



July 10, 2010

To Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations:

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38) ...

Just one week ago, the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) convened with Scripture and music and prayer. Commissioners and advisory delegates from every presbytery across the church gathered around the baptismal font with hopeful expectation of what God’s Spirit would do in and through them as they sought to discern together the mind of Christ for the PC(USA).

As the week progressed, prayer was a foundational part of each day’s deliberations and decisions, and the presence of the Spirit was palpable!

“Out of the believer’s heart...”

While all assemblies are significant, this one holds particular significance in the life of the PC(USA). Among the assembly’s decisions – to be ratified by presbyteries – are the addition of the Belhar Confession to *The Book of Confessions* and a revised Form of Government. Both of these items give a clear signal that we are a church that is not afraid to change – an important perspective to have in these days of great change in the church and the world.

The assembly celebrated and was greatly encouraged by the commissioning of 122 young adult volunteers and 17 new mission workers for service around the globe. Commissioners voted unanimously to renew the call to “Grow Christ’s Church Deep and Wide” and were inspired by the stories (<http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/evangelism>) of congregations that are growing in evangelism, discipleship, diversity, and servanthood. They celebrated the generosity of Presbyterians who have contributed more than \$10.5 million to relief and redevelopment work in Haiti in the wake of January’s devastating earthquake.

The assembly also engaged in discussion about significant matters of faith and life – ordination standards, justice and peace in the Middle East, and civil union and marriage, to name just a few.

Information on the more than 300 assembly actions is available at <http://pc-biz.org>. Answers to frequently asked questions about the items that have already garnered media attention are attached to this letter and available online (www.pcusa.org/ga219). We commend these resources to you for their accurate and straightforward information.

While the content of the assembly’s decisions is important, what may be of equal or greater importance is the *manner* in which commissioners and advisory delegates did their work. They debated, but did not fight. They tackled tough issues while refraining from tackling each other. They placed great value on finding common ground as they displayed gracious, mutual forbearance toward one another. They sought the will of God within their actions, rather than regarding their decisions as the will of God. One commissioner called the experience of seeking – and finding – common ground truly “miraculous.”

In short, this assembly exhibited to the whole church and, indeed, to our society and the world a way to engage in difficult issues while maintaining respect for one another. To put it another way, they exhibited well what it means for the church to “a provisional demonstration of what God intends for the world” (Book of Order, G-3.0200).

...shall flow rivers of living water.”

Just a few short hours ago, the 219th General Assembly ended in the same worshipful manner with which it began, as well as with a similar same sense of hopeful expectation that the hard work done in Minneapolis will continue forward across the church.

Michael East and Caroline Sherard, elected by their peers as co-moderators of the young adult advisory delegates to this assembly, shared their thoughts in a blog entry (www.pcusa.org/ga219):

If all our commissioners and advisory delegates returned to their places of community and encouraged others to continue similar stories, what great things could be next for the PC(USA)? These narratives have the ability to inspire discussions on new, creative, and innovative ways of being the Church. At the heart of being Presbyterian is the principle belief that our discernment is best done when we gather together. Being able to gather in one place, as one people, for the one Church is a powerful and transformative experience--one which dramatically shapes future generations.

The assembly has commended to the church a number of items for further study, out of which is hoped will come, as Michael and Caroline write, “new, creative, and innovative ways of being the Church.”

May the good and faithful work begun in Minneapolis truly be just the beginning of a season of respectful, earnest, and gracious engagement – both in our words and in our deeds – all for the sake of the gospel.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,



Elder Cynthia Bolbach
Moderator, 219th General Assembly



The Rev. Gradye Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly



The Rev. Landon Whitsitt
Vice Moderator, 219th General Assembly



Elder Linda Bryant Valentine
Executive Director, General Assembly Mission Council



New Form of Government Questions and Answers

What happened? What changed?

