July 17, 2008

Dear Friends,

The General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) concluded its business a few weeks ago in San Jose, California. Our own Curt McFarland served as a commissioner representing Central Washington Presbytery. Many of you had the opportunity to follow the events presented by Curt through his blog at http://cwpga2008.blogspot.com/. I do want to offer you my own brief thoughts on the events that have transpired, thus the reason for this letter.

For context, the PCUSA’s government is similar to the government of the United States, with legislative (General Assembly), judicial (Permanent Judicial Commission), and executive (General Assembly Council) branches. In the opinion of many (myself included), we have an enormous and generally uninformed legislative branch, a weak judicial branch, and an unfocused executive branch.

As a result, we have neglected the authority of scripture and drifted away from issues that truly merit our attention, such as denominational decline (we have lost half of our membership as a denomination since 1960), and decline in world mission and evangelism. Instead, much of the energy at GA is focused on more political issues, such as human sexuality (especially the ordination of unrepentant practicing gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered [GLBT] people). The issue of human sexuality has continued to be debated over the past 35 years. Until this most recent GA, the PCUSA has held to what can be described as Biblical, historical, and orthodox views. You may have read or heard that the PCUSA has lifted the ban on homosexual ordination. This is not true.

Four actions, however, were taken at this last General Assembly that give me concern regarding this issue. While they do not totally allow for ordination at this time, they do remove certain obstacles.

First of all, one authoritative interpretation (AI) of our constitution (Book of Order and Book of Confessions) was adopted that nullifies previous denominational statements. An AI directs us in how we are to interpret the constitution. One previous AI (originally called “definitive guidance” written in 1979) made it clear that “homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination as set forth in the Form of Government.” Another authoritative statement was adopted this year that allows sessions and presbyteries latitude to ordain people who, as a matter of conscience, cannot comply with a certain portion of the denomination’s constitution.

With these two AI’s, each church and presbytery now has immediate authority on what standards of belief and practices they will accept in their ordained officers. This is a step away from our Presbyterian connectional form of government, and moves us toward a more “congregational” form.

Two more actions were approved that will require the approval of the 173 presbyteries of the PCUSA before adoption into the constitution. One is a proposed change to the Book of Order (deletion of G-6.0106b) and will require a simple majority vote. The other is a proposed change to the Book of Confessions (specifically the Heidelberg Catechism), which would require a 2/3 majority vote.
Having shared this, it is important to note that our own executive presbyter, David Lambertson, has sent a letter to each church in our presbytery stating he hopes “that we can reach agreement that the action of the General Assembly will not change what we are doing! As a presbytery, we have an examination policy that is consistent with the present Book of Order, and this policy also complies with the new Authoritative Interpretation adopted by the 218th General Assembly. Even if G-6.0106b is deleted and replaced with the new wording by note of the 173 presbyteries, our examination policy will be in compliance. This is liberating to me in that we as a presbytery can focus our attention to preaching, teaching, and living the Gospel.”

I praise God for David’s response and for our presbytery’s continued commitment to the Gospel. Historically, the GA of the PCUSA has been more liberal in its thinking when compared to that of the individual churches and presbyteries. Personally, I do not think the proposed amendments to the constitution will pass as similar amendments have been defeated in the past by over 70% of the denomination’s 173 presbyteries. However, some have argued that the damage has been done through the two new authoritative interpretations.

This issue continues to divide the church and has distracted us from the mission of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world that is hurting. Because of this, three years ago, the Presbyterian Global Fellowship (www.presbyterianglobalfellowship.org) was formed. The purpose of this fellowship is to behave like the church we believe God is calling us to be in the 21st century. Topics and themes are discussed within this fellowship that many believe should be discussed at the GA. I have been involved in their conversation for the past year and a half. My hope is to draw our congregation deeper into the conversation. As of today, we have at least five staff members and one elder who will be attending this year’s conference in Long Beach, California.

My hope and prayer is that we can join the conversations that are taking place in Presbyterian Global Fellowship, Presbyterians for Renewal, and within our own presbytery so that we might focus on the mission God has given us. Also, we need to be in conversation with these folks as we look toward the future of the denomination and First Presbyterian Church Yakima.

It is often erroneously suggested that to oppose the ordination of unrepentant practicing homosexuals is to be unloving, judgmental, and even hateful. I firmly believe that God’s love and grace are offered to all. Everyone is invited into church membership, based solely on a person’s profession of faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, regardless of their sexual orientation. To enter into an office of the church, however, there are certain standards to which we require compliance based on Biblical truths.

For your own information, the session and I would like to share with you some hopefully helpful information from various sources within the denomination. Special thanks to Dave Marshall and Derek Smith for helping to compile this information. It is important to note that we are not alone in our frustrations and concerns. There are many churches that have begun the conversation of what to do next. We need to be a part of the conversation. As the governing body of First Presbyterian Church of Yakima, the session’s desire is to communicate as clearly as possible the steps we will be taking to respond to the GA.

I want you to know that I, as your pastor, will continue to do everything in my power to make FPCY the strongest possible congregation, adhering to the authority of God’s Word, upholding Christ and the Biblical witness to Him, and carrying out the mission He has given to this church to reach, worship, grow, and impact.

Blessings in His service,

Jack Peebles
Senior Pastor

REACHING THOSE UNCONNECTED TO JESUS AND TOGETHER WORSHIPPING GOD AND GROWING INTO CHRIST-LIKE MATURITY IMPACTING OUR COMMUNITY AND THE WORLD.
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Appendix B: The Presbyterian Coalition "Altering the Covenant"
Outline of Articles and Links
218th General Assembly PCUSA (June 21-28, 2008)
List Compiled by: First Presbyterian Church, Yakima WA

Updated: July 17, 2008

A. OFFICIAL NEWS FROM THE GA

1. Assembly proposes amendment to delete G-6.0106b and replace it with a new version

2. Assembly leaves definition of marriage unchanged

3. Assembly starts process toward revising Heidelberg Catechism

4. FOG revision sent for study to churches and presbyteries
   http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/

5. Gradye Parsons elected General Assembly stated clerk

6. Reyes-Chow elected moderator of 218th GA

B. RESPONSES FROM EVANGELICAL GROUPS WITHIN PCUSA

   d. Broader Implications:

2. Presbyterian Global Fellowship: http://www.presbyterianglobalfellowship.org
   a. See attached PGF Newsletter dated July 3, 2008
   d. Vic Pentz Video at Presbyterian Global Fellowship 2006 Conference
      http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSjRYRsnU5I

   Former pastor at FPC Yakima, Vic is now pastor of the largest PCUSA congregation, Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta Georgia (http://www.peachtreepres.org). He is a founding leader in the PGF as well. (David Lambertson makes a cameo appearance 10:56 minutes into the video!)

3. The Outreach Foundation: http://www.theoutreachfoundation.org/
   http://theoutreachfoundation.org/News/onlinenews/TOFletterfollowingthegeneralassembly.html
4. The Presbyterian Coalition

   This document is again commended for study by all. Penned by Pastor Mark Patterson and endorsed by Santa Barbara Presbytery, this does a thorough job framing the issues that are before the denomination, providing a cultural and theological context for these events. http://www.firstpresyakima.com/pdf/SantaBarbaraResponse.pdf

C. RESPONSES FROM WITHIN CENTRAL WASHINGTON PRESBYTERY

1. David Lambertson’s June 27 letter.

2. Al Sandalow’s (1st Pres Ellensburg) July 1 Letter to CWP Pastors.


4. FPC Yakima Response to Date (June 2006):
   Last updated after the 217th GA, this website presents information from FPC Yakima Session on GA issues: http://www.firstpresyakima.com/About_PCUSA.cfm

D. RESPONSES FROM GROUPS HOPEING TO REVISE ORDINATION STANDARDS


3. That All May Freely Serve: http://tamfs.org/

Updated: July 17, 2008
GA08131

Assembly proposes amendment to delete G-6.0106b and replace it with a new version

Paragraph covers “fidelity and chastity” ordination standards

by Jerry L. Van Marter

SAN JOSE, June 27, 2008 — The 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted today (June 27) 380-325 to send a proposed amendment to the denomination’s 173 presbyteries that would delete the current paragraph G-6.0106b in the Book of Order — which requires church officers to live in “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness” — and replace it with a new G-6.0106b.

The proposed new G-6.0106b ties ordination decisions more closely to assent to the ordination vows currently in the church’s Book of Order without singling out a sexual conduct standard.

In the same action, the Assembly issued a new authoritative interpretation of the Book of Order declaring that interpretive statements related to sexual standards for ordination that predate the adoption of G-6.0106b in 1996 “have no further force or effect.”

