

Evangelical Presbyterian Church
Presbytery of the Southeast
Policy on Church Viability

I. Purpose of this Policy

This policy provides:

- A protocol to respond to churches that may be “failing in [their] mission”;
 - A mechanism to assess and/or assist such churches; and
 - A process for making recommendations to Presbytery to address such matters.
- A. One of the primary ways the Kingdom of God is advanced is through healthy churches. It is Presbytery’s goal that all local churches will be healthy, and Presbytery provides appropriate assistance for achieving this goal.
- B. A church is “viable” when: it has a key focus on advancing the Great Commission; it is preparing its members to grow in their personal discipleship; and it has adequate resources to continue to accomplish these goals.
- C. Presbytery has responsibilities in this area. The EPC Book of Government assigns presbyteries the authority and responsibility to ensure that 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.¹

G.21-2.D.2.d (2014-15 EPC BOG).

While the processes established in this policy include Presbytery assistance for local churches seeking to restore or increase viability, it is the churches’ sole responsibility to maintain viability.

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

¹ The Presbytery of the Southeast has a Ministerial Care Committee (MCC), as required by the Book of Government. Given the size of Presbytery, the MCC is supplemented by other committees that assist in Presbytery’s compliance with responsibilities set forth in the Book of Order. One of these is the Church Health and Growth Committee, which works in close coordination with the MCC.

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).

G.4-3 (2014-15 EPC BOG).

III. Church Viability

- A. A viable church is effective 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 for continuing missional work and daily operations without relying on other than occasional consulting 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.
1. Viability is essential to a local church's 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.
 2. The local church may present the only opportunity members and visitors have to encounter Christ, understand his transforming grace, and see the impact of faith in people's lives. A nonviable church cannot effectively present this witness and may discourage seekers from pursuing a relationship with Christ.
- C. Viability is not measured simply by size, attendance, stewardship levels, budget, or other circumstances that exist at any given time. Viability assessments require context, including a church's history, missional activities, membership, worship 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 Church Health and Growth (CH&G) 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 an initial inquiry to be conducted by the CH&GC, or assign the matter to a different committee as the Council deems appropriate.

C. Initial Inquiry into Viability.

1. Committee representatives 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. Other committees (*e.g.*, the Ministerial Care and the Church Receiving and Planting Committees) may be consulted as part of the inquiry. The goal of the inquiry is to determine whether a formal review of the church's viability is warranted.
2. At the conclusion of the initial inquiry, the committee shall submit a report to Presbytery Council with a finding that the evidence from the initial inquiry:
 - a. Does not support a conclusion that the church is failing in its primary mission, together with the reasons for this finding; or
 - b. Does support a conclusion that the church is, or may be, failing in its primary mission, or is in danger of becoming not viable, together with the reasons for this finding.

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 the initial inquiry report supports a conclusion that that a church may be failing in its mission, or is in danger of becoming nonviable, Presbytery shall initiate a formal review of the matter. Responsibility for conducting this review will be assigned to the CH&G Committee or such other committee as deemed appropriate.
2. In conducting the formal review, the committee will use the relevant considerations set forth in the Appendix to this policy, and it may also consider additional matters that it deems appropriate.
3. Through the formal review process, the committee will:
 - a. Gather historical and current facts, data, and documents 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 collaborative effort with church leadership, explore feasible corrective actions for addressing challenges the church faces (see “Assisting Churches Improve Mission Effectiveness”, below); and
- d. Prepare a 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; and
 - (2) Actions and/or recommendations for Presbytery to consider.

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

4. Assisting Churches to Improve 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 for action 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 increasing the church’s viability and missional effectiveness. Upon invitation by the pastor and the session, the committee may agree to assist the church in formulating realistic plans to improve viability.
- c. If the church develops 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.

E. Special Cases.

1. Receiving existing churches into Presbytery.

- a. If an existing church seeks to join Presbytery, the actions of the Church Planting and Receiving Committee (CP&RC) shall include an assessment of the church’s viability using the following criteria:
 - (1) Does the church have a full-time, vitally active pastor who is adequately compensated?
 - (2) Does the church have at least 30 members? Congregations with fewer than 30 members can only be received in mission church status.
 - (3) Do the church’s records of membership, attendance, and the number of giving units in the congregation show growth, or at least stability, over the previous 24 months? Is there a significant and verifiable number of people

withholding membership until the church is affiliated in a new denomination?

- (4) Does the church's session have at least three Ruling Elders?
- (5) Are the Ruling Elders actively involved in teaching and shepherding the congregation?
- (6) Does the church have any activities or programs for evangelism and/or outreach to the community?
- (7) Is the congregation's giving sufficient to meet the church's expenses, including outreach and/or other evangelical activities?

