

**Actions of the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)**  
July 3 – 10, Minneapolis, MN  
Pastor Phil Moran

The following is in no way a complete report on actions of the General Assembly, but a brief overview of actions that will most effect local congregations like ours.

**1. New “Form of Government” Sent to Presbyteries for Vote**

The opening section of the Presbyterian Book of Order (church constitution) is called the “Form of Government” (FOG). The Assembly approved a complete revision of the FOG. It is much too lengthy to print here, but you may read it at the following link:

<http://www.pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?m=ro&id=2263>

The Form of Government has a great impact on local congregations because it prescribes the way we govern ourselves as a Presbyterian church. It dictates matters such as the election of deacons and elders, the calling of pastors, responsibilities of governing bodies, and many other areas of church life.

Many believe that constant tinkering by amendment over the years has resulted in a FOG that is more regulatory manual than constitution. The stated goal of the new FOG is to make Presbyterian polity more “missional” and less regulatory, giving congregations and presbyteries more latitude to adapt to local contexts.

The new FOG proposal will be voted on in presbyteries over the coming year. In order to become church law it must be approved by a simple majority of the 173 presbyteries of the PCUSA. Our session will give it careful study before the vote of Boise Presbytery.

**2. “Confession of Belhar” Sent to Presbyteries for Possible Inclusion in the Book of Confessions.**

The Confession of Belhar is a theological declaration that grew out of the experience of African Christians in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa. Written in 1986, it is a powerful and prophetic statement against the sin of racism and the false theology that undergirded apartheid and racial separation in the churches of South Africa.

The Assembly approved the unanimous recommendation of a two-year study committee that Belhar be sent to the presbyteries for a vote. It must be approved by at least two thirds of the 173 presbyteries in order to be included in our Book of Confessions. If approved, it would be the first new confession added to the book since the Brief Statement of Faith was adopted in 1991. You can read the Confession of Belhar at: <http://warc.ch/20th/02.html>

**3. G.A. Creates Commission on Middle Governing Bodies (presbyteries & synods)**

In a rare action, the G.A. voted to create a special commission of the GA to act on middle governing body issues. The commission will have 21 members, appointed by the GA Moderator. A commission has all the power of a general assembly and can act within its mandate without

approval of the whole assembly. The commission will have authority to organize new synods and presbyteries and to dissolve or combine synods and presbyteries. But the commission cannot act unilaterally. Any proposed changes must be approved by majority vote of the affected presbytery or synod.

This unusual step was taken because a number of presbyteries and synods are under acute financial stress and are no longer institutionally viable.

#### **4. GA Votes to Delete “Fidelity/Chastity” Requirement for Church Officers**

By a vote of 373 to 323 (53% to 46%) the assembly approved sending to the presbyteries the following amendment to the Book of Order:

Shall G-6.0106b be amended by striking the current text and inserting new text in its place: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

~~“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.”~~

At the heart of this action is the effort to delete from the Book of Order the requirement that officers of the church (ministers, elders, deacons) must live either in fidelity within the marriage of a man and woman, or chastity (abstinence) in singleness.

In order to take effect this proposed amendment must be approved by a simple majority of the 173 presbyteries of the PCUSA. Voting will take place over the next year. I will write more on this elsewhere.

#### **5. GA Narrowly Says “No” to Redefinition of Marriage**

Two years ago, the 218<sup>th</sup> GA created the “Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage.” That committee brought two reports to this year’s GA: a majority report that simply laid out differing opinions in church and society, and a minority report that is a full-throated defense of the traditional Christian understanding of marriage.

The GA took two significant actions on these issues. First, they voted to combine the two reports and make both available to the church for study. Second, they voted by a narrow majority (51%) to make this action their response to a number of overtures that would have changed the definition of marriage in our Book of Order from “a man and a woman” to “two persons.” The

net effect is that efforts to change our definition of marriage died at GA and will not be debated in the presbyteries this time around. I will write more on this elsewhere.