The General Assembly voted to recommend a revised Form of Government to the presbyteries with a vote of 468 in favor, 204 against, and 6 abstentions – a 70%-30% margin. The new Form of Government includes:

- Foundations of Presbyterian Polity -- the principles that are foundational to government, worship, and discipline for the PC(USA). Preserves the vast majority of the material in the first four chapters of the current Form of Government.
- Form of Government -- in six chapters, which spells out the constitutional framework for government of the PC(USA) as it seeks to respond to God's call to life in mission.
- Advisory Handbook for Councils for the Development of Policies and Procedures Required by the Form of Government -- an aid to councils (governing bodies) of the church for developing the policies and procedures to carry out their mission.

Nothing has changed until a majority of presbyteries vote to approve this new Form of Government. Voting must be completed by July 10, 2011, and if affirmative, the new Book of Order would take effect the next day.

What does it mean?

The current Form of Government has served the church ably over the past quarter century. The bedrock historic principles of Presbyterian governance will continue to order our lives together today and into the future, just as they have guided those who witnessed before us. At the same time, the world in which we as 21st-century Presbyterians proclaim the gospel is not the world of the 1950s, or even the 1980s. The proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government are intended to help the church better meet the needs of mission in the 21st century.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity gathers together in three succinct chapters the historical and theological provisions that have defined, and continue to define, our church life together. Placing this bedrock material into a separate section of the Book of Order provides an excellent teaching tool to explain who and what we are.

The current Form of Government has evolved over the years from a Constitution into a regulatory manual that attempts to provide a "one size fits all" answer to every situation faced by congregations and presbyteries. The problem with this regulatory approach is that the diverse, multicultural environment in which we do mission no longer permits a "one size fits all" approach if we are to do mission effectively. The proposed new Form of Government lifts up the constitutional standards that are essential to our life together, while at the same time empowering councils (governing bodies) at all levels to respond more effectively to the ministry and mission needs that each faces.

What's next?

The revised Form of Government must now be considered, and approved by a majority of presbyteries, before July 10, 2011, in order to replace the existing Form of Government.

Where can I learn more?

The document, as amended by the Assembly, is available now at <http://pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=2263&promoID=99>.

A formatted version will be developed and made available online and in hard copy.



The Middle Governing Body Commission Questions and Answers

What did the Assembly do? What has changed?

The 219th General Assembly (2010) has created a Middle Governing Body Commission with the power to act as the General Assembly, upon request of presbyteries and synods. The commission has the power “to organize new synods and to divide, unite, or otherwise combine synods or portions of synods previously existing” (G-13.0103m) and “to approve the organization, division, uniting or combining of presbyteries or portions of presbyteries by synods” (G-13.0103n) — upon the request, by a majority vote, of the affected presbyteries and/or synod.

What does it mean?

Presbyteries and synods wishing to realign their structures or boundaries may request such actions from the commission and make those changes without having to wait until the 220th General Assembly (2012) for approval. The commission will also supervise the work of the Special Committee on Administrative Review of the Synod of Boriquen in Puerto Rico and its constituent presbyteries. That special committee has been seeking reconciliation among the governing bodies in Puerto Rico, which have experienced struggles that threaten the effectiveness of the PC(USA)’s mission and ministry in the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The 219th General Assembly voted to continue the special committee for two more years.

What’s next?

The moderators of the 218th General Assembly (the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow) and the 219th General Assembly (Elder Cynthia Bolbach) will appoint the 21-member commission. The commission will serve until at least the 220th General Assembly (2012). It must include at least one representative from each of the 16 synods.

Where can I learn more?

The Office of the General Assembly will provide information about the membership, meetings and activities of the commission at www.pcusa.org/oga.



Ordination Standards Questions and Answers

What did the Assembly do? What has changed?

The 219th General Assembly (2010) proposed a change to the PC(USA) Constitution regarding ordination standards by a vote of 373-323-4. This action does not change the Constitution. It is a first step in the process. A majority of the 173 presbyteries would have to vote in the affirmative to approve the replacement by July 2010.

What does it mean?

G-6.0106b is a provision in the PC(USA) Book of Order (Constitution) that provides the following standards for persons ordained as church leaders (deacon, elder or minister). The current version reads:

“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”

The 219th General Assembly (2010) recommends deleting the above provision and replacing it with the following language:

“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

This proposed change would focus ordination examinations on the individual calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability of candidates for the responsibilities of the office, in joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.

