

Presbyterian Church (USA) 219th General Assembly
July 3-10, 2010
Minneapolis, Minnesota
Report of Bill Marsh, Elder Commissioner
Presbytery of Lehigh

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For overall information on the Assembly go to www.pcusa.org/ga219. For detailed information on the business of the Assembly including texts of each action, amendments and votes of the committees and General Assembly, go to www.pc-biz.org. There is no need to register or log in. All information is available. Registering or logging in only gives you the additional ability to make notes on items of business and to follow specific items of interest to you. Other sites offering their perspectives are available. Just search on GA219 or PC(USA) General Assembly.

Major Actions:

Ordination Standards: The General Assembly again approved a change to the ordination standards for pastors, elders and deacons. This change to our constitution must now go the 173 presbyteries and be ratified by a majority of those presbyteries (87 as of this date. Note that GA empowered a Commission to work with synods and presbyteries, at their request, which could involve combining or even adding presbyteries or synods which could affect the number of presbyteries voting.) Voting must be completed by July 10, 2010. If ratified it goes into effect July 11, 2010. The Assembly vote on this change was very similar to the vote in 2008. Vote this year was 373-323-4. Detailed information is available on PC-BIZ at Committee 6, Item 06-09.

6.0106

~~“b. 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. **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.**”~~

Form of Government: GA approved a new Form of Government that would replace the entire G Section of our current Book of Order. This has been an ongoing action for 6 years. Amendments were made by committee and approved with the overall approval at the General Assembly which address some, but not all, comments and concerns with the new proposed Form of Government. The new form provides more flexibility and less prescriptive requirements in the Constitution, and requires all governing bodies below (synods, presbyteries and sessions) to develop manuals and procedures of operation which will be under their respective control, subject to review by the next governing body above. This action must now be ratified by a majority of presbyteries by July 10, 2010. If ratified it goes into effect July 11, 2010. Assembly vote was 468-204-6. Detailed information is available on PC-BIZ at Committee 7, Form of Government and Item 07-01.

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Book of Confessions:

Heidelberg Catechism: The retranslation of the Heidelberg Catechism was approved to be continued, in cooperation with a similar effort by the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the Reformed Church of America (RCA). One of the major impetuses for review of the translation of this 16th century German catechism was the answer to question 87 which specifically stated "A. Certainly not! Scripture says, 'Surely you know that the unjust will never come into the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolator, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.' " It has been pointed out that the language, "or of homosexual perversion" were not included in the original German text of 1563 or in later German texts, but introduced by the 1962 translation presented to the 1965 Presbyterian Assembly when this confession was added to our Book of Confessions. The original Scripture references in the 1563 document are to *1 Cor.6; Eph.5 and 1 John 3.*

The retranslation committee has identified approximately 100 areas in the current confessional translation that are not accurate with respect to the original (1563) or early German (1860) documents. More than 2/3 of these instances have been accepted by the Reformed Churches' committee.

Recommendations on any changes to the Heidelberg Catechism in our Book of Confessions will be reported to the 220th General Assembly in 2012 and any action of the that Assembly to change the confession will require ratification by 2/3 of the presbyteries. Amendment of the Book of Confessions becomes effective upon the next General Assembly approving and enacting the revision (therefore, not being effective before 2014). This is the same procedure under either the current or the proposed new Form of Government. Vote to approve the continued work of retranslation was by affirmative *voice vote*, the Assembly committee having approved the recommendation by vote of 51-4-0.

Belhar Confession: The Assembly has approved sending to the presbyteries for approval the Belhar Confession with Scriptural References in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions and the presentation of an 'fully inclusive language' version on PC(USA) website, but without Book of Confession status. This is a confession pronounced in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa (then the officially segregated arm of the Dutch Reformed Church for '*coloureds*'). It was in response to both the segregation within the Dutch Reformed Church itself and the secular and official policy of South Africa. The confession was originally issued in the Afrikaans language, and the translation proposed appears to be a 1967 translation by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa. This confession has been approved by the General Assembly for transmission to the presbyteries for approval or rejection by June 10, 2011. If approved by a 2/3 majority of the presbyteries, it then returns to the General Assembly for approval and enactment at its 220th General Assembly in 2012.

