

## Splitting the Presbyterian baby

By [Theresa Cho](#)

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When I was 11 years old, my parents told me that they were going to separate. At the time, we lived in Reno and my dad decided to take a job in Dallas as my parents sorted things out. Although my older sister and I were both devastated, we reacted in very different ways.

My sister was angry, sad, depressed, worried, and heartbroken. I was . . . well let's put it this way, the moment my dad said he would be moving into an apartment building with a pool, I wasn't as upset. It wasn't that I no longer cared, but it was obvious for a long time that they weren't happy— we weren't happy—and if this was going to happen, at least I would get a swimming pool out of the situation.

Last night, the [Presbytery of San Francisco](#) voted to officially dismiss [Menlo Park Presbyterian Church](#) from the [Presbyterian Church U.S.A.](#) denomination. Just as my sister and I had different reactions, the weeks leading up to this vote elicited many reactions by the wider church to the [settlement of the dismissal](#). Some accusing the presbytery of being selfish on demanding such a large amount. Some accusing Menlo Park on not being more transparent about how much property they truly own. Many speculating on the real reasons why Menlo Park is leaving. Others judging the other on who is more gracious or righteous or blah, blah, blah, blah.

I don't mean to be flippant about the comments. I have my strong opinions as well on the matter. But I choose not to go into them because while this has been recent news fodder for the wider church, this has been going on for quite some time for the Presbytery of San Francisco. I wasn't close enough to the action to bear any scars, but was close enough to witness the toll it took from both sides.

- I saw how much it took out of my colleague, John, to serve on two out of the three dismissal policy teams, be questioned on the floor relentlessly from both sides, only to have neither of them approved by the presbytery.
- I was moderator of my presbytery when the third and final dismissal policy team was formed and \$25,000 spent on a mediator to finally come up with a

policy that the presbytery approved. When I read the results of the vote, I actually shed some tears because I couldn't believe we finally agreed on something.

- I served on council for three years listening to testimony of the first discernment team who was tasked to lead a discernment process with Menlo Park on whether they were going to leave or not. The process was so draining that many chose not to serve on the Presbytery Engagement Team (PET).
- I have many friends and colleagues who served on that PET and saw how emotionally and spiritually invested they were in the process.

The vote last night was a long time coming.

What I haven't heard in many of the articles and blogs is an acknowledgement of how complicated, gray, and emotionally taxing the process is—almost to the point that you wish someone would promise you a damn swimming pool so at least there'd be a positive lining in the whole deal. I wish it were as easy as Solomon [threatening to split the baby](#) in half to see who the real owner of the property is. But like any divorce, how do you put a value on the impact both parties have had on each other's lives?

I don't know. Here's what I do know. And what I know can't be wrapped up neatly in a box tied up with a bow.

### **It's emotional. For both sides.**

One of my first duties as a moderator was to sign the final dismissal papers between the Presbytery of San Francisco and [Community Presbyterian Church of Danville](#). In the room were representatives from both sides: pastor and elders from the church, members of the PET, legal representatives for both sides, and me. The mood was jolly and cordial. My only job was to put my signature and initials on the line to finalize everything. As I scribbled my name on page after page, stories were being shared across the table. You would never know by the tone in the room that we were here for such a final matter.

When I signed my name for the last time and the papers were being collected, stillness replaced what once was jolly chatter. The kind of stillness where you stop breathing as if you are trying to freeze a moment in time. And that stillness turned into weeping. From both sides. A deep sadness and recognition of the gravity of what just happened. Words were shared. Words of gratitude for each other. Words of

prayer shared for one another.

I realized that I wasn't there to just sign papers. I was there to bear witness.

### **Mutual Loss. Mutual Gain.**

One of the things that has surprised me about this whole process is how selective and short our collective memory is sometimes, especially when it comes to the mutual impact the presbytery and Menlo Park have had on each other.

In the [PET report](#), it states that in the 1920s and '30s, Menlo Park was "a Mission Church and during both periods it received sizable grants from the denomination's New York headquarters just to keep its doors open." This is just one example of how the presbytery impacted and assisted Menlo Park.

During my 10 years in this presbytery, I have had the pleasure of serving on committees with many of the elders and pastoral staff from Menlo Park. They were an active church in the presbytery. When my husband was a co-organizing pastor, they were a huge contributor to [Mission Bay Community Church](#) during its beginning stages as a new church development.

However, this relationship has run its course and whatever mutual impact we have had on each other, we have also had equal amounts of toxicity. And so while it has been painful and it is sad, I believe there is also a mutual gain for both the presbytery and Menlo Park. In the words of our presbytery pastor, Jeff Hutcheson, "This dismissal is a freeing for both MPPC and the presbytery to follow Christ's will."

And so I deeply thank both the PET and Menlo Park Special Committee, the previous presbytery discernment team for their faithful work and the long hours and energy they put into this.

I'm excited to see how both the presbytery and Menlo Park will flourish in ways they were not able to do so together.

But after today, I will put no more thought and energy into this. Because . . . there is ministry to do, people to feed, people to heal, people to be heard, people to love.

There is laundry to do, dinner to be cooked, kids to drop off at school, time to spend with the family.

And in the midst of all this, when there is time to rest, you will find me by the swimming pool.

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