

Church Viability Policy

I. Purpose of this Policy

- A. Soon after his glorious resurrection, our Lord and Savior commanded his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.” Matt 28:19-20.
- B. A church is “viable” when: advancing the Great Commission is a key focus in its ministry; it is preparing its members to grow in their personal discipleship; and it has adequate resources to accomplish these goals.
- C. One of the primary ways the Kingdom of God is advanced is through healthy churches. It is Presbytery’s goal that all its local churches will be healthy, and that Presbytery can enable appropriate assistance to achieve this goal.

Presbytery also has responsibilities in this area. The EPC Book of Government assigns presbyteries the authority and responsibility to ensure that its local churches are effective in their ministries:

Although no complaint may have been received, if in the judgment of the [Ministerial] Committee, a local church may be having difficulties or appears to be failing in its mission, the Committee has the authority to investigate and to make recommendations to Presbytery. [BoG 21-2.D.2.d]

Nevertheless, local churches are responsible for maintaining viability. While the processes established in this policy include assistance for churches seeking to restore or increase their viability, nothing herein is intended to shift responsibilities of local churches to Presbytery.

- D. This policy: 1) establishes a procedure for addressing churches that may be “failing in [their] mission”; 2) provides a mechanism for assessing and assisting such churches; and 3) defines a process for making recommendations to Presbytery to address such matters.

II. The Mission of Local Churches

It is the primary mission of the local church to evangelize, making disciples by extending the gospel both at home and abroad, leading others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, providing for the nurture of that faith that all might worship the true God and grow in grace and in sanctification. It is to be remembered that good deeds in ministry and service to others, offering relief to those in need, is the fruit of the gospel. Without the clear evidence of such fruit, all else is brought into question. However, the Church must never confuse its primary mission of evangelism (the gospel) with the fruit of faith (good works). [BoG 4-2]

III. Church Viability

- A. For purposes of this policy, a viable church is one that effectively participates in its primary mission. The three broad aspects of viability are:
 - Missional viability: a viable church effectively participates in the propagation of the Gospel message and encourages and helps the congregation grow in personal commitment to follow Christ.
 - Resource viability: a viable church has sufficient resources (including personnel) for continuing missional work and daily operations without relying on inordinate support from Presbytery.

- Financial viability: a church is financially sustainable if it has adequate funding to meet its financial obligations in a manner that does not compromise its independence in proclaiming God's word.
- B. The importance of viability.
- Viability is an essential aspect of local churches in the EPC. Every church is a witness for Christ to its congregation, its neighbors, and its community. This internal and external witness must be consistent with biblical teaching, reflect love for others, and honor God.
 - The local church may present the only opportunity visitors (and some in the congregation) ever have to encounter Christ, understand his transformational grace, and see the impact of faith in people's lives. A church that is not viable cannot effectively present this witness and, even worse, it may discourage seekers from pursuing a relationship with Christ.
- C. The determination of viability.
- Viability determinations must take into account factors such as a church's history with regard to missional activities, membership, attendance, congregational participation in worship and other church activities, funding history, effectiveness of leadership, evidence of the fruit of the spirit, peace and harmony, its near-term plans, and efforts to address viability issues that may exist.

IV. Addressing Church Viability Issues

- A. Consistent with Presbytery's authority and responsibility as set forth in the Book of Order; the following process is established to address issues relating to the viability of local churches. The Ministerial Committee has primary responsibility for implementing, executing, and coordinating actions pursuant to this policy.
- B. If Presbytery Council receives credible complaints, concerns, or other information that raises questions about a local church's viability, it shall direct that an initial inquiry be conducted.
- C. Initial Inquiry into Viability.
1. The Ministerial Committee (or representatives of the Committee) will conduct an initial inquiry regarding the church's viability through discussions with the Pastor, members of the Session, and other interested parties as the Committee deems appropriate. Reviews of documents may also be part of the inquiry. The Church Planting focals may participate in the inquiry as well. The purpose of the initial inquiry is to determine whether a formal review of the church's viability is warranted.
 2. At the conclusion of the initial inquiry, the Min Comm shall submit a written report to Presbytery Council with a finding that the evidence from the initial inquiry that does or does not support the initial concern. The Committee's report may include recommendations for consideration by Council or Presbytery and observations, including matters related to the Pastor or pastoral staff, and other issues at the church that Presbytery should be aware of.