What’s next?

Presbyteries will study this recommendation and vote over the course of the next year. If a majority of the 173 presbyteries approve the change, it will replace the previous provision in the Book of Order. The deadline for presbyteries to vote is July 10, 2011.

Where can I get more information?

<http://pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=2309>



Civil Union and Marriage Issues Questions and Answers

What did the General Assembly do? What has changed?

The General Assembly approved both the Final Report and the Minority Report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage and ordered they be sent out for study by the wider church. The vote was 439 in favor, 208 against, with 6 abstentions.

By this action (sending both reports for study) the Assembly maintained the definition of marriage as "a man and a woman." With the action to send the reports for study, no change has occurred, or is pending.

What does it mean?

The Special Committee Report provides descriptive material on the historical and theological aspects of marriage, as well as a look at current laws on same-gender partnerships and their children, and the place of same-gender covenanted relationships in the Christian community. They commend to the church their covenant, "Those Whom God Has Joined, Let No One Separate" as a guide for Presbyterians to come together to discuss difficult issues when there is disagreement. The Minority Report, also approved for study by the Assembly, concludes that Scripture is clear that marriage is between a man and a woman only and does not support any kind of sexual behavior outside marriage. The minority report also contains a covenant for the wider church to use.

What next?

The Special Committee Report and the Minority Report will be prepared for distribution as one document to the wider church.

By sending both reports to the wider church, it is the hope of the Assembly that Presbyterians will find helpful background information on civil unions and marriage, as well as material to help individuals and groups remain together as they work through these difficult issues.

Where can you learn more?

Majority report: <http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=3333&promoID=168>

Minority report: <http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=3335&promoID=169>



Actions regarding the Middle East Questions and Answers

What did the Assembly do?

The General Assembly approved a comprehensive report on the Middle East – its first since 1997. The paper calls for:

- An immediate cessation of all violence, whether perpetrated by Israelis or Palestinians;
- The reaffirmation of Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign nation within secure and internationally recognized borders;
- The end of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories;
- An immediate freeze on the establishment and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and on the Israeli acquisition of Palestinian land and buildings in East Jerusalem;
- And many other steps toward peace in the region.

The General Assembly also approved the report of the Mission Responsibility through Investment (MRTI) committee, which:

- Provides an update on all corporations that MRTI has engaged as a result of the 2004, 2006 and 2008 General Assemblies;
- Acknowledges that “Caterpillar has in many ways provided positive leadership to its community, its state, and the nation. It has donated considerable resources and equipment in support of local development and disaster relief at home and overseas. It has significantly improved workplace safety, acted aggressively to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and pursued environmental conservation within its production processes. In recognition of these accomplishments, Caterpillar has been listed for seven consecutive years in the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index”;
- Strongly denounces Caterpillar’s continued profit-making from non-peaceful uses of a number of its products on the basis of Christian principles and as a matter of social witness;
- Calls upon Caterpillar to carefully review its involvement in obstacles to a just and lasting peace in Israel-Palestine, and to take affirmative steps to end its complicity in the violation of human rights.

What does this mean?

Coming into the 219th General Assembly (2010), few thought that agreement on issues relating to the Middle East would be possible. Diverse perspectives divided Presbyterians from each other, and from the Jewish community. However, during the committee deliberations and again in the plenary session, through God’s grace, a place of broad consensus was found -- common ground for continued peacemaking work in Israel/Palestine.

The General Assembly rejected immediate divestment from Caterpillar in favor of continued corporate engagement with Caterpillar and other companies profiting from the sale and use of their products for non-peaceful purposes and/or the violation of human rights.

What’s next?

A Monitoring Group for the Middle East will be formed to assist the appropriate General Assembly Mission Council offices and the Middle East staff team in monitoring progress and guiding actions to ensure adequate implementation of policy directions approved by this General Assembly. MRTI will continue to engage Caterpillar, and other companies, in relation to particular actions whereby the company profits from “non-peaceful action” of their products.

Where can I find out more?

<http://www.pcusa.org/middleeastpeace>

<http://www.pcusa.org/mrti>