A link to the Belhar Confession of 1986, with Scriptural references: <http://www.pc-biz.org/Resources/46fc086a-87e1-446a-a624-1dd755dcad4d/Belhar%20Confession%201986.pdf>.

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The detailed reports, discussion and Committee and Assembly votes can be found on PC-BIZ at Committee 16, Item 16-12.

Civil Union and Marriage: These issues came before the General Assembly in the form of committee report with both majority and minority reports and various presbytery initiated proposals ('overtures' in Presbyterian speak) with respect to either confirming existing definitions and views of Scripture on the issues of marriage and sexual behavior or amending constitutional definitions of marriage in the Directory of Worship of the Book of Order and offering or reinstating competing 'Authoritative Interpretations' on the issues as contained in our Book of Order. The majority Special Committee Report provided a historical, social and legal background for the issue and the Minority Report provided a confirmation of traditional understandings of the Scriptures on these issues. Both offered proposed covenants for continued dialog on these issues. The Majority report was contained in Item 12-12 of Committee 12's report to the General Assembly, and the Minority Report was contained in Item 12-13. During General Assembly plenary consideration, Item 12-13, the Minority Report was proposed as a substitute amendment to the Majority Report, Item 12-12, that was recommended by the Assembly Committee by vote of 47-8-2. However, both proposals were amended to include recommendation of both the Majority and Minority Reports for study by the presbyteries and churches. It was decided by vote to vote on amended 12-12, the recommendation from the Assembly Committee, but now including the Minority Report, for transmission to the presbyteries and churches for study. This combined motion passed Assembly by a vote of 439-208-12. No action other than study together is set in motion by this referral.

Subsequently several proposals were disapproved before a commissioner offered a motion to have the action on 12-12 'answer all pending matters from this committee'. This proposed action would avoid the Assembly taking actions on committee recommended proposals to alter the definition of marriage to "two people" in our directory of worship, issue 'authoritative interpretations' likewise defining marriage and give congregations and pastors clear permission to conduct same sex civil unions in our churches. This motion to 'answer remaining pending matters' with the action on 12-12 to send both the majority and minority reports of the Special Committee on Civil Unions and Marriage to the presbyteries and churches for study was approved by a vote of 348-324-6 (approximately 51%/49%) to muted but audible gasps from both sides of the issue. A next morning motion to 'reconsider' the action taken to 'answer all remaining pending matters' was defeated by a vote of 475-207 or approximately 60%/40%.

On a related item of Board of Pensions work, the Board of Pensions recommended that its benefit programs be extended to 'domestic partners'. The Board of Pensions covers all pastors in the PC(USA) as well as a significant number of employees of the denomination, synods, presbyteries and churches which choose to provide benefits to employees through the Board of Pensions. This was approved by the Assembly along with authorization to the Board and the General Assembly to authorize an increase of up to 1 percentage point in the benefits charges to employers to cover the cost of this extension of benefits.

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Detailed information on the Assembly work on Civil Union and Marriage can be found on PC-BIZ at Committee 12.

Middle East Peacemaking: The Assembly had several controversial proposals before it concerning Middle East Peacemaking primarily centered on Israel/Palestinian conflict. Concerns existed that reports and proposed actions were unfair and unbalanced. A major item on the agenda was a Special Committee Report on a study report entitled "Breaking Down the Walls". Assigned to an Assembly Committee of approximately 60 people, including advisory delegates with voice and vote in committee, but only voice in the General Assembly plenary discussions, these issues drew more than 160 people wishing to be heard by the committee in its deliberations. Passions were high. But what came out of committee was a revision of the study report and amendments to the proposal that was unanimously passed by the committee and passed by a vote of 558-119-7 in the Assembly. Both members of the committee and observers praised the resulting recommendation as a genuine consensus where few thought such possible or likely. This action was then used to, again, 'answer' many of the pending matters. Proposals to require PC(USA) divestment of Caterpillar were disapproved in favor of a report of proposed by the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment ("MRTI") that called for denouncement of Caterpillar's involvement in use of its equipment by Israel in destruction of Palestinian homes and infrastructure and building of separation barriers and settlements in Palestinian areas, but for continued dialog with Caterpillar as well as other companies who have been more actively engaged in similar discussions with MRTI. The recommendation of the Report of MRTI was approved by a vote of 418-210-9. Detailed information can be found on PC-BIZ at Committee 14. The MRTI report is found at Item 14-03.

