



# Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales

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**Public statement approved at the Presbytery meeting on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2024  
in light of the Deeds of Separation issued by three churches within EPCEW**

## **Executive Summary**

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales (EPCEW) is a small confessional church of around 20 congregations, firmly committed to the Westminster Standards and church planting. In the past few months the sessions of several member congregations of EPCEW (Sheffield, Lincoln, Blackburn and Bury, which all share a common Clerk of Session) have sought to leave EPCEW via “Deeds of Separation”.

There is a constitutional process for the separation of congregations set out in our Form of Government (FOG 14.2). This orderly process should take 18 months (*Decently and in Order* 4.7.12). A “Deed of Separation” is not recognised in our Book of Order, and, as such, on 27th January 2024, when Presbytery met to discuss these Deeds it judged that they were without effect, the constitutional process for the separation of congregations not having been followed.

It is our longing that these sessions would engage in the orderly process outlined in our Book of Order, even if ultimately it is sadly necessary for us to separate.

## **The Context of the Deeds of Separation**

Over recent years, a number of complaints have been brought to Presbytery concerning its actions, substantially (though not exclusively) from one individual. These complaints concerned in essence two matters, the discipline of a minister in EPCEW and the sad situation in Sheffield Presbyterian Church (SPC), particularly the admission by Presbytery of appeals from 11 purportedly erased members of SPC.

## **Discipline of a Minister in EPCEW**

Regarding the discipline case, the censure determined as appropriate by EPCEW had first been pronounced by his own Presbytery within the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). This sets in appropriate context the outcome of the judicial proceedings in EPCEW, which, whatever their shortcomings, reached the same conclusion as a respected sister church.

## **Sheffield Presbyterian Church (SPC)**

Regarding Sheffield Presbyterian Church, this can only be acknowledged to be a sad, complex and perplexing situation which Presbytery was still considering when the unilateral “Deeds of Separation” were submitted. The catalyst for the “Deeds of Separation” were the appeals of purported erasure by 11 individuals. Presbytery admitted the appeals because it does not believe erasure is an admissible mechanism to deal with members who wish to follow process. This is in line with the PCA (PCA BCO 38.4) and our understanding of our BCO.

Further, the language used by the current Sheffield Session on the floor of Presbytery laid heavy moral charges against those purportedly erased, unavoidably raising in the mind of Presbytery the question whether the erasures were de facto exercise of *judicial discipline* rather than a simple administrative procedure by the Session of SPC. Further context to this whole sad situation is that many of the members the SPC Session sought to erase had been seeking to bring complaints, appeals or charges against the minister of the church at the time of their erasure; they allege they were first suspended from the Lord’s Supper without process; they allege that the election of the session which acted to erase them was gerrymandered; all wished to return to the church; all were alleging pastoral misconduct. Other Presbyters have also requested that Presbytery take jurisdiction in charges against the minister of SPC.

The above is an account of the context around the SPC appeals against erasure to highlight the difficulty of the situation. It in no way presumes the veracity of the complaints or their allegations. Presbytery has yet to consider and rule on a number of appeals or complaints relative to SPC, and clearly this may result in a dismissal of appeals, complaints and charges.

Presbytery is also aware of recent communications from SPC concerning Sheffield Presbyterian Church Trust. Where matters concerning the Trust have come before Presbytery, they were dealt with to the satisfaction of the session of SPC. We note, however, that the subsequent purported excommunication of two former trustees was contrary to due process, in that the purported excommunication was carried out despite an appeal from the former trustees to Presbytery. Presbytery also deprecates the labelling of the former trustees as a whole as “renegade”. Some of these former trustees are Presbyters in good standing, against whom no charges have been presented by the session of SPC. There are orderly processes for such claims to be made, and for these claims to be tested. Where this process is not followed, the purity and peace of the church is damaged and men are denied the opportunity to defend their good name.

### **Letters of Concern and Deeds of Separation**

Late in 2023, the sessions of the Sheffield and Bury St Edmunds congregations separately brought concerns to Presbytery under FOG 14.2.1 (the initial stage in a process that might eventuate in an orderly separation of a congregation from EPCEW). Before either of these letters could even be discussed by Presbytery, however, both sessions (and others who had not issued congregational protests) issued unilateral Deeds of Separation. Presbytery does not believe that “attempts at reconciliation have been exhausted” (FOG 14.2.1) nor have the procedures set out in FOG 14.2.3 and DAO 4.7.12 for the separation of congregations been followed beyond the initial step. Having initiated the process set out in our Form of Government, no effort has been made by these sessions to complete it.

Having since considered the congregational letters, we do not believe that they substantiate any charge that Presbytery has so erred in its doctrine of the Church as to put “the gospel in jeopardy”. The provisions of our FOG under which these letters were issued are not intended to be used as a negative veto or to contest particular points of variation within Presbyterian principles but rather to identify a departure from biblical religion which makes meaningful fellowship impossible (FOG 14.2.2). EPCEW has been and remains fully committed to Presbyterian principles of church government (including the rights of sessions) as the express teaching of the Scriptures and seeks before Christ as the Head of the Church to practice them according to the provisions of our Book of Church Order.

### **The Way Forward**

Presbytery is aware that accusations have been made publicly, including to congregations in other denominations, about its actions over past years (and about doctrinal deviation alleged to underlie them). We would reiterate that the orderly processes for raising such concerns were not exhausted (where they were even begun) by those sessions which issued Deeds of Separation and also that a number of these matters remain before the courts of the Church. Furthermore, Presbytery has not as yet, as outlined in FOG 14.2.3, been given an opportunity to respond to these accusations in a constitutional manner nor to put its case via representatives at congregational meetings where separation was discussed.

Our desire is not to coerce sessions or to trample their rights but rather to proceed in a spirit of humble submission to one another via the process that all members of Presbytery have committed to. We would, once again, encourage sessions to make proper use of the courts of the Church. Our deep desire is that we might be reconciled and be able to continue together. Even if that is not possible and our disagreements (which are as to polity and not the essentials of the gospel) cannot be overcome by constitutional means, we believe that it should still be possible to separate with good will and mutual blessing of one another’s ministries (subject to any disciplinary cases before Presbytery) rather than by unilateral withdrawal while important matters remain before Presbytery.

EPCEW would welcome consultation with those who have concerns and can be contacted via the Clerk of Presbytery.