The Advisory Committee on the Constitution has repeatedly said that clearing the way for ordination of sexually active gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Presbyterians requires the deletion of G-6.0106b and the removal of the authoritative interpretations that undergirded Assembly policy statements of 1978 and 1979 prohibiting the ordination of practicing homosexuals.

The proposed new G-6.0106b reads:

“Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of
the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.”

The debate now moves to the denomination’s presbyteries, which in 1997 and 2000 rejected proposals to delete G-6.0106b. At a press conference following the vote, the Rev. Dan Holloway of Providence Presbytery, who moderated the Assembly Committee on Church Orders and Ministries that brought the recommendation to the Assembly, said, “It is important to say that at this point our Constitution has not been changed. As we move forward it is essential that we have conversations that are gracious and loving and welcoming, since we are not all of one mind.”

The Assembly’s debate on the issue was briefer than in previous years.

Minister commissioner the Rev. William Stepp of Tropical Florida Presbytery opposed the deletion, saying the PC(USA) “needs a continuing strong witness to biblical standards for sexuality” and warned that the proposal will “destabilize the denomination, obliterate trust and reduce funding for the church. Don’t send a shock wave through the church.”

Others, noting that a study guide on ordination standards and issues mandated by the 2006 General Assembly as part of its approval of the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church was delayed until earlier this year, urged more time for sessions and presbyteries to study the issue before moving to a vote.

“Though we may be hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit here, many of our churches have not heard that same Spirit and are not ready,” said the Rev. Walter Hamer of John Calvin Presbytery, who presented a minority report that was defeated 319-375. “Let us continue the conversation with the whole church at the table to build trust, learn about various positions and give us a chance to understand each other. We need more time for study and conversation.”

But the Rev. Susan Fisher of Pacific Presbytery said the PC(USA) had discussed the ordination standards issue for 30 years and a proposal for “dialogue but not action doesn’t move us forward.” Fisher said she felt “compelled” to send the deletion proposal to the presbyteries “to give the church voice and vote to change language, to let the wider church decide if now is the time” to change ordination standards.

At a press conference after the vote, outgoing General Assembly Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick pleaded for unity during what promises to be heated debate in the church. “There are people who are gay and lesbian who long passionately to be included,” he said. “There are others who believe strongly, not that they don’t love them, but that standards must be upheld. What is essential is the spirit of unity as we go forward to a new stage in the process.”
In another ordination standards-related action, the Assembly adopted a supplementary authoritative interpretation of the PC(USA) constitution that applies the historical practice of “scrupling” — the declaration of conscientious objection by candidates for ordination, coupled with discernment by the ordaining body whether the declared objection is disqualifying — equally to all ordination standards of the denomination.

The authoritative interpretation reaffirms the scrupling practice affirmed by the 217th General Assembly (2006) when it approved the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church and effectively overturns a recent General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) ruling — Bush vs. Presbytery of Pittsburgh — that G-6.0106b, the commonly called “fidelity and chastity” ordination standard, cannot be scrupled.

The GAPJC ruling also stated that scrupling on any provision of the church’s Constitution does not give the conscientious objector license to disobey it.

Erin Cox-Holmes contributed to this report.
SAN JOSE, June 27, 2008 — After much docket delay, the Church Polity Committee gave its report to the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) late Friday afternoon (June 27). It included a lively discussion on the definition of marriage, civil rights for same-sex couples and a gracious response to congregations wishing to leave the denomination.

**Definition of marriage**

Item 04-08, which generated the most discussion of the evening, was an overture to change the definition of marriage in W-4.9000 of the Directory for Worship to include same-sex couples. The committee recommended disapproval of this overture, and the Assembly agreed after defeating a substitute motion. Minister commissioner the Rev. William Myers of Great Rivers Presbytery offered the substitute motion that proposed the Assembly approve the original overture with the addition that the Office of Theology Worship and Education, in consultation with Presbyterians for Renewal and the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, study the issue of the definition of marriage.

Extensive discussion on the matter followed. Minister commissioner the Rev. Duncan McColl of Los Ranchos Presbytery suggested that, in light of the Assembly’s decisions earlier in the day regarding ordination standards, “to introduce this to the church at this time would not be a wise thing.” Youth Advisory Delegate Elizabeth Miller of Maumee Valley Presbytery said, “One question that must be addressed is whether homosexuality is a biological condition or a social construct? Denying homosexuals the rights given to all other members of the church would be to deny them the rights of God’s people.”

The most passionate plea of the evening came from former moderator of the General Assembly Marj Carpenter: “If you want to completely shatter the denomination, then vote for this substitute motion. But if you want to give (the issue) the time it needs for us to learn from each other, listen to each other, then, please God, vote no.”
The substitute motion was defeated and the motion to disapprove the overture to change the definition of marriage passed with a vote of 540-161-3. The definition of marriage in the Directory for Worship will remain the same.

**Civil rights for same-sex couples**
The committee brought a recommendation to the Assembly to approve urging civil rights for same-sex couples and the appointment of a special committee to study the issue. This overture was approved 516-151-13.

**Gracious response to churches leaving**
The Assembly also considered a Commissioner Resolution that urges a gracious, pastoral response to churches wanting to leave the PC(USA). In commenting on the resolution, Minister commissioner the Rev. Robert Austell of Charlotte Presbytery observed that the resolution intends to underscore that “we are more interested in shepherding the ship with grace than with litigation.” Item 04-28 was approved with a vote of 519-157-8.

###
SAN JOSE, June 26, 2008 — The most emotionally charged overture from the Theological Issues and Institutions Committee came from the Presbytery of Newark asking the 218th General Assembly “to correct translation problems in five responses of the Heidelberg Catechism as found in The Book of Confessions and to add the original Scripture texts of the German Heidelberg Catechism.”

The issues surrounding this confession are complex and multi-layered. After hearing much information and debate, and defeating a minority report, the Assembly approved the overture to initiate the process to revise the Heidelberg Catechism by a vote of 436-280-11.

The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. adopted The Book of Confessions in 1967, which included a 1962 translation of the Heidelberg Catechism prepared for and published by United Church Press. According to the overture rationale, Professor Edward Dowey of Princeton Theological Seminary chaired the committee of the General Assembly that compiled the confessions. He later admitted that a thorough check of this version was never undertaken and certain “illicit” changes made to this Heidelberg translation went undetected. After consulting the original German, as well as early Latin versions, five passages in the original text were discovered to be rendered incorrectly and key theological meanings were obscured.

Most of the Assembly’s attention focused on Question 87 of the catechism: “Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved?”

The current text of the answer reads: “Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.’”

According to the overture rationale, two phrases in the current answer that were supplied by the 1962 translators do not appear in the original text or in any translations produced prior to 1962. The primary phrase that is in dispute is “or of homosexual perversion.”
Neither the original German nor Latin contains text corresponding to this phrase, “Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake:"

If approved, the corrected text would read: “Certainly not; for as Scripture says no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, greedy person, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or anyone like that shall inherit the kingdom of God.”

The other four responses to the catechism questions would also be amended in a way that makes them more accurate and faithful to the original text. This approach would satisfy concerns that have been raised without the need of a major rewriting of the present translation.

According to the Rev. Mark Tammen, associate stated clerk and director of Constitutional Services for the Office of the General Assembly, a special committee will be appointed by the 218th GA moderator to study the recommendation and bring back a proposal to the 219th Assembly (2010). If that Assembly approves the proposal, it will be sent to the presbyteries for approval. If two-thirds of the presbyteries vote to adopt the amendments to the catechism, it will return to the 220th Assembly (2012). If that Assembly approves the changes, then the corrected Heidelberg Catechism will replace the current version in The Book of Confessions.

In other actions, an overture from the Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) to study the Belhar Confession for inclusion in The Book of Confessions was approved. A committee will be appointed to consider the inclusion. They will report to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

The Assembly approved an overture to commend a study of the Trinity for PC(USA) congregations. The Office of Theology and Worship has made available a DVD resource and study guide entitled, The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing, to assist church members to deepen their understanding of and practices in response to the Trinity.

The Assembly approved the Rev. Brian K. Blount as president of Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education, and approved the board of director nominees to the Mountain Retreat Association, Inc.

###
FOG revision sent for study to churches and presbyteries

BY TOYA RICHARDS HILL

SAN JOSE, June 26, 2008 — Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) churches and presbyteries are expected be more involved in the process of revising the Form of Government section of the denomination’s Book of Order, thanks to an action passed Thursday by the 218th General Assembly.

The Assembly passed without any changes a recommendation coming from the Assembly committee tasked with examining a proposed revision to the Form of Government. The recommendation asked that the proposed revision, crafted by the Form of Government Task Force (FOGTF), be referred to the Office of the General Assembly “for a period of consultation and study with churches and presbyteries.”

