

Strengthening Advocacy in Consequential Ecclesiastical Discernment

An Invitation for Consideration by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Presbyterian Church in America, Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians

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An invitation, not a prescribed amendment

Out of love for the Church and respect for its constitutional responsibilities, Presbyterian Discernment invites these four denominations to consider whether their present arrangements for counsel, advocacy, representation, and pastoral assistance adequately serve persons and ecclesiastical bodies affected by consequential decisions. This recommendation does not claim to be an overture, prescribe identical constitutional language, or assume that existing safeguards are deficient. Each denomination is invited to assess the question under its own theology, polity, procedures, and experience.

1. The central principle

No person, congregation, or council facing a consequential ecclesiastical decision should have to navigate the process alone, without reasonable access to knowledgeable and appropriately independent assistance.

Such assistance should include a meaningful and appropriately bounded opportunity for the advocate to be heard by the body responsible for the decision. The purpose is not to transfer authority to the advocate, but to strengthen meaningful participation, fuller understanding, fair process, responsible accountability, and sufficient Christian discernment.

The advocate remains accountable to the person or ecclesiastical body being assisted; bidirectional benefit does not mean divided loyalty. By helping the affected party understand the process and communicate responsibly, and by helping the deciding council hear relevant facts, contrary information, and procedural concerns, advocacy may improve discernment on both sides.

2. Why this deserves consideration

Presbyterian governance entrusts consequential decisions to ecclesiastical bodies. That authority is necessary. Yet those exercising it, and those affected by it, are fallible people operating within human institutions. Faithful intentions and constitutional procedures do not by themselves ensure complete information or sound judgment.

Unequal power and access. Participants may differ in authority, resources, procedural knowledge, access to records, continuity, voice, and capacity to influence the enduring account of events.

Capacity and complexity. Time, workload, experience, available expertise, emotional strain, and organizational scale can constrain both affected persons and deciding councils.

Fallibility and bias. Prior assumptions, loyalties, theological differences, confirmation bias, and deference to authority can shape what participants notice, trust, and question.

Group and institutional dynamics. Groupthink, informal influence, conflict avoidance, reputation concerns, risk management, and pressure to clear an agenda can encourage premature closure.

Delegation and information filtering. Interviewers or smaller committees may possess firsthand knowledge that becomes compressed into a recommendation. The deciding body may not hear every material uncertainty, alternative interpretation, or response.

These conditions do not imply misconduct or establish that an affected person is correct. They are reasons to provide proportionate safeguards and ways to test assumptions. A decision may conclude deliberation without completing the work of discernment.

3. The advocate's meaningful opportunity to be heard

Assistance that is confined to private advice may leave an important gap. Each denomination is invited to consider appropriate ways for an authorized advocate, subject to its procedures, to:

- Attend relevant proceedings and help the affected party prepare and participate.
- Present or submit material information and respond to significant inaccuracies or omissions.
- Raise questions about procedure, fairness, evidence, and unanswered issues directly with the responsible decision-making body.
- Respond to a consequential recommendation before final action when practicable and consistent with confidentiality, safety, and other legitimate obligations.
- Seek clarification of the reasons for a decision and of available next steps.

A right to be heard is not a right to control the agenda, determine the outcome, or override lawful confidentiality and safeguarding requirements. Appropriate time limits, conflict-of-interest rules, qualifications, professional boundaries, and protections for other participants should be defined by each denomination.

4. Accompaniment before, during, and after

Before. Proactive explanation of the process; early access to a trusted, knowledgeable advisor; preparation; identification of relevant resources; and opportunities to clarify concerns before a crisis escalates.

During. A genuine opportunity to participate and be heard; attention to information gaps and unequal capacity; fair consideration of competing accounts; and a bounded advocate voice before the deciding body.

After. An intelligible explanation of decisions, guidance on review or reconsideration where available, appropriate pastoral care, remediation or transition support, and learning from longer-term consequences.

A council may complete an administrative proceeding without completing its pastoral responsibility. The need for accompaniment may continue even where the decision is a faithful “No” or “Not Yet.”

5. Theological purpose: formation and shalom

Christian discernment concerns not only the decision reached, but the people, relationships, and communities formed through the process. Romans 12:2 connects discernment with renewed understanding; James 1:19 calls for listening; Philippians 2:1–11 models humility in the exercise of power; and Galatians 5:22–23 directs attention to the fruit of the Spirit. Job 9:32–35 gives poignant voice to the

longing to speak without fear before overwhelming authority, without prescribing a modern advocacy office.

Christ is the norm; fruit over time provides evidence; shalom is the horizon. Shalom means truthful, just, reconciling wholeness—not simply institutional tranquility, agreement, or the restoration of a preferred outcome. Advocacy should help the Church remain open to a faithful “Yes,” “No,” or “Not Yet.”

6. Invitation to denominational examination

We respectfully invite each denomination, through the governing bodies and procedures it judges appropriate, to consider the following questions:

1. Where do existing provisions provide counsel, advocacy, representation, pastoral accompaniment, or comparable assistance?
2. Do those provisions reach consequential nonjudicial decisions affecting ministers, members, candidates, congregations, and councils, as well as formal judicial matters?
3. Can an advocate communicate material concerns directly to the deciding body, orally or in writing, with appropriate limits?
4. How are affected parties informed of available assistance, and can they ordinarily accept or decline it?
5. What safeguards address recommendations from smaller groups, including factual accuracy, contrary evidence, and opportunities to respond before final action?
6. What qualifications, independence, accountability, confidentiality limits, and protections against conflicts of interest are appropriate?
7. How might advocacy strengthen both the affected party’s participation and the council’s discernment without duplicating existing offices or creating unnecessary bureaucracy?
8. What pastoral support and institutional learning should continue after the decision?

7. The requested response

We invite each denomination to affirm, adapt, question, or decline the principle as its own discernment leads; review its existing practice; and determine whether education, better use of current resources, procedural guidance, or constitutional change is warranted. This is an invitation to examine the conditions of faithful authority, not a judgment that every denomination must establish a new office.

Closing conviction

No one should stand alone before consequential ecclesiastical authority, and no council should have to discern without the benefit of a fuller understanding.

Out of love for the Church, this recommendation is offered for prayerful consideration, respectful critique, responsible testing, and continuing learning.