## **6. G.A. “Urges” the Board of Pensions to Provide Benefits to Same-Sex Partners**

In what may prove to be its most controversial action, by a vote of 366 to 287 (55% to 43%) the GA approved the following resolution:

“That the 219th General Assembly (2010): 1. Urge the Board of Pensions to adopt amendments to the Benefits Plan to extend eligibility for spousal and dependent benefits under the Plan to Benefits Plan members, their same-gender domestic partners, and the children of their same-gender domestic partners, on the same basis as, and equivalent to, benefits made available to Benefits Plan members, their spouses, and the children of their spouses. 2. Approve an increase in dues for the Benefits Plan of up to 1 percent, effective January 1, 2012, to be allocated among the plans of the Board of Pensions, including but not limited to the Pension Plan, as the Board, in its sole discretion, deems necessary to fund the cost of the additional benefits. Should the Board not implement these benefits for any reason, approval of the increase in dues is rescinded. Comment: That the Board of Pensions be highly urged to provide relief of conscience, to be implemented simultaneously with these actions, for those congregations for whom these actions cause a moral dilemma.”

All ordained and installed ministers in the PCUSA are required to participate in the Benefits Plan administered by the PCUSA Board of Pensions. As of now the dues (paid by the congregation) are 31.5% of Effective Annual Salary. The plan includes pension and health insurance. Non-ordained church employees may also participate in the plan on a voluntary basis.

There are a very small number of openly gay partnered ministers in the PCUSA who hold their ordination under the “scruple of conscience” provision created by the 217<sup>th</sup> GA in 2006. Some churches that provide Board of Pensions benefits to non-ordained staff may have employees living in a same-sex partnership or, depending on the state, a same-sex “marriage.”

Based on data from their actuaries, the Board of Pensions has determined that providing benefits to same-sex partners and their dependents will require a 1% increase in dues from 31.5 to 32.5% of Effective Annual Salary. If it is put into effect, this increase will be mandatory for all churches.

A few important facts:

- The GA can “urge” the Board of Pensions to provide such benefits, but cannot require it. The Board of Pensions is an independent branch of the PCUSA with its own board of directors. It is not subject to the authority of GA. Whether or not this change will become a reality is still an open question.
- The GA resolution urged the Board of Pensions to provide “relief of conscience” for those congregations that object to providing same-sex benefits. This does not mean that congregations could be exempted from the 1% dues increase. It means that the Board of Pensions would attempt to segregate funding streams so that, theoretically, dues from an objecting church would not go to provide same-sex benefits.

## **7. GA Alters Boise Presbytery Overture**

Early this year our session approved an overture asking the GA to condemn violence against pregnant women, especially the violence of coerced abortion. Boise Presbytery approved the overture, deleting the reference to coerced abortion. The GA in Minneapolis set the Boise Presbytery language aside completely (this is not unusual) and approved the following statement in response to the overture:

“The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms females’ right and capacity to make responsible decisions regarding their sexual lives, including the right to use contraception, to reject sexual activity, to continue a pregnancy, or when necessary to end a pregnancy; condemns the injustice of any force, coercion, or violence against females to compel pregnancy, the continuation of pregnancy, sterilization, or abortion; commends and encourages those who provide shelter, medical care, and counseling for females subject to domestic violence and coercion in reproductive issues; and instructs the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to communicate this concern and commitment to the Congress of the United States and the state legislatures, urging them to expand support for women’s shelters and transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic and all other acts of violence, and to adopt legislation that provides adequate means of prosecuting those who perpetrate violence against females.

“In light of the many forms of violence perpetuated against women, the 219th General Assembly (2010) condemns violence against women in all forms and under all circumstances as violations of God’s will for women and men, whether that violence is perpetuated by a stranger or by an intimate partner, and commends and encourages all persons who provide shelter, counseling, and other forms of assistance for women experiencing coercion and violence.”