The GA action addressed widespread concerns raised in overtures to the Assembly, claiming that presbyteries simply did not have enough time to thoroughly review the overall document.

The FOGTF, charged by the 217th General Assembly (2006), crafted a proposed revision that included two documents: “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” and “Revised Form of Government” with recommendations.

Thursday, the GA agreed to a new, expanded task force that will revise the FOGTF’s work, “taking into account the concerns and suggestions gleaned from the consultation and study process.” This task force will include members of the original FOGTF and new representatives from the current Assembly committee that reviewed the Form of Government.

The new task force will also consider, among other things, presbytery overtures and testimonies received during the current Assembly.

A substitute motion was presented in lieu of the 68-member committee’s recommendation. That motion called for allowing “presbyteries the freedom to work in conjunction with the General Assembly Mission Council to develop a new way forward rather than trying to amend and reshape only the model proposed by the Task Force.”

That substitute motion failed.

“Let’s not just scrap all the work that has been done,” GA commissioner the Rev. Dean Strong said in arguing for not replacing the substitute motion for the main motion, which was the committee’s recommendation. “Build on what’s been done already.”

Several attempts also were made to amend the committee’s recommendation, all of which failed.

The new Form of Government revision is to be submitted to the stated clerk of the General Assembly no later than Oct. 15, 2009, for distribution to the church-at-large no later than Jan. 15, 2010. The new revision is to be considered by the 219th General Assembly (2010).

###
Gradye Parsons elected General Assembly stated clerk

Nomination committee’s choice wins on first ballot

BY JERRY L. VAN MARTER

SAN JOSE, June 27, 2008 — The Rev. Gradye Parsons, associate stated clerk and director of operations for the Office of the General Assembly (OGA), won a first ballot victory Friday (June 27) to succeed the Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick as General Assembly stated clerk for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Kirkpatrick is stepping down after three four-year terms. Parsons has served in OGA for eight years after serving as executive presbyter and stated clerk of Holston Presbytery in his native Tennessee.

Parsons received 405 votes, or 57 percent. He was the choice of the Stated Clerk Nomination Committee and defeated three other applicants who also stood for election. The Rev. Winfield “Casey” Jones, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Pearland, Texas, finished second with 176 votes, or 25 percent. Jones was an unsuccessful challenger to Kirkpatrick in 2000.

The Rev. Ed Koster, stated clerk of Detroit Presbytery, finished third with 110 votes, or 15 percent. The Rev. William Tarbell, pastor of Saluda (S.C.) Presbyterian Church trailed with 21 votes, or 3 percent.

In his speech before the vote, Parsons invoked the names of several folk who have been influential in his ministry, saying he was “standing with them for this office.” He spoke for example of a hard-working church member in Tennessee, Betty, “who taught me that faith is not a static noun, but an active verb.”

Parsons said, “The church matters to me, deeply and passionately. That’s why I’m offering myself to the church.”

Jones said his administration would be “permeated by prayer” and that he would focus the denomination’s attention as much on The Book of Confessions as on the Book of Order. “The church has to be connected to its roots [Jesus Christ] like a tree to its roots,” Jones said. “If we are rooted in Jesus Christ, in prayer and in what God has said in the past, then we will bear much fruit.”

Koster emphasized his 13 years experience as Detroit Presbytery’s stated clerk and his training...
as both a lawyer and minister. “I am a clerk experienced in polity and issues of the church,” he said, “and I will invite all to the table of all theological persuasions.”

Tarbell emphasized a pastoral approach to the office and said he employs a systems analysis approach to determine “whether relationships create or block progress” in the church. “My approach will be as informative, accurate and objective as possible.”

Asked about the decades-long pattern of membership decline in the PC(USA), Parsons said all Presbyterians “need to develop the welcoming spirit of Acts 2 rather than [lack of openness to strangers] we find in many of our churches. You and I need to be more open to those who are different from ourselves.”

On the authority of Scripture, Parsons said, “Scripture is God’s gift to us and should always be our starting place. That’s where I start,” adding that the Bible “is not a book that’s easy to read and is not supposed to be, because while we are reading the Bible the Bible is trying to read us, which is not always easy.”

All four candidates agreed that fear is one of the greatest problems facing the PC(USA). “Fear paralyzes,” Jones said, “but perfect love, that of Jesus Christ, drives out fear.” Koster said that fear “sometimes makes us feel we’re coming unglued, but we have our great traditions of Presbyterianism” and Tarbell called fear “our most destructive enemy, robbing us of purpose and life itself.”

Parsons called fear “the overriding issue in the church — everybody’s afraid that for some reason or another the church is going to close in two weeks.” He said his favorite Bible story is the story in Luke 8 — Jesus in the boat, asleep, with his disciples when the storm comes up. “Jesus wakes up and asks, ‘Where is your faith?’” Parsons said. “The middle of the lake is pretty scary and you can’t see the other shore, but a mantra I recite to myself regularly is ‘Get in the boat; go across the lake; there will be storm; you will not die.’”

So it is for the PC(USA), he told the Assembly after his installation. “We are in this together because God has put us together,” Parsons said.

“All let’s go make Jesus proud of our church.”

At the press conference following the election, Parsons responded to a question about denominational funds to assist with legal expenses in lawsuits relative to property issues.

He responded, “The last thing we need to do in dealing with these situations is to go to court. We need to find ways to address them with each other and try to stay out of court, which will bring down costs considerably.”

“We need to find ways to help people not to live into fears as we continue to discern together how to be the church. The important thing is we need to stay connected to each other, rather than distance ourselves from each other.”

###
Reyes-Chow elected moderator of 218th GA

San Francisco pastor wins second ballot victory

BY JERRY L. VAN MARTER

SAN JOSE, June 21, 2008 — The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, 39, an energetic new church development pastor in San Francisco and leader in the “emergent church” movement, was elected moderator of the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Saturday night (June 21), capturing a second ballot victory.

Reyes-Chow — who received 48 percent of the first ballot votes — won an easy majority on the second ballot with 390 votes or 55 percent.

The Rev. William “Bill” Teng of National Capital Presbytery finished second with 255 votes or 36 percent. The Rev. D. Carl Mazza of New Castle Presbytery finished third with 52 votes or 7 percent. Elder Roger Shoemaker of Homestead Presbytery trailed with seven votes or 1 percent.

Reyes-Chow is pastor of Mission Bay Community Church, an innovative new church of San Francisco Presbytery that was recently named winner of a 2007 Sam and Helen Walton Award for outstanding new church development. In his address to the Assembly, he noted that he makes as many pastoral calls by email as by in-person visitation.

Such is the future of ministry, Reyes-Chow said. Mission Bay has a state-of-the-art Web site and extensive electronic communications among members and participants, which he said is absolutely essential for a congregation that is predominantly under-40.

In her nominating speech for him, Elder Vivian Guthrie of Greater Atlanta Presbytery urged Reyes-Chow’s election “to keep our church relevant...or we aren’t going to be on the same page as younger people. Bruce has a profound understanding of the way the world is changing, so he can help us feel less anxious and less resistant to change.”

In both his speech and his responses to questions, Reyes-Chow reiterated over and over his belief that “nothing is too hard or too wondrous for God. If the church steps out in faith rather than clinging to survival, to be more intent on being faithful than on being right, to be together based on our common covenant in Jesus Christ rather than by property or pensions, then we
will be able to live into a future in which we are a vital and vibrant presence in the world.”

Teng, the only one of the four candidates to explicitly support the current constitutional prohibition of the ordination of sexually active gay and lesbian Presbyterians as church officers, emphasized his campaign theme of “gratitude and hope.”

“We gather up a wealth of meaning as Presbyterians in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ,” Teng said. “We have no greater need than to look beyond ourselves and follow Jesus into the world he loves and calls us to love.”

Mazza, who brought to his candidacy a compelling personal story of conversion and resultant commitment to the homeless and other marginalized people as founder and director of Meeting Ground in Elkton, MD, spoke of the two “great strengths” of the PC(USA) that drive his ministry: “We have an abiding commitment to gospel and Jesus Christ and a commitment to mission in the world,” he said.

Shoemaker, the only elder among the four, called for Presbyterians to develop a greater understanding of themselves as the body of Christ and as Presbyterians and in doing so “we will find ways to pursue solutions that will grow our congregations spiritually and numerically.”

Reyes-Chow, the grandson of Chinese and Filipino immigrants to California, was raised in Sacramento and Stockton, CA. He is a graduate of San Francisco State University and San Francisco Theological Seminary. A prolific writer and blogger, Reyes-Chow describes himself as a “pastor/geek/dad/follower of Christ.”

