

PCUSA continues to see exodus of churches

by [Leslie Scanlon](#) in the [October 16, 2013](#) issue

The exodus from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues as congregations seeking a more conservative home leave for other denominations. Some are small congregations—20 or 30 members—and some are among the largest and wealthiest churches in the PCUSA.

The departures, mostly for the Evangelical Presbyterian Church or for ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians, have been going on for some time now, but the cumulative impact is adding up. ECO reports that 60 congregations so far have formally joined its ranks, with more considering on planning such a move.

[In spring 2011, a majority of PCUSA presbyteries approved the General Assembly's vote in 2010 to ordain gay and lesbian clergy, a move that led many conservatives to opt out of the denomination.]

The PCUSA reported that in 2012, the denomination dismissed 110 congregations to other denominations, compared to 21 in 2011. Another 86 congregations were dissolved typically because they were too small to continue operating, and overall the PCUSA lost more than 102,000 members in 2012, according to the denomination's 2012 comparative statistics report.

That 5 percent membership loss constituted the denomination's greatest numerical loss since the 1970s and largest loss, in percentage terms, in almost 50 years of ongoing membership declines. The PCUSA now reports 1.84 million members, less than half of its peak membership of 4.25 million members in 1965 and down from 1.95 million members in 2011.

Some of the potential departures have been low on drama, but others have involved lawsuits over who owns the property, as in the case of Highland Park Presbyterian Church, with nearly 4,900 members, which filed suit September 10 in Dallas County District Court against Grace Presbytery.

The court filed a temporary restraining order, which for 13 days would prevent the denomination from interfering with the congregation or the property. A key focus of the dispute is whether Texas courts are likely to rule that a local congregation owns its own property or whether the courts would consider that the property is held in trust for the denomination.

Grace Presbytery posted a statement on its website that “we are shocked and saddened” that Highland Park chose to file the lawsuit. “There has been no conversation at the presbytery level to seek control of their property or establish a commission to work with the church during their period of discernment as to whether or not to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” the statement continues.

Among the prominent congregations considering leaving the PCUSA is Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in San Francisco Presbytery, with more than 3,300 members, whose session voted June 11 to seek dismissal and to affiliate with ECO. Menlo Park’s pastor, John Ortberg, was a speaker at ECO’s national gathering in Orlando in January 2012.

Another considering leaving is St. Andrews Presbyterian in Newport Beach, California. In June the 3,000-member congregation voted 923 to 120 to begin discussions with the Presbytery of Los Ranchos, which could lead to St. Andrews’s departure to another denomination.

In June, Los Ranchos adopted a new “property policy and procedures,” which outlines how the presbytery will conduct conversations with congregations considering leaving the PCUSA.

At Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina, Minnesota, with more than 5,300 members, 86 percent voted in a congregational straw poll in December 2012 in favor of moving to ECO. In May 2013, the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area appointed an administrative committee to work through the departure process with the congregation.

First Presbyterian Church of Houston, with more than 3,500 members, voted in January 2013 to enter into the discernment process that the Presbytery of New Covenant has established for congregations contemplating transferring to other denominations.

Other congregations, such as First Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, Washington, First Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins, Colorado, and First Presbyterian in Hollywood, California, have opted to stay, with some of them joining the Fellowship of Presbyterians as a means of finding common ground with like-minded Presbyterians.

“What is the problem we are trying to solve?” Fellowship president Jim Singleton asked in a September e-mail news update. “How can the Fellowship help stagnant congregations flourish?”

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