Middle Governing Bodies: These middle governing bodies are our presbyteries and synods, including their respective judicial bodies. A significant and sensitive issue was presented to form a Commission of the General Assembly with the full powers of the General Assembly to work with presbyteries and synods which are currently experiencing difficulties that cannot wait for action until 2012, the next General Assembly. This concentration of broad power in a commission (an empowered committee) elicited a great deal of concern. The general power given to the commission to deal with presbyteries and synods was limited by amendment to acting upon the invitation upon vote of synods and presbyteries and to for the commission to act only upon a 2/3 supermajority vote. In addition, the Commission was given full powers to deal with continuing conflict within the Synod of Puerto Rico. Vote on this issue was 566-104-4 and detailed information can be found at PC-BIZ at Committee 04, Item 04-06.

A proposal to form a Korean language aligned presbytery in the Synod of the South was defeated, even though the various presbyteries within the Synod of the South had already voted to "dismiss" Korean congregations to a new Korean language non-geographic presbytery within the Synod. Concern was raised by second generation Korean pastors and seminarians that they would be excluded from service in these congregations and by others that approving this non-geographic presbytery would reduce the diversity of voice and theology within existing as well as the new presbytery. The vote to disapprove the proposal was 125-514-7 and drew audible gasps from the assembly.

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Analogous proposals to form theologically aligned non-geographic synods or allow congregations to transfer to more theologically aligned presbyteries also failed. For detailed information, see PC-BIZ, Committee 04 and the various proposals listed.

International Issues and Peacemaking: Assigned to this assembly committee and to Middle East Peacemaking were proposed resolutions on the continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Proposals were amended in committees and presented to the Assembly to call upon the United States government to honor commitments to withdraw combat and all troops from Iraq according to current announced schedules and to provide additional support to our returning troops, and in the case of Afghanistan, cease non-combat activities except as necessary to protection of troops and humanitarian effort, along with additional support for our returning troops and recognition and accounting of the cost and sacrifice of the war on both US and Afghani populations. Support to Sudan and a self-determination election scheduled for this year was also approved. Detailed information on the Iraq resolution is found on PC-BIZ at Committee 14, Item 14-07. The Assembly vote was 525-80-8. Detailed information on the Afghan war resolution can be found at PC-BIZ, Committee 13, Item 13-02, passed by hand vote. Information on the Sudan Resolution can be found on PC-BIZ at Committee 13, Item 13-04.

A resolution calling for the Protection of Religious Minorities, while initially based on events in Pakistan, was passed broadening the call to protection of all religious minorities from extreme actions and harm. Item 13-05 in Committee 13. Passed by 'consensus' on a consent agenda from the committee.

A resolution calling for a period of study and convening of a conference on peacemaking was approved, combining several proposals to look at how we, as the church, approach peacemaking including the use of force and the concept of 'just war' was passed with the creative participation of the denominations' peacemaking arm and an advisory committee on social witness policy. See Item 13-11 of Committee 13. Passed on consent agenda proposed by committee.

Commissioners' Resolutions (those first introduced by commissioners at the General Assembly) on restoration of sustainable agriculture in Haiti, peace efforts toward reconciliation and reunification of the Koreas, and restoration of democracies in Madagascar and Honduras also were approved, after amendment in committee, by the Assembly by either consent agenda or hand votes.

There was a host of other items covering the spectrum of our Presbyterian life together, both internally and externally. These, along with a wealth of resource materials from this and prior general assemblies, are all available on PC-BIZ at

www.pc-biz.org

You can even view video of the General Assembly plenary sessions on the PC(USA) website, either on your home computer or your smart phone. Go to

www.pcusa.org/ga219

and look for the VOD or smart phone icon.