###
The 218th General Assembly of the PC(USA) made some major decisions that require prayer and thoughtful response. The most significant decisions are contrary to the very foundation of Christian faith and life, our calling to witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in and for the world.

**POTENTIALLY POSITIVE ACTIONS**

While those troubling actions of the GA deserve our most focused attention, we note several actions of the General Assembly that have potential to promote biblical faithfulness:

- **“An Invitation to Expanding Partnership in God’s Mission”:**
  This document, approved by the GA, presents a new collaborative spirit for Presbyterian participation in God’s mission.

- **“A Call to Seek God for Spiritual Renewal of the Church”:**
  The GA has encouraged congregations and presbyteries to hold special gatherings seeking spiritual renewal.

- **A new mission budget**
  Provides more funds for international mission workers.

- **Annual Report on “Relief of Conscience Plan” (re: abortion)**
  An annual report on the plan is now required.

- **“Response to Churches Seeking Dismissal from the PC(USA)”:**
  The GA encouraged presbyteries to be charitable in their treatment of congregations seeking dismissal.

**NEGATIVE ACTIONS OF THE GA: INTER-FaITH RELATIONS, ORDINATION AND SEXUALITY**

Other actions are serious departures from Scripture and our missional calling:

- **Inter-faith Relations: Judaism, Christianity and Islam:**
  The GA has encouraged common worship between members of the three faiths, and has asked them to “celebrate diversity.” A new theological statement was approved that implies Jesus is one of several viable ways to know and worship God, and considers all three faiths part of one larger family of God.

- **Ordination Standards and Sexuality:**
  - **Local License:** The GA passed a a new “Authoritative Interpretation” (AI) of the Book of Order that intends to give sessions and presbyteries freedom to ordain persons in violation of the PC(USA)’s standards, including the requirement to live in fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. (AIs are effective immediately, but learning the actual impact of this one will require court decisions.)
  - **Removal of Authoritative Interpretations on Homosexual Practice:**
   The GA removed the existing AIs on this subject that supported biblical morality. (Learning the actual impact will require court decisions.)
Approved Deletion of the “Fidelity and Chastity” Standard:
This is a proposed amendment to the Book of Order that requires approval by the presbyteries to be effective. The amendment intends to allow the ordination of persons with a variety of sexual lifestyles.

Approved amendments to the Heidelberg Catechism to Remove Reference to Homosexuality: these amendments would require the next GA to approve them and subsequent approval of the presbyteries to be effective. The intent is to change the church’s teaching and moral standards on the issue of homosexuality.

"WHAT IS PFR DOING NOW?"
It is necessary to respond both to the particular actions taken by the GA and to the deeper condition of the PC(USA) revealed by these actions. We encourage you to read “Contending for the Faith: The Way Forward After GA 2008,” on our website, where we offer a more detailed assessment of the state of the PC(USA) and outline how you can partner with us, including the following initiatives:

Resources for Worship and Theology:
PFR will provide resources for the church to develop faithful understandings and practices regarding Christian worship, the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, and our calling as Christians to work together for peace with members of other faiths. We will also provide resources to help congregations and presbyteries answer the Assembly’s call to gather in “spiritual assemblies.”

Call to Biblical Faithfulness:
PFR will provide networking and resources to defeat the proposed amendments to the constitution and to send to the next GA opportunities to restore integrity to the interpretation of the PC(USA)’s constitution. We need your help. Please contribute to the “Fund for Biblical Faithfulness,” and watch our website for more information in the coming weeks.

Reshaping the PC(USA):
The unity and witness of the PC(USA) have been strained to an unprecedented level. For the sake of our witness to the Gospel, we believe it is necessary for the different visions of Christian faith and life in the PC(USA) to be expressed in formally distinct bodies without a formal split in the denomination. Such possibilities have been discussed hypothetically under the rubrics of non-geographical or “missional” presbyteries and synods.

We invite the contribution of ideas from the whole church (a means will be available online soon) about how best to reshape the PC(USA), and we are gathering a team of elders, pastors and governing body executives to develop the best possible proposal for re-structuring the PC(USA). Please contribute to the “Fund for Reshaping the PC(USA)” to make this effort possible.

For further information, visit www.GA2008.com and www.pfrenewal.org. Other resources available from PFR include:
“Reshaping the PC(USA): PFR Looks Beyond the 218th General Assembly”
“Contending for the Faith: The Way Forward After GA 2008”


###
Reshaping the Presbyterian Church (USA)
Presbyterians For Renewal Looks Beyond the 218th General Assembly
June 28, 2008

Sometimes it takes pain to make things clear. While this General Assembly was not the first to bring pain to the church, its pain has been used by God to bring clarity to Presbyterians For Renewal.

For two decades Presbyterians For Renewal has worked with congregations to faithfully engage in God’s mission in the world. Our hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and our commitment to the Presbyterian movement remain strong. The faith and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been a consistent concern both of our congregations and of PFR as a national organization. As our North American culture has changed, our denomination has changed along with it. Having lost sight of her clear, Christ-centered identity, the PC(USA) has continued to embrace our culture’s beliefs and morals.

The actions of the 218th General Assembly have made it clear that the PC(USA)’s compromise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has reached an unprecedented level. It is clear that the PC(USA)’s confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and commitment to our Reformed confessions has weakened to the point that we can no longer assume a common framework of conversation. The pain of this realization has been used by God to clarify our next steps. While PFR’s mission has not changed, our context has. We are compelled to do the following:

• In order to faithfully witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in and for the PC(USA), we will actively pursue a means of reshaping the life of the denomination. For the sake of our witness to the Gospel, we believe it is necessary for the different visions of Christian faith and life in the PC(USA) to be expressed in formally distinct bodies without a formal split in the denomination. Such possibilities have been discussed hypothetically under the rubrics of nongeographical or “missional” presbyteries and synods. We will pursue the ideas and relationships necessary to make this a reality, and we call upon the whole church to think creatively about ways to achieve this end. Perhaps revisions to the work of the Form of Government Task Force that will be brought to the next General Assembly are a way to advance this effort.

• We will no longer consider the debates over ordination standards and sexual ethics as a meaningful venue to seek resolution of our denominational malaise. We acknowledge that we are simply talking past each other, and realize that this debate is merely a symptom of deeper divisions. These deeper divisions include our understandings of the authority of Jesus Christ as Head of the Church, and our calling to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. As we pursue a means to make these differences manifest in “missional” governing bodies, we hope that over the long-term God will re-unite the faith of the PC(USA) and enable a formal re-unification.

• While we pursue significant changes to our denomination’s polity, we will work to defeat the amendment to the “Fidelity and Chastity” standard for ordination, and to bring to the next General Assembly a new “Authoritative Interpretation” regarding homosexual practice. We
will also work to improve the processes each presbytery uses to elect commissioners to General Assembly, so that the next GA is more representative of the faith and life of the PC(USA). We do not, however, believe such measures are an adequate response to the state of the PC(USA), and therefore will pursue the larger polity changes mentioned above.

- We will also pursue a revision of our constitution’s property provisions, which would allow those who cannot live with the church’s ordination standards to depart with their property. In the providence of God this may at some point serve those who have advocated changing our traditional standards. Regardless, we believe that the unavoidable lawsuits that proceed from our current property provisions are a disgrace to God’s mission in the world.

- While these polity actions take form, we will encourage our congregations to begin or continue redirecting their giving into missions and ministries that serve the Kingdom. In the past we leapt through many hoops to keep our giving within denominational structures that we believed would be faithful. While those ministries remain a viable option, we will no longer hesitate to direct our giving to ministries beyond the current forms of the PCUSA.

- We will also pursue missional partnerships within and beyond the PCUSA, including a means of confessing our faith in the Lordship of Jesus Christ with integrity, so that mission and ministry might proceed in good faith even while larger polity solutions are being worked out.

We do not see the way to the end of this particular path, but we believe that God is calling us to take these next steps, and we welcome those who would walk with us. We especially look forward to working with Presbyterians of racial and ethnic distinction, and with Presbyterians in other parts of the world, whose concerns for the faith and witness of the PC(USA) we share. Our primary concern in taking these steps is to enable our congregations to faithfully proclaim and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their own communities, and to do so together.

Our hope is and will remain in Jesus Christ and him alone. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and we confess our firm confidence in his power to renew his church. We call the Presbyterian Church (USA) to a new season of prayer and repentance, and to gather in solemn assemblies to ask the Lord’s guidance as we face these changes in the life of our denomination.

###
Contending for the Faith: The Way Forward After the 218th General Assembly

July 9, 2008

The 218th General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recently took numerous actions on important and controversial issues. This article will outline several deeply troubling actions that require the prayerful and active response of those concerned for biblical faith and life in the PC(USA).

