight year they will include the Jesus Seminar as a part of their adult education. The Presbytery of the Cascades has given their permission to proceed with this activity. The Jesus Seminar explicitly denies that all Scripture is inspired, placing man's opinion above God's revelation by voting on the authenticity of the words of Jesus. What is more, many of the participants in the Seminar deny the resurrection of Jesus. The Jesus Seminar and its participants therefore explicitly deny several beliefs that are affirmed by the PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions, Book of Order, and

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affirmations of orthodoxy in other denominational statements. Therefore, there is no unity or integrity between the PC(USA)'s confessions and the actions of our local Presbytery, and obviously no unity or integrity with Sunset's mission, vision, core beliefs and values.

The renewal groups within the PC(USA) mentioned above have tried for many years to restore the confessional unity and integrity of the denomination, but all attempts have been unsuccessful. Quoting the PUP Report's Mandate, "The 213th General Assembly (2001) approved the formation of a Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. Its mandate is as follows: The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church is directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church. This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power. The task force is to develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discern the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)."

The PUP Report acknowledges theological diversity, calls for unity and mutual respect for diversity but fails to address essential matters of faith preferring to push the issue to the local level for church by church determination. This results in the final deterioration of the denomination's theological unity. We are now bound only by a governance structure that promotes the celebration of diversity while failing to clearly define and enforce common essential beliefs. In effect, and ironically, the PC(USA) has promoted unity only for the issue of diversity of theology.

V. Ultimately the internal conflict in the PC (USA) has spilled over to the point it inhibits Sunset's ability to fulfill Great Commission for several groups:

Within the Reformed Theology Christian Community, opportunities to participate in seminars have been denied because of concern over PC(USA) theology.

At the Local Church Leadership Level, ministers at the highest levels of Sunset's leadership struggle with PC(USA)'s association with natural theology. As a result, some have chosen to leave. This results in a drain

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of leadership resources, and an inability to attract the best talent to fulfill the Great Commission.

At the Membership Level, individuals have refused to join because of the theological concern over the PC(USA). Individuals have also left for the same reason. Individuals have refused to contribute money because the per capita contribution paid to the PC(USA) by Sunset could be used by the PC(USA) leadership to support non-Biblical theology. Finally, individuals have refused to give to our capital campaigns or give as much as they wanted due to our association with PC(USA) and their policies related to ownership of church property.

At the Non-member Level, the theology of Sunset Presbyterian Church is in conflict with the theology of the PC(USA). The inconsistency breeds suspicion for non-members and inhibits personal conversion due to perceived lack of integrity on our part.

Within our surrounding community, inconsistency confuses Sunset's message. In one case protesters actually appeared outside the church, assuming that Sunset agreed with a position supported by PC(USA) when in fact Sunset does not support that position.

The result is a confused message, preventing Sunset's leaders and members from even having a chance to proclaim the Gospel.

VI. Why not "Stay and Fight" to change the PC(USA) back to follow Evangelical Theology?

Sunset has supported the position of "stay within denomination and promote denominational renewal" for at least two decades. This is proven by our participation in Presbytery committees and in the renewal groups, as detailed above. We now believe that staying and fighting is unlikely to prevail. Years and even decades of discord have led nowhere. We see an increasing emotional toll on our leaders, and an increasing distraction away from the Great Commission.

Time devoted to the tension in the PC(USA) has been and continues to be substantial; Pastor Ken Mulder has devoted half of his time to denominational issues over the last four years. Time spent in Denominational Task Force issues has distracted Sunset's Session; Session monthly meeting time over the last two years has been dominated by discussion of PC(USA) issues. Special Session meetings were

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devoted to the PUP Report, both before and after its adoption by the PC(USA).

The Great Commission is not about particular denominations, so staying in the PC(USA) is not essential. Sunset belongs first to the Church of Jesus Christ. The denomination originally represented churches that shared essential beliefs and traditions. The disagreements within the denomination have now eroded relationships between Sunset and other like-minded churches within the PC(USA), to the point that now each individual church must declare its essential beliefs so that other churches can determine whether there is alignment on essential beliefs. This eliminates one of the primary benefits of membership in the PC(USA).

Sunset theology would remain unchanged, even in a new denomination. Sunset's commitment to evangelism would remain unchanged. Sunset's commitment to the Presbyterian form of church government and Reformed Theology (a particular form of Evangelical Theology) would continue. Changing denominations – from one Presbyterian body to another – would have the effect of removing the tension over denominational issues, the distraction from our mission, and the time demands on our pastors required to deal with PC(USA) developments.

VII. What are the next steps for our congregation?

In pursuit of separation, Sunset will follow this series of steps, in roughly chronological order:

1. Sunset's Session contacts the Presbytery of the Cascades to initiate this process.
2. The Presbytery of the Cascades begins to follow its published "A Process for Congregations Considering Leaving the PCUSA".
 - a) The Presbytery offers a Conversation Team, who meet with Sunset leadership.
 - b) The Presbytery follows this with a Resolution Team, who meet with Sunset membership and work with Sunset leadership.
3. Sunset's Session recommends, presuming an affirmative vote of Sunset's membership, that we seek to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church ("EPC").
 - a) EPC is a Presbyterian denomination that follows Evangelical Theology, both in belief and practice.
 - b) The process of the Presbytery of the Cascades requires that Sunset's congregation be received by another

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Reformed (i.e., Presbyterian) denomination. EPC would qualify.

- c) Sunset could join EPC by following a straightforward process provided by New Wineskins Association of Churches.
- 4. Sunset membership votes on the recommendation to leave PC(USA) and join the EPC/New Wineskins transitional presbytery.
- 5. A transition of our people, property and pastors occurs.
 - a) A transition process will be established for people who do not want to transition with Sunset to EPC.
 - b) The two ordained Presbyterian pastors, Ron Kincaid and Ken Mulder, will seek to be received by the EPC.
 - c) Legal documents will be executed to transfer our assets to Sunset.

VIII. Conclusion

We hope that this Statement provides the essential materials needed to understand the background of this recommendation, to make an informed decision about this critical issue, and to concur with Sunset's leadership that it is in our best interests to proceed with separation. We are aware that individuals may have many questions on particular points, and we expect to answer those questions both in publications and in face-to-face meetings. In the meantime, we humbly request your prayerful support as we move forward.