D. Formal Review of Church Viability.

1. If an initial inquiry report finds that the evidence supports a conclusion that the church is failing in its mission or otherwise is not viable, or is in danger of becoming not viable, Presbytery shall initiate a formal review of the matter. Responsibility for conducting this review will be assigned to the Ministerial Committee. The Min Comm may appoint a team including some members of itself and others from the presbytery with abilities and interests to perform this review.
2. In conducting the formal review, the committee will use the relevant considerations set forth in the Appendix to this policy, and additional matters that it deems appropriate.
3. Through the formal review process, the committee will:
 - a. Gather historical and current facts and data relating to the church's current and projected viability;
 - b. Seek to identify key specific challenges that may be adversely affecting the church's viability;
 - c. In a collegial effort with church leadership, explore feasible corrective actions for addressing challenges the church faces (see "Helping Churches Improve Their Mission Effectiveness", below); and
 - d. Prepare a written report for Presbytery that sets forth:
 - (1) The committee's findings with regard to the church's current and projected viability with respect to missional viability, resource viability, financial viability, and overall viability;
 - (2) The basis for these findings; and
 - (3) Actions and/or recommendations for Presbytery to consider.

The report will note the considerations set forth in the Appendix to this policy that are instrumental in formulating its findings. The committee may also address other considerations it deems relevant to the question of current and projected viability of the church that is under review.

4. Helping Churches Improve Their Mission Effectiveness.
 - a. The review process can be more than an audit of a church's viability at the time of the review. It presents a strategic opportunity as well, thereby advancing Presbytery's goal that all local churches are being effective in their primary mission.
 - b. Discussions between reviewers and the local church as part of the review can lead to valuable insights and ideas for strengthening the church's viability. Upon invitation by the Pastor and the Session, the committee may agree to assist the church formulate realistic plans to improve its viability.
 - c. If the church does develop written plans to improve viability, the committee will consider the plans and the likelihood the church can successfully implement them in a timely manner when it formulates its findings and recommendations for Presbytery.

(Adopted by Presbytery 1/27/2018)

Appendix

EPC Presbytery of the Pacific NW Policy on Church Viability Criteria for Formal Review of Church Viability

The basic question to be answered through the formal review process is whether a church is fulfilling its primary mission as defined in the Book of Order.

The considerations noted below are intended to create a transparent, objective, and consistent review process to examine factors that may be relevant in assessing a church's current or projected viability. The answers to some of the questions may also be helpful to the church in identifying strategies for achieving improvements in its viability.

The goals of a viability formal review process are:

- Assist church leadership to identify factors that relate to concerns regarding viability; and
- Offer consultation services to assist church leadership develop and implement strategies and plans to address viability concerns.
- Gather information that will assist Presbytery in determining what actions - if any - are appropriate for responding to viability concerns.

The use of objective metrics only is inappropriate for matters as important, complex, and nuanced as a church's viability. Therefore, the process inevitably requires a degree of subjective judgment. In order to enable this subjectivity, the parties should approach a review with a commitment to candor, cooperation, respect for all participants, patience, and thoroughness. Judgments regarding viability should not be made until all needed information has been gathered.

The committee conducting a formal review of a church's viability will explore the following considerations for assessing viability.

A. Missional Viability.

1. Propagation of the Gospel and Making Disciples.

- a. Is propagation of the Gospel and discipleship the first priority for the Pastor? For the Session? For the congregation?
- b. Does the church have a written mission statement or policy that addresses the primary mission for EPC churches? If so, how is the church implementing this statement or policy?
- c. What types of activities has the church conducted over the previous 12 months that were specifically (though not necessarily exclusively) intended to share the Gospel with people who have not received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? How many times were such activities undertaken?
- d. How many adult baptisms and child/infant baptisms has the church performed in the previous 12 months?
- e. Does the church support missionaries who are overseas or located in the U.S.?
 - (1) Who are these missionaries, and what sponsoring organizations are they affiliated with?

- (2) How long has the church supported each of these missionaries?
 - (3) What forms of support does the church provide?
 - (4) In what ways are members of the congregation involved in supporting missionaries?
- f. In what ways do member of the congregation engage in evangelizing activities?
 - g. Please describe other aspects of the church's ministry that relate to the primary mission.
2. Christian witness.
- a. Does the church seek to demonstrate a Christian witness to the local community? If so, how?
 - b. Does the church encourage the congregation to demonstrate Christian love, support, and fellowship within the church body and in dealings with their families?
 - c. Does the church encourage the congregation to demonstrate Christian love for those outside the church? If so, in what ways?
 - d. Please list and discuss any other aspects of the church's ministry that relate to propagating the Gospel.
 - e. In the last 3 years, have there been any significant church-related disputes or strong disagreements between individual members of the congregation or between members of the congregation and church leadership? If so, what was in dispute, and how were the matters resolved?
 - f. Are community groups allowed to use church facilities for meetings or other gatherings?
 - g. Have the Pastor and Session members cooperated with the reviewers, answered questions and participated in discussion in a forthright manner, and been responsive to requests for additional documents and data?
 - h. To what extent, if any, has the church been beset over the last 3 years with issues that have generated significant discord, rancor, animosity, or other ill-will between individuals affiliated with the church?
3. Discipleship and Spiritual Formation.
- a. Do the church leaders encourage members of the congregation to grow in discipleship and spiritual formation? Do they provide materials and/or opportunities for members of the congregation to intentionally pursue this growth? If so, discuss the church's efforts in these matters.
 - b. Please describe any other aspects of the church's ministry that relate to growth in discipleship and spiritual formation.