PFR strongly encourages all Presbyterian pastors and elders to stay informed on denominational issues and to lead their congregations faithfully while engaging in their presbyteries “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). To this end, PFR is committed to providing accurate and timely analysis on denominational issues. We will also offer the church initiatives designed to address both the “big picture,” underlying challenges we face as a denomination and as a movement of Presbyterians for renewal, and initiatives aimed at the particular and immediate concerns before us.

Contents of this paper:
"What happened at the GA and what can we do?"

- The Major Actions of the 218th General Assembly
- Inter-faith Relations: Judaism, Christianity and Islam
- Ordination Standards and Sexuality
  - Local License: A New Authoritative Interpretation Regarding “Freedom of Conscience” (immediately effective)
  - Removal of Authoritative Interpretations Prohibiting Homosexual Practice for Church Officers (immediately effective)
  - Deletion of the “Fidelity and Chastity” Standard (requires approval by presbyteries to be effective)
  - Amending the Heidelberg Catechism to Remove Reference to Homosexuality (requires next GA approval and subsequent approval of the presbyteries to be effective)

"What is PFR's Response to the State of the PC(USA)?"

- “The Big Picture”: Repentance and Our Missional Calling
- The GA in Light of our Missional Calling: A Two-Fold Approach to the Way Forward
  - Call to Biblical Faithfulness
  - Reshaping the PC(USA)

The Major Actions of the 218th General Assembly

It is important that we first say the 218th General Assembly made several decisions that have the potential to promote biblical faithfulness in our denomination. These include the approval of a radical new document enabling broader mission collaboration and an increase in funding for international mission workers. We encourage you to read the outline of these positive decisions available through the homepage of GA2008.COM.
The actions of the GA that have rightly received the most attention are those related to interfaith relations, ordination standards and sexuality. The GA’s actions on these issues are profound deviations from the clear teaching of Holy Scripture and our Reformed Confessions. As such, they are deeply disturbing. Indeed, they threaten the very identity of the PC(USA) as an expression of the Body of Christ called to “exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”

Inter-faith Relations

1) Common Worship for Jews, Christians and Muslims?

The General Assembly took two actions regarding the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The stated intent of these actions was to promote peace and understanding among the faiths. To pursue this end, these actions encourage members of the three faiths to join together to “celebrate diversity” and to engage in common worship. One of the actions encourages Presbyterians, Jews and Muslims “to celebrate religious holidays together, setting aside days of worship,” and the other says joint practices might include “participation in sacred and holy observances in each other’s traditions.”

There is much to commend in the GA’s stated intention to promote peace and understanding. Yet the recommendation of common worship between the three faiths represents a serious misunderstanding of Christianity and Islam as well as forms of modern Judaism.

Worship is a central expression of faith and shapes the identity of each religious community. The mode and meaning of worship for each faith, respectively, are determined by each faith’s foundational beliefs, which are not consistent among Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

For instance, as Christians, we believe true worship of God is worship through Jesus Christ, God's Son (e.g. John 14:6). Behind the everyday practice of praying “in the name of Jesus” is this foundation of Christian worship. It is the exaltation of Jesus Christ as Lord of all and the one through whom we have access to God the Father that launched the early church into the discussions that grew into the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds, the standard-bearers for Christian belief.

Of course, the identity and centrality of Jesus Christ are the very beliefs that have most distinguished Christianity from both Judaism and Islam. The encouragement for Christians to worship together with Muslims is particularly troubling. As a faith tradition that emerged five hundred years after the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Islam is very self-conscious regarding its beliefs about the person of Jesus. Mainstream Islam honors Jesus as one of many in a line of prophets, the last of which was Muhammad, whose teachings are considered the most authoritative.

The Qur’an is clear that Jesus, while a prophet, is not and could not have been the eternal Son of God. This belief naturally, then, has characterized mainstream Islam. It naturally follows and is only honest to note that Christian worship (through Jesus) is clearly rejected throughout the Qur’an as dishonoring to God, even a form of unbelief. Given these foundational differences in our faiths, over the last fourteen centuries, since the emergence of Islam, Christianity and Islam have not been able to affirm common worship because they hold very different beliefs about the nature and identity of God, the means of salvation and what kind of worship honors God.

Nevertheless, the General Assembly has encouraged Presbyterians and Muslims to worship together. The Assembly has not explained precisely what new Christian and/or Muslim theological understanding would enable Christians to worship as Christians with Muslims, or
how Muslims might worship as Muslims with Christians. A new theological statement that was also approved goes some way toward explaining the rationale for the encouragement to engage in common worship.

2) A New Theological Statement on the Three Monotheistic Faiths
Providing what one overture called “a new theological foundation,” the GA also approved the following new theological statement that underlies the encouragement for common worship among Jews, Christians and Muslims: “though we hold differing understandings of how God has been revealed to humankind, the PC(USA) affirms that, as children of this loving God, we share the commandments of love for God and neighbor, the requirement to care for the poor.”

The most natural reading of this statement finds the PC(USA) confidently affirming that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is in fact the God of Muhammad, despite all the enormously complex and controversial issues involved in such an affirmation. The explicit phrase, “a common God,” was removed before the statement was approved. Of course, the affirmations that remain, as well as the encouragement for common worship, all hang on that premise. More important than an abstract statement is the affirmation of a common connection by faith that each religion is thought to provide to the one God. People of all three faiths are “children of this loving God,” all part of God’s family through their respective faiths, which forms the basis for the encouragement of common worship. The differences between the faiths, according to this statement, are found in “differing understandings of how God has been revealed to humankind.”

The primary problem with this statement is that the various elements taken together are in conflict with the faith of orthodox Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The statement seems to begin with a generic monotheism – “that there is only one God” – a God who can be known and approached in worship in a variety of ways. The differences between the three monotheistic religions are considered to be secondary -- God may have created the differences intentionally, or they may be the result of human convention or cultural influences - but at the end of the day the idea is that there is a deeper unity for common worship in the one bigger family of God.

The Theological Implications of the Actions on Inter-faith Relations
It is difficult to avoid the fact that this new theological statement and the exhortation to common worship only make sense if the Lord Jesus Christ is moved to the sideline in favor of a generic monotheism. Contrary to a generic monotheism is the Christian confession of the centrality of Jesus Christ for all knowledge and worship of God. As the Barmen Declaration famously states: “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” Jesus is not merely one of several viable understandings of how God has been revealed and how people of faith can approach God in worship.

Taken at face value, the implication of these inter-faith statements is a denial of very basic elements of orthodox Christian faith. Such a move was obviously not the intention of the majority of commissioners who voted overwhelmingly to approve these actions. A charitable view of these decisions would fault the general theological malnourishment of the denomination as a whole.

Finally on these matters, it is worth pointing out that it is not appropriate, for inter-faith relations, for one group unilaterally to state what beliefs and practices would be appropriate for persons of another faith, especially when the statements involve beliefs and practices that have not historically characterized the other faith or faiths in question.
PFR Action on Inter-Faith Relations
We will make theological and other practical resources available to the church regarding interfaith relations in the coming weeks and months, to help Presbyterians dig deeper into the nature of Christian worship, the relationship between Christianity and other faiths, and a theologically sound approach to fulfilling our responsibility to work for peace together with people of other faiths.

Ordination Standards and Sexuality

Two Immediately Effective Actions Related to Sexual Behavior and Ordination Standards

1) Local License: A New “Authoritative Interpretation” (AI) of G-6.0108 in the Book of Order:

What happened?
The GA passed a new Authoritative Interpretation “AI” on section G-6.0108 of the Book of Order, the section that states ordained officers must “exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds.” The intent of this new “AI” is to broadly expand “freedom of conscience” and to allow sessions and presbyteries to ordain and install individuals who do not and do not intend in personal belief or practice to abide by the constitutional standards for ordination, including 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” (G-6.0106b).

Two reasons this action is deeply troubling:
1) Biblical faith and practice. Most importantly, the intent of this action is to permit the ordination of persons who are sexually active outside of marriage between a man and a woman. Those encouraging this action include the special interest groups urging the church to honor homosexual practice as a gift from God. This action seeks to undo the historic and biblical standards for ordination in the PC(USA), standards that are vital for the church’s witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

2) The covenant community. But the intent of this action is also a clear disregard for the established means of amending our constitution of the PC(USA), a safeguard that allows the whole covenant community to make determinations about changes in a constitution that governs the life of the whole church. This established process for constitutional changes requires the approval of the GA and a majority of the 173 presbyteries. Because the GA itself has the authority to “interpret” the constitution of the PC(USA), this new “AI” passed twelve days ago by the 218th Assembly is immediately effective. In taking this action, the GA has attempted to effectively amend the constitution while circumventing the amendment process by not giving the presbyteries a vote.

