

A new denomination, continuing ties to PC(USA)

A report from the Fellowship of Presbyterians conference

By Leslie Scanlon, *Presbyterian Outlook* national reporter

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Most of the 2,100 people who came to the Fellowship of Presbyterians' Covenanting Conference, held Jan. 18-20 in Orlando, are not yet ready to leave the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Instead, they're still trying to discern what to do next.

But Fellowship organizers say about 100 congregations are ready to withdraw from the PC(USA) and step into something that's new and still taking shape. The Fellowship has made that possible by formally creating a new denomination, the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (ECO for short), which will begin accepting member congregations April 1.

Throughout this conference, Fellowship leaders cast a vision of a bold new church unafraid to take risks in mission; of like-minded evangelicals committed to mutual accountability; of taking the best of Presbyterian history and tradition and pointing it in new directions.

"I'm not really sure we have really dreamed for a long time," said John Ortberg, an author and pastor of Menlo Park Church in California. "I think God is calling us to dream." Along with the dreams came a bucket of nuts and bolts (pensions, health plans, per capita and more). The Fellowship's board of directors approved revised theology and polity documents that form the new denomination's constitution. They announced plans for another national gathering, to be held Aug. 23-24 in a place yet to be determined. It will be partly a gathering for mutual support and worship, partly a formal business meeting.

It's also clear that most evangelicals aren't leaving the PC(USA). Some aren't ready to make the switch yet, some don't want to go at all (although that could change if the PC(USA) decides to allow its ministers to perform same-gender marriages). Relatively few are pursuing the idea of achieving union status with both the ECO and the PC(USA).

Evangelical congregations may have several reasons for staying in the PC(USA), said Jim Singleton, a Colorado pastor and president of the Fellowship. Some may feel it's too costly to go to the ECO; some may not want to risk rupturing a divided congregation; some feel they already do effective ministry and have solid relationships within PC(USA).

Some evangelicals staying in the PC(USA) also will join the Fellowship as a way of differentiating themselves — to align with other evangelicals in networks of mutual accountability, and to stand in opposition to the PC(USA)'s controversial decision last year to allow the ordination of sexually active gays and lesbians.

Here are more details regarding the Fellowship and the new denomination.

ESSENTIAL TENETS. Included in the ECO's theology document is a section on essential tenets, with which those being ordained in the new denomination or having leadership roles in its congregations are expected to agree. That section, however, is apparently still under revision. Laura Smit, a theology professor and its primary author, described it as a "paper-cup document" (to be used for a while, then replaced with something better), rather than a cherished crystal goblet handed down through the generations.

The essential tenets are "not a subscriptionist bullet-point list of eight essential things you have to believe to get in the door" of the ECO, said John Crosby, a Minnesota pastor and president of the ECO. Crosby said in an interview that the essential tenets are bedrock theological teachings listed in boldface in the document, and that the Fellowship's board of

directors retains the authority to make changes in the constitutional documents for the next 18 months, while the ECO is taking shape. “Everything we do around here is a draft,” Singleton said.

FINANCES. The Fellowship has begun raising money. It ended the gathering with a Covenanting Service where pledge cards were passed out and people were asked to sign a covenant of support with the broader Fellowship umbrella group, not specifically with the ECO. The Fellowship has set what its leaders call a “bare-bones” budget of \$500,000 for 2012. For congregations entering the ECO, the per capita would be 1 percent of the congregation’s budget. Joining the Fellowship will cost \$250 a year for congregations and \$125 for individuals.

NEW ECOSYSTEM. Leaders spoke of having in the ECO a solid theological center; mutual accountability through peer evaluations of ministry; and an ethos that allows for flexibility, risk-taking and trust.

“This is not a safe harbor” but a vessel for those “who want to be in ships that sail out into the storm,” said Joe Farrell, a Colorado minister who worked on the polity document.

“We’ve had this deep longing for belonging,” said Marnie Crumpler, a minister with Peachtree Church in Atlanta. “This is our tribe. These are our people.”

When asked why evangelicals should choose the ECO rather than the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Singleton said there’s one clear distinction: The EPC has an “ambivalent” position on the ordination of women, while the ECO celebrates the gifts of women in ministry. **O**

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