- b. Negative answers to any two of these questions raise serious concerns that the church will fail in the primary mission of EPC churches. If the Church Planting and Receiving Committee nevertheless believes that the church should be invited to join Presbytery, the Chair of the Committee will first discuss the results of the assessment and the reason for recommending acceptance of the church to the Council.
- c. Negative answers to three or more of these questions disqualify the church from becoming a part of Presbytery at this time due to the significant risk of failure in its mission.

2. Church planting.

- a. Presbytery's involvement in church planting includes encouragement in explorations of planting opportunities, consultation, and communications with involved churches, planters, and others to identify needs and assistance that Presbytery can provide to meet those needs. These activities are under the auspices of the CP&RC.
- b. Successful church planting typically requires a great deal of effort by the church planter, support from churches and Presbytery, and financial assistance – and it is not unusual for these needs to endure for a protracted period of time. As the planting process proceeds, however, the trend line should show overall growth in the planted church's vitality, independence, and viability.
- c. Presbytery's participation in church-planting projects must take these considerations into account when periodically evaluating the project's direction and achievements. However, if there is not reasonable progress in the church's ability to stand on its own after 2 years, there should be a sharp focus on achieving viability under the standards set forth in this policy. In any event, the planted church should meet Presbytery's for viability by the end of the fifth year of the project.

Appendix
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Criteria to be Considered in Formal Reviews 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 the viability formal review process are:

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

Litmus tests are inappropriate for matters as important, complex, and nuanced as a church's viability. Therefore, the process inevitably requires a degree of subjective judgment. In an atmosphere of Christian brotherhood and in order to minimize 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 necessary 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. Are propagation of the gospel and growth in discipleship priorities for the pastor? For the session? For the congregation?
- b. Does the church have a written mission statement or policy that addresses EPC churches' primary mission? If so, how is the church implementing this document?
- 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 often 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 members of the congregation engage in evangelism?
 - g. Are there 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, support, and concern for those outside the church? If so, in what ways?
 - d. Are there any other aspects of the church's ministry that relate to propagating the gospel?
 - e. In the last 2 years, have there been any significant disputes or strong disagreements between members of the session, individual members of the congregation, or members of the congregation and church leadership? If so, what was in dispute, and how was each matter resolved?
 - f. Are community groups permitted to use church facilities for meetings, sports activities, 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 have they 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 internal issues that have generated significant discord, rancor, animosity, or other ill-will between individuals affiliated with the church?

3. Discipleship.

- a. Does the church encourage members of the congregation to grown in discipleship? Does it 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. Does the church emphasize the need for leaders of the church to help others grow in discipleship? Does it provide materials and/or opportunities for leaders to use in discipleship training?
- c. 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 at 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 the pastor would like to leave this church? If so, why does he or she want to leave?
- e. What positions are on the church staff, and are the staff members paid or unpaid individuals? 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? [Obtain a list of their names and the length of their on the session]. If the size of the session has been reduced or increased in the last 2 years, why?
- c. Are any Ruling Elders related to the pastor and/or to each other? What are the details of 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 for resigning or leaving?

- e. Do 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 (or the session as a body) have any role in addressing disputes, disagreements, conflict, or ill-will between members of the congregation?
 - g. Are there Ruling Elders who sometimes act in ways that are abrasive, highly critical, dismissive, insulting or domineering in their dealings with the pastor, other Ruling Elders, church staff, or members of the congregation? If so, what actions have been taken to address this issue?
3. Other leaders.
- a. Do members of the congregation who are not officers 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 of those on the session?
4. Facilities.
- a. Does the church regularly meet in facilities it owns or rents for worship and for other church activities? Are the facilities appropriately sized for the number of people regularly in attendance?
 - b. Are the facilities, furniture, and equipment clean, safe, well-lit, adequately heated and cooled, and in good repair?
 - c. Have critical facility maintenance needs been deferred for 2 years or more?
 - d. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding the adequacy of the church's facilities?
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 any additional information that provides insights regarding materials that are available to assist the church in meeting its mission?

6. Membership, attendance, and stewardship.

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

C. Financial Viability.

1. Over the last 2 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 2 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 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 use borrowing (other than a mortgage on church property) to raise funds for operating expenses? Over the last 3 years, has the amount of this debt increased, decreased, or remained about the same?
5. How many giving units did the church have 3 years ago? Two years ago? Today? If there has been a decline of 10% or more in any year, to what is this decline attributed?
6. What percentage of giving units provide 50% of the funding necessary to pay the church's salaries and operating costs?
7. Is there additional information that provides insights regarding the church's financial viability?