What impact will the new AI on G-6.0108 actually have?
It remains to be seen whether or not this new “AI” will be able to accomplish its intent. There are good arguments on both sides. Future decisions by the General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) should make the impact of this action more clear. Such a decision could come in a few months or take longer than a year.

What Can You Do?
Sessions can begin now to establish for their congregations and for their presbyteries clear
statements of intent regarding their application of biblical standards for ordination. Such statements must be made carefully in order to be done within the bounds of the PC(USA) constitution. PFR will provide specific advice through our website in the coming weeks. In addition, sessions and presbyteries can work together to draft a more biblically faithful interpretation of the constitution to send as an overture for consideration by the 219th General Assembly in 2010 as a new AI on G-6.0108.

**PFR Action**
PFR is committed to mobilize leaders and provide resources for congregations and presbyteries who wish to establish clear, biblical and constitutional ordination practices for themselves, and who wish to send to the next GA a faithful “AI” on G-6.0108.

### 2) Removal of the “Authoritative Interpretation” on Homosexual Practice

**What happened?**
The GA passed another “AI” that says all previous authoritative interpretations on homosexual practice no longer have any “force or effect.” Among the clear statements no longer in effect is the following: "That unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination."

The AI’s on homosexual practice were significant because they were the only statements with constitutional force that explicitly indicated that homosexual practice was inconsistent with the requirements for ordination. Some church court cases have leaned on these AI’s when making determinations regarding the constitutionality of ordinations of practicing homosexual persons.

**What impact will this action have?**
Though the intent of the GA’s action is clear - to make it more likely that such ordinations will be deemed constitutional - it is unclear whether or not the action will ultimately have this effect. PFR believes the “Fidelity and Chastity” standard in G-6.0106b (see below) is, on its own, very clear on the matter. Recent GAPJC decisions appear to have interpreted the Fidelity and Chastity standard in this way as well. Therefore, it remains to be seen what practical effect on ordination standards this action will have.

**PFR Action**
PFR is committed to mobilize leaders and provide resources for congregations and presbyteries who wish to send to the next GA a new authoritative interpretation of the constitution regarding homosexual practice and ordination standards.

**A general note on the two actions above on authoritative interpretations:**
Regardless of what technical impact these actions of the GA will have, it is very likely that we will begin seeing “test cases” in the near future. In other words, it is likely that some sessions and presbyteries will begin ordaining candidates who are in open violation of the Fidelity and Chastity standard.

Such actions would do further damage to the church, because they would be contrary to both God’s good intentions for humankind as expressed in Holy Scripture and contrary to the PC(USA)’s own “Fidelity and Chastity” standard for ordination. We urge sessions and presbyteries considering such ordinations not to take this step. And we urge those desiring to uphold our biblical and constitutional standards for ordination to work with us to give the next GA an opportunity to approve a new AI on homosexual practice and G-6.0108.
Two Actions on sexuality and ordination standards that require presbytery approval to be effective:

1) Deleting the “Fidelity and Chastity” Standard in G-6.0106b

What happened?

The GA approved an amendment to the Book of Order’s section G-6.0106b, which includes the “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.” The proposed amendment would remove this language.

What impact will this action have?

This action has no immediate impact on the polity of the denomination. Amending the Book of Order of the PC(USA) requires the approval of a majority of our 173 presbyteries. Presbyteries have now been launched into another round of contentious debates on sexuality and controversial votes. The presbytery votes must be taken within one year from the close of this last Assembly. If passed, the amendment would take effect at the end of June 2009.

The very likely implication of passing the amendment would be the removal of any doubt about the eligibility for ordination of persons sexually active outside of marriage between a man and a woman. Sessions and presbyteries would be able to ordain individuals engaged in all manner of lifestyles without violating the letter of the PC(USA)’s Book of Order. The debate over the constitutionality of such ordinations would shift solely to this question: Can a person be both obedient to Christ and engaged in unrepentant and habitual sexual activity outside of marriage?

While PFR and indeed the global church are quite confident that the answer to this question is “no,” the last thirty years of debate in the PC(USA) have proven two things: there is much disagreement in our denomination on the Bible's teaching on sexuality and indeed on the status of the Bible as an authoritative guide for faith and practice, and questions about the constitutionality of ordinations are generally answered in church courts on the basis of specific wordings of the Book of Order alone, not on the basis of scriptural teaching or our Book of Confessions. PFR believes we all must acknowledge and repent of these two realities.

Beyond the technical implications, the approval of this amendment would plunge the PC(USA) to a new depth of departure from biblical morality on a central aspect of human life about which the Scriptures have much to say. It would further entrench the PC(USA) in the untenable position of claiming to be a Christian church while living at odds with the foundation of Christian faith - the calling to trust in, obey and witness to Jesus Christ according to the written Word of God in Holy Scripture. Our witness within our own culture would be damaged further. And global partners have already expressed concern to PFR that, if this amendment were passed, the implications for our mission efforts among people of other cultures, and for our relationships with Presbyterian and Reformed Christians around the world would be enormous and devastating.

PFR Action

We can and must engage in this specific struggle for biblical faithfulness in the PC(USA). PFR is committed to helping elders and pastors in their presbyteries defeat this proposed amendment to the Book of Order and to maintain the Fidelity and Chastity standard. This will require the passionate and committed efforts of the entire family of Presbyterians for Renewal, and we strongly urge all elders and congregations who are committed to PFR’s mission, values and vision to remain engaged in the struggle for biblical faithfulness in the PC(USA).
What Can You Do?
In three previous votes of the presbyteries on the Fidelity and Chastity standard, the presbyteries have voted, by an increasing margin, to maintain biblical faithfulness in our ordination standards. We believe the presbyteries will defeat this latest proposed amendment. But this outcome will require the efforts of all of us to be informed and engaged in our own presbyteries.

This crucial effort will, unfortunately, require the investment of significant funds. PFR’s funding for its continuing grassroots and program ministries for congregational leadership has already been significantly affected, for the worse, by previous actions of the Assembly in recent years. In order to lead this new effort, we need your investment.

We have set up a special fund, “The Fund for Biblical Faithfulness,” to which individuals and congregations may contribute, which will enable a collaborative effort between PFR, other renewal groups and you, across the nation.

Please pray for the PFR network, for the discernment of the presbyteries of the PC(USA), and please contribute to this new fund. Contributions to this fund will be used specifically for the networking and resource development to help you -elders and pastors of the PC(USA) - to address the actions of the 218th General Assembly on ordination standards. We will be making further announcements about this effort on our website, through special email communications, and through traditional mailings.

2) Removing A Reference to Homosexuality in the Book of Confessions: Amendments to the Heidelberg Catechism

What Happened?
The GA approved an effort to amend the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the confessional standards of the church in our Book of Confessions. The contention of the overture approved by the Assembly is that the PC(USA)’s Heidelberg Catechism does not adequately reflect the language of the 16th-century German text of the catechism. The primary interest of this effort to amend the catechism is actually to remove a reference to homosexuality in the answer to the catechism’s “Q&A 87” (the catechism has 129 questions and answers that teach the Christian faith). In order to make the case that the primary interest was to restore our catechism’s fidelity to the 16th-century text, four other answers were cited as containing “errors.” In reality, two of these “errors” are very minor and debatable issues that present no substantive theological concerns, and the other two are in fact completely reliable translations.

Why the concern to remove a reference to homosexuality? The stated intent of those driving this initiative is their desire to prevent a person from being able to find an answer in our Book of Confessions to the question of whether or not homosexual practice is sinful. Furthermore, section G-6.0106b in our Book of Order states the following as a standard for ordination: “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 effort to remove the reference to “homosexual perversion” from the Book of Confessions is one piece of the broader effort to change the PC(USA)’s standards for the sexual conduct of ordained officers of the church.

What Impact Will This Action Have?
There is no immediate change to the Heidelberg Catechism, but a process has been initiated that could result in the removal of the reference to homosexuality. The process to amend the Book of Confessions is rigorous and lengthy. The initial result of this GA’s action is the formation
of a committee to study the proposal and to make a recommendation to the next Assembly. The next GA will then vote on that proposal. If the next GA’s vote is to move forward with some form of amendments to the catechism, then these proposed amendments would need to passed by 2/3 of the presbyteries in order to move to the final step. The final step required in order to amend the Book of Confessions would be the approval of the subsequent General Assembly.

**PFR Action**

During the General Assembly PFR posted on GA2008.COM a letter from four Presbyterian seminary professors, two of them scholars of Reformation Theology from Princeton, outlining their objections to the proposed amendments and the means by which the amendments were sought, i.e. on the basis of very weak historical arguments, rather than by stating the actual intent, namely to change the church’s confessional teaching on homosexuality. This letter is In addition, we will publish a detailed article explaining several of the cited “errors” in the catechism are not, in fact errors at all but faithful renderings into English of the original German text of the catechism. Finally, in the event that the amendments to the catechism are sent to the presbyteries for a vote, PFR will work with elders and pastors to defeat the amendments.

**Addressing the “Big Picture”: Repentance and Missional Calling**

For two decades, PFR has passionately engaged the PC(USA), seeking to be an instrument of God’s Spirit in renewing the life of our denomination. We have been dubbed by some as the “evangelical loyalists,” a label we have received with gratitude. We have worked to establish and maintain a close working relationship with the broad center of the denomination and whenever possible to support the mission and ministry of the General Assembly Council. We have intentionally worked to maintain a “comprehensive vision for renewal” and a long-term perspective.

Ultimately, the spiritual health of our denomination is determined by the faith and witness of our local congregations, so our ministries have and continue to provide resources, leadership training, inspiration, and a sense of evangelical Presbyterian identity through conferences, networks and publications for our congregations and for youth. To a great extent, these ministries have been able to do their work without much direct involvement in the decisions of the governing bodies of the PC(USA).

Simultaneously, we have sought to address “denominational issues.” We have offered analysis on the issues facing the church and worked with pastors and elders who seek to make godly decisions within the middle and higher governing bodies of the PC(USA), including the General Assembly. Our desire has been for the PC(USA) to be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ in the world as a connectional body and particular expression of the larger Body of Christ.

The PC(USA) has struggled through many of the same problems that other mainline denominations in North America face. And like many other mainline denominations, the PC(USA) has progressively lost sight of its Christ-centered identity and missional calling: the reason we exist as a church is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to offer to the world a distinctive vision of God’s good intentions for humanity. One of the “Great Ends of the Church” in our tradition is our calling to “exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world”: to be a distinctive people, guided by a distinctive loyalty to the one and only reigning Lord Jesus Christ, who is attested to us in the authoritative and written Word of God.

Without this foundational sense of our identity, the Church has little defense against the full embrace of the culture in which it finds itself. In the case of mainline denominations in North America, including the PC(USA), this loss of our sense of identity has catalyzed the erosion of biblical authority, “other gods” direct our life, and the church has embraced the beliefs and
morals of North American society. Numerical decline in the church is not a mystery: without a distinctive faith and way of life, the church has nothing to offer anyone that they could not receive in most other forms of human community, many of which have “less baggage” than Christian denominations.

PFR will be the first to confess our own failures in this process of decline. Mainline evangelicals may have been unfaithful on different “issues” than those who have explicitly embraced a pattern of cultural accommodation, but we have been unfaithful nonetheless. Matters of wealth, justice, power, and care for the creation, to name but a few, are matters on which many of us in the broadly evangelical movement have allowed ourselves to be made captive to the culture rather than to Christ. These are not the central points of the “culture war” and so they have not become central points of contention in the mainline denominations. Both “liberals” and “conservatives” in the PC(USA) and other denominations have made serious accommodations to these aspects of western culture.

When it comes to areas of obvious sinfulness in the church such as these, we face a critical question: Should we repent of our sin as guided by sound study of the Holy Scriptures and our Reformed Confessions, in order to honor God and pursue a distinctive way of life as Christ’s witness to the world? Or should we take our cues from the norms of the surrounding culture, openly revamping our faith and life as Christians to fit within the prevailing standards of North American society?

The distinctive mark of a Christian church is not that we should be a community found perfect in this life, but that we should be found in continual repentance of our sin and calling upon God for forgiveness and transformation, that we might embody the Gospel for the sake of the world. However imperfectly, this we have tried to do for the last two decades as PFR.

It is the deep difference over this question of the church’s identity that characterizes a major divide in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today: are we directed by Jesus Christ who is the Head of the Church, who has called us to be an alternative community in and for the world? Or are we an organizational expression of the latest trends in western culture? The identity of the church - the very existence of the PC(USA) as a “church” - is at stake as we answer these questions. And on these questions, the PC(USA) is deeply divided.

The Actions of the 218th General Assembly in Light of Our Missional Calling

When taken together, the actions of the 218th General Assembly make a strong statement about the disunity of the PC(USA) and the status of its faith and witness to Jesus Christ.

Just two years ago the 217th GA approved one authoritative interpretation intended to accomplish a change in our ordination policies regarding the sexual conduct of church officers, what the new “AI” on G-6.0108 seeks to accomplish as well. When the first measure was passed in 2006, many hoped it would promote the peace, unity and purity of the church. The result was very different. Several dozen congregations have left or are leaving our denomination, thousands more of our congregations were dismayed by the Assembly’s action, and deep concerns were expressed by our global partners. This action made many wonder if the PC(USA) had taken its decisive step toward full cultural accommodation.

By attempting to strengthen the action of the previous GA, and by adding to that action several additional measures designed to advance the same cause, a narrow majority of the 218th
Assembly has now strained the unity of the PC(USA) to a new level. In addition, the actions regarding inter-faith relations add a pointed and radical embrace of western culture’s prevailing sense of the status of various “religions”: that we should consider the distinctive beliefs of each faith to be of lesser concern, such as the Lordship of Jesus Christ, in favor of viewing religions as the product of various human conventions valuable only in so far as they serve a secular vision for the basis of political peace in the world.

It is for this reason that we said, in our initial response to the General Assembly, “the PC(USA)’s compromise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has reached an unprecedented level.”

Therefore, PFR’s response to the current condition of the PC(USA) is two-fold.

1) The Call to Biblical Faithfulness
The specific “action” steps outlined above have emphasized one crucial aspect of our response to the state of the PC(USA): PFR is committed to uphold biblical faithfulness within the PC(USA) by supporting presbytery-by-presbytery efforts to defeat the proposed amendment to the Book of Order’s standards for ordination and to send to the next General Assembly proposals to restore integrity to the interpretation of our constitution. In God’s mysterious providence, thousands of congregations who share PFR’s mission have been called to be faithful witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ in the PC(USA). We minimize neither the severity of the state of the PC(USA) nor the opportunities to be instruments of God’s Spirit at this moment in the life of the denomination.

Now is the time to make that witness to the truth clearer than ever, by working together to address the actions of the Assembly immediately and directly.

2) Reshaping the Presbyterian Church (USA)
Many congregations and their leaders have expressed to PFR that they have now been pushed to the point where they must seriously question the ability to remain faithful within the PC(USA). PFR believes this is a valid concern. While we are, at present, free to be faithful in the PC(USA), it is also clear that the way in which we, together, exercise that freedom to be faithful must now change.

By a narrow majority, recent assemblies have voted to change our biblical and historic standards for ordination. These votes actually represent only one segment of our denomination. The majority of the members of the PC(USA) have consistently disagreed with these actions. Given the theological and moral seriousness of the issues involved in these disagreements, we have reached the point where the different visions of Christian faith and life in the PC(USA) need to be expressed through the institutional structure of the denomination.

No one is honored by the constant battles over sexuality, especially not our Lord Jesus Christ, whose love it is our calling to proclaim to the world. At a more foundational level, we reiterate the following from our initial response to the General Assembly:

“It is clear that the PC(USA)’s confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and commitment to our Reformed confessions has weakened to the point that we can no longer assume a common framework of conversation....For the sake of our witness to the Gospel, we believe it is necessary for the different visions of Christian faith and life in the PC(USA) to be expressed in formally distinct bodies without a formal split in the denomination. Such possibilities have been discussed hypothetically under the rubrics of non-geographical or “missional” presbyteries and synods. We will pursue the ideas and
relationships necessary to make this a reality, and we call upon the whole church to think creatively about ways to achieve this end. Perhaps revisions to the work of the Form of Government Task Force that will be brought to the next General Assembly are a way to advance this effort.”

Reshaping the PC(USA) will recognize outwardly what is already our inward reality. Reshaping the PC(USA) will allow congregations to be connected through governing bodies grounded in their commitment to a common faith and life, rather than mere geography as is the case today. For our own congregations, this will mean the freedom to be connected through a network of governing bodies that share a common vision for faithful witness to Jesus Christ in the world.

We fully recognize that there are many questions surrounding such a proposal. So, let’s put some of those on the table explicitly: Would such a proposal really address the concerns of congregations struggling to remain in the PC(USA) in good conscience? Does it make sense ecclesiologically - that is, can there be one PC(USA) that, at the same time, formally recognizes profound disagreements on Christian faith and life? Is there historical precedent for such a move? What would such a “network of governing bodies” actually look like? Would the current system of the General Assembly and the presbyteries actually approve such a reshaping of the PC(USA)?

These are only a few of the very good questions surrounding the effort to reshape the PC(USA). If these questions cannot be answered well, any proposal to reshape the PC(USA) will not work. We are not interested in merely pragmatic moves that are not theologically sound, nor would we propose theologically sound moves that would not work practically. The theological and practical realities of the PC(USA) require creative and faithful solutions that will address both legitimate concerns.

In the coming months, we will be publicly exploring our thoughts on these and other issues with the whole church. At the very least, such discussions will put serious theological thinking on the agenda of the national conversation of the PC(USA). These discussions may help all Presbyterians, regardless of their position on the theological spectrum, to think through their own views about the meaning of confessing the faith, the missional purpose of the church, and the relationship between congregational and denominational identities.

What Can You Do?
For those interested in helping to move this conversation forward, there are at least three ways for you to become involved.

• First, we will provide a means for you to contribute your own ideas to the effort. The primary means for you to do so will be provided online in the coming weeks. We will take advantage of the latest technology to foster a national conversation where everyone’s input will make a contribution to the discussion. Gone are the days when a small group should determine institutional structures on its own, and this includes the concrete proposal for reshaping the PC(USA) that will be the result of this process. We need all of our minds to work together. We especially look forward to the contributions of Presbyterians of racial and ethnic distinction, and of Presbyterians in other parts of the world. PFR will facilitate the overall framework of conversation.

• Second, we are putting together a team of elders, pastors, governing body executives and theologians to help lead this process. With the contributions of the whole church in view, a team will still need to facilitate this conversation, provide its own expertise, make some judgment calls and move the initiative forward. PFR will gather this group together at times over the coming months. What does this have to do with you? We need your help to pay this team’s expenses for gathering together numerous times.
“The Fund for Reshaping the PC(USA)” has been established for this purpose, and all contributions to this fund will specifically serve this effort. Please consider helping us facilitate this initiative.

- Third, we encourage pastors to engage their sessions and small groups in their congregations in this conversation. In the coming weeks and months, PFR will provide some written reflections addressing this initiative and the key questions we raised above. We hope you will find these resources helpful in facilitating your own conversations.

Maintaining Perspective, Vision, and Hope

The challenges we are facing together in the Presbyterian Church (USA) are no challenge to the authority of Jesus Christ and the victory that is his – and so ours in him, by faith – for eternity. The condition of this little part of the Body of Christ called the PC(USA) is not a surprise to God. The Lord has always been and will always be faithful to his people, and we must continue to pray for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and ask to be filled with his Spirit as we discover together how best to respond faithfully to the state of our denomination. In God’s providence, we are here together in the PC(USA). And we trust that God will lead us as we move forward together and seek his will for the coming weeks and months, for the next few years and for the long-term future of our congregations.

Presbyterians For Renewal is committed to mobilizing leaders of congregations within the PC(USA) for just such a time as this. We are committed to biblical faithfulness and missional mindedness—to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ for all God’s people, with passion and with joy. The lasting effect of PFR’s commitment is only as strong as the commitment from each person whose faith is called into action by the challenges we now face.

We need you to respond to the call to biblical faithfulness by making a commitment to be an active participant in the life and witness of your congregation and your presbytery. Take a stand for biblical fidelity, as God sends us into our corners of the church and the world in mission. We also need you to put your mind to work at thinking creatively about reshaping the life of the PC(USA). Through your own experience in the denomination, God may have given you wisdom that would make a sound contribution, however large or small, in the effort to help all of us have the freedom to confess and live out our faith with integrity in the PC(USA).

We need your support, your prayer, your vision, your voice. But more importantly the Body of Christ needs you to recommit your life to our Savior Jesus Christ and to serving him with joy where God has called you.

Together we are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it. Christ is Lord of all. The work of ministry is waiting.

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The following is an email advertisement from PGF for their August 2008 assembly

There is work to do. Join us. From Presbyterian Global Fellowship

Like many of us in the wake of the 218th General Assembly, Elijah felt alone. He despaired that Israel turned to idols and fled into a cave. But Elijah was not alone. God was with him and revealed himself in a still small voice. Also with Elijah were other faithful people. The Lord says, “Go return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; I have work for you to do. I still have seven thousand in Israel, who have not bowed their knees to Baal” (I Kings 19:18).

In the wake of the 218th General Assembly, you may be wondering if we can be faithful in the PC(USA). Like Elijah, the way forward is through a wilderness. But God says there is work to do and we need to do it together.

Presbyterian Global Fellowship’s mission is to transform mainline congregations into missional communities following Jesus Christ. The mainline church has turned from Jesus and is chasing other gods. But there is life and hope in understanding ourselves as missional bodies, sent by God to participate in His work in the world, and to re-orient everything around God’s agenda of mission.

We invite you to come join our assembly of the Presbyterian Global Fellowship, August 14-16, in Long Beach, California and celebrate the joy of participating in God’s mission in the world.

Why is this conference important at this moment?
1. We will host a discussion titled, “Can We Be Faithful in the PC(USA)?” In the coming days, we will add it to the schedule and invite you to participate.
2. Leaders are working to prepare a resource that will help you to designate and direct funds to Presbyterian and Reformed missionaries, missions, and ministries without supporting the institutional church that does not conform to the values of our fellowship.
3. Alan Hirsch will follow the powerful presentations given by Michael Frost delivered at last year’s conference. He will cast a vision of how we can be about God’s work in the world. We will gather together in worship as a powerful witness to the church worldwide that we believe that God has a hope and a future for us as Presbyterians.
4. God will reveal, like he did to Elijah, that there are many disciples and congregations who seek to partner with Him in mission. Presbyterian Global Fellowship seeks to identify and gather these fellowships together. Presbyterian Global Fellowship will continue to work to provide resources to train, equip, and inspire missional living and ministry in these networks.

Presbyterian Global Fellowship does not look to prop up structures that will fall. Rather, Presbyterian Global Fellowship seeks to live as faithful disciples of Jesus, following Him into the world. For as our Savior said, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60). Like Elijah, we are not alone. There is work to do. Join us at Inside-Out 2008.

Presbyterian Global Fellowship Leadership Team © 2008 Presbyterian Global Fellowship

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July 01, 2008

Do You Know The Way FROM San Jose?

by Vic Pentz, Pastor Peachtree Presbyterian Church

To most observers, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been a slow motion train wreck for the past thirty years. Year by year, membership dwindles, conflicts mount, finances shrink and trust in the existing leaders and structures dissipates. With the most recent General Assembly in San Jose, the smoke seems at last to have cleared, and the steaming debris of the PC(USA) has settled into place. It’s not a pretty sight. One thing for sure: this Humpty won’t be getting back together again for a long time, if ever.

My purpose in writing is to offer the Presbyterian Global Fellowship (PGF) Conference in Long Beach, August 14-16, as a hopeful way forward. But first I want to take my best shot at explaining where we are as a denomination and how we got here.

Some folks are elated. Justice/Love has been served. Others feel hurt and betrayed. Others say that what has been true for a long time simply at last has come out into the open. These folks ask, “So what has really changed with this latest General Assembly?” The answer is that the PC(USA) rejected unequivocally what has long been considered—and still is in the global church—the biblical standards for sexual practice. In a clean sweep that even successfully included a move to expunge an inconvenient Bible verse out of the venerable Heidelberg Catechism, the culturally progressive wing of the PC(USA) had their way in San Jose. The battle is lost for evangelical renewal groups within the system. The old “stay-fight-win” strategy is history.

The options now remaining seem to be: 1) to live with the new ascendant ideology; 2) to enter into the legal complexities of trying to get permission for one’s congregation to be dismissed to another denomination; or 3) to find a way to be “in the denomination but not of the denomination.”

This third option is the one Presbyterian Global Fellowship affirms. Let me explain why our post-San Jose context makes PGF so important.

The Christian life is unfashionably tough today. The difficult cruciform task of loving one’s neighbor as Jesus did in the gospels becomes far easier when reduced to a kind of beige “tolerance” and “justice love” equaling little more than “live and let live.” California, my native state, famous for its pop expressions of this understanding of love, was an apt setting for this General Assembly.

The church is not the plaything of its leaders. We are accountable before God to Scripture and, to a far lesser degree, before the communion of saints to the creeds they left for us. We’re not making this up as we go along. We have a charter and a divine calling to be the people of God in the world. The Christian faith is about grand tensions. God is immanent and transcendent. Jesus is fully God and fully human. The church is reformed and always being reformed.
Christians are to be in the world but not of the world. We are called to love the sinner and hate the sin.

When these grand tensions have been collapsed in favor of one way or the other throughout church history the result, theologically, has been heresy. For today’s church, the collapse simply means irrelevance. As Douglas John Hall