



ECO Mission Affinity Groups

As a way to connect, care for, and provide accountability for churches and leaders, every ECO congregation is required to be in a Mission Affinity Group (MAG). Each MAG consists of 3-4 congregations organized around similar ministry contexts. MAGs may contain only ECO congregations, or a combination of both ECO and PC(USA) congregations. MAGs are relationships between the Sessions of churches.

Part of being in a “Covenanted Order” is the willingness to submit to care and accountability with others. In ECO, we believe this will increase our capacity to become the congregations and the individuals we sense God calling us to be. We understand that there are forces at work within each of us as individuals and within every congregation that cause us to remain self-centered. We know that we will remain blind to being “curved in upon ourselves” (Luther) unless someone helps us see and repent. We believe that a Covenanted Order provides the external accountability necessary to keep us focused on our missional calling and rooted in our biblical/theological heritage.

A congregation will also be a part of a Mission Affinity Group in order to spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24). These Mission Affinity Groups (MAG) will ordinarily be 3-4 congregations organized around similar ministry settings and contexts. These contexts may include but are not limited to: size, geographical location, cultural or demographic similarities, or future ministry goals.

Format

Mission Affinity Groups will be Session-to-Session relationships. They shall meet together face-to-face at least once a year, although they will also be encouraged to find ways to connect throughout the year. In this annual meeting, each Session should have at least 1/3 of the current elders in attendance. Mission Affinity Groups shall begin with the questions provided in the Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry, but may individualize other questions for their particular context.

Given the expectation of an annual meeting of 3-4 congregations, geography may be a determining factor for the selection of the group, but Mission Affinity Groups may be formed beyond geographical boundaries and certainly beyond Presbytery boundaries. In ECO it is the responsibility of each presbytery to ensure that all congregations within its jurisdiction are participating in these groups. The active participation of PC(USA) congregations in the MAG process will be monitored through the national office of The Fellowship.

Composition

Each MAG shall be comprised of 3-4 congregations represented through their Session. A representative group of ruling elders will join with pastors (Teaching Elders) for an annual meeting. For the ruling elders the aim should be approximately 1/3 of the session, with a maximum of 7 Ruling Elders present. Other staff people may certainly attend. This meeting might provide opportunity for youth staff or music staff to connect their work to their mutual benefit beyond the scope of the meeting itself. A Mission Affinity Group can be comprised of entirely ECO or PC(USA) congregations, or may be a combination of the two.

Commitment

The Mission Affinity Group should normally plan to stay together at least 3-4 years, giving each congregation an opportunity to host an annual meeting. After that initial commitment they may re-covenant, or they may change the composition of the group.

Preparation

Each participating Session will need to develop their answers to the “Narrative” questions before the annual meeting. The time each Session invests in this preparation will be both significant and strategically important. Written responses should be distributed to the other Sessions ahead of the annual meeting. Clarity and brevity are important. With 10 questions, the written answers should be no more than 5 pages.

Host Church

The host church will provide the meeting space. This could be a neutral site (like a camp or retreat center) or at the church. They will also provide hospitality and food. Each congregation will be responsible for the transportation and lodging of its own elders and staff.

Time Commitment

It would be best to plan for 8 hours together. One pattern could be Friday night through Saturday afternoon. Another could include Sunday morning and the opportunity to worship together. In between annual meetings it would be our hope that natural relationships would emerge and prayer partnerships be established. The Clerks of Session can serve as the formal “points of contact.”

Suggested Outline of an Annual Meeting *(Friday night/Saturday)*

FRIDAY EVENING

- Log in with brief introductions
- The host congregation begins by sharing their summary of the year. Answers to the “Narrative” questions would have been distributed, but now they are presented verbally. Other issues and questions not covered in the “Narrative” may need to be included. Transparency and vulnerability should be modeled. This should be the place where we discover what we cannot see about ourselves on our own.
- Short break
- The second congregation shares their summary of the year
- Evening Prayer

SATURDAY MORNING

- Morning Prayer
- The third congregation shares their summary of the year
- Short break
- The fourth congregation shares their summary of the year (if appropriate)
- Lunch

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

- A moderated conversation among all participants around two questions: “What did we learn?” and “How will accountability work among us over the next year?”

Reality Check

This level of accountability and vulnerability is something new for all of us. It may feel awkward in the beginning — many Sessions have never done this among themselves let alone with another Session. For this Covenanted Order to have maximum positive effect, each Session will need to focus on vulnerability. Cynicism needs to be resisted. Bragging would be out-of-bounds — yet what the Holy Spirit is doing in each congregation should certainly be celebrated. Best practices can be discovered and enjoyed by all. Mistakes and failures can become learning experiences for each congregation. This is a place to recognize all who are at the table are elders together — though fulfilling differing roles. The distinction of Teaching and Ruling Elders has long been the genius of the Presbyterian system; being in these relationships can be our finest hour.



Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry

This contemporary instrument is based in the tradition of North American Presbyterians as recently as the early 20th century. It is designed to be used annually by a Session as a metric for self-evaluation, and then to be the basis for the annual meetings of Mission Affinity Groups (3-4 congregations whose leaders meet for prayer, accountability, and encouragement in ministry).

1. How has the Holy Spirit been evident in your congregation in the past year — through conversions, growth in the fruit of the Spirit, or other transformational experiences that make disciples of Jesus Christ?
2. How has your congregation extended itself beyond its bounds through the establishment of new communities of worship and discipleship, expanding the Kingdom of God?
3. In what ways is your congregation seeking the welfare of the community to which you have been called — devoting itself to the poor, seeking justice, and living out the whole of the Great Commission?
4. How are you encouraging people to allow God's Word to shape their priorities and actions, and to nurture constant learning and the life of the mind?
5. How are you helping children and others new to the Christian faith to discover Jesus and grow in their understanding and love of God's Word?
6. Describe the moral expression in your congregation — are you more like the world or more like participants in the values of the Kingdom of God?
7. How is your congregation intentionally unleashing the ministries of women, men, and people of different ethnic groups who are experiencing God's call?
8. How is the idea of ministry as the joy and calling of every disciple evident in your congregation? How are you equipping people to represent Jesus more effectively in their respective professions?
9. Illustrate the commitment of your congregation to global evangelism and discipleship, including examples of where you are engaging and with whom you are partnering.
10. How does your congregation understand commitment to the larger church through our connectional relationships within the Body of Christ?