B. Resource Viability.

1. Teaching Elders and Church Staff.

- a. Is the Pastor a Teaching Elder in the EPC? If not, what is the reason the church does not have a Pastor who is an EPC Teaching Elder?
- b. How long has the Pastor served the church? Is the Pastor's position full-time?
- c. What is the nature of the relationship between the Pastor and the Session?
- d. Is there any reason to believe that the Pastor would like to leave this church? If so, why does he or she want to leave?
- e. What tasks are staffed for this church, and are they paid or unpaid? Are any members of the church staff related to the Pastor?
- f. Are there vacancies on the church staff? If so, what positions, why are they vacant, and how long have they been vacant

2. Ruling Elders.

- a. What training do Ruling Elders receive regarding the Book of Order, EPC polity, the church's primary mission, and the church's approach to advancing that mission?
- b. How many Ruling Elders does the church have at this time? Please list their names and note how long they have been on the Session. If the size of the Session has been reduced in the last 2 years, why was that done?
- c. Are any Ruling Elders related to the Pastor or to each other? Please provide details regarding these relationships.
- d. In the last 24 months, have any Ruling Elders resigned from the Session or left the church? If so, what reason was given?
- e. Do the Ruling Elders' have responsibilities for teaching and shepherding the congregation? How, and how often, do they engage in activities to meet these responsibilities?
- f. Do Ruling Elders have any role in addressing disputes, disagreements, conflict, or ill will between members of the congregation?
- g. Are there any Elders who sometimes act in ways that are abrasive, highly critical, dismissive, insulting or domineering in dealings with each other, church staff, or members of the congregation? If so, what actions have been taken to address this situation?

3. Other leaders.

- a. Do members of the congregation serve in leadership roles? If so, are they trained in principles of Christian leadership and the church's primary mission?
- b. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding the strength and depth of leadership capabilities and participation in the church's ministry? If so, please discuss it.

4. Facilities.

- a. Does the church regularly meet in facilities it owns or rents for worship and other church activities? Are the facilities appropriately sized for the number of people regularly in attendance?
- b. Are the facilities clean, safe, well-lit, adequately heated and cooled, and in good repair?
- c. Have critical facility maintenance needs been deferred for a year or more?
- d. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding the adequacy of the church's facilities? If so, please discuss it.

5. Materials.

- a. Does the church have adequate and appropriate materials, such as books, hymnals, Bibles, and access to musical instruments, to conduct worship services, adult and/or child Sunday school classes, and Bible or other book studies during the week (if such opportunities are provided by the church).
- b. Does the church have adequate office supplies and equipment?
- c. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding materials that are available to assist the church in meeting its mission? If so, please discuss it.

6. Membership, attendance, and stewardship.

- a. How many active members did the church have 3 years ago? 2 years ago? How many does it have today? If there has been a decline of 10% or more in membership for any year, what appears to be driving this decline?
- b. What was the average weekly attendance at worship services over the last 3 years? If there has been a decline of 10% or more attendance for any year, what appears to be driving this decline?
- c. What was the average monthly giving in each of the last 3 years? If there has been a decline of 10% or more in any year, what is the attributed to?
- d. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding the church's history of membership, attendance, and stewardship? If so, please discuss it.

C. Financial Viability

1. Over the last 3 years, did the church regularly receive sufficient funds from weekly/monthly giving to pay its staff and bills on time each month?
2. Over the last 3 years, did the church have funds after paying operational expenses to devote to missional endeavors such as community outreach, supporting missionaries, supporting local charitable organizations, and evangelizing on a regular basis?
3. Is the church repeatedly relying on reserves, proceeds from the sale of property or other assets, or other large sums of money to cover salaries, benefits, and other operating expenses? If so, what percentage of operating expenses are paid using such funds?

4. Does the church have outstanding debt (other than a mortgage on church property) for funding that has been used for operating expenses? Over the last 3 years, has the amount of this debt increased, decreased, or remained about the same?
5. What percent of current market value of the property is mortgaged?
6. How many giving units did the church have 3 years ago? Two years ago? Today? If there have been a decline of 10% or more in any year, what is this change attribute to?
7. What percentage of giving units provide 50% of the funding necessary to pay the church's salaries and operating costs?
8. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding the church's financial viability? If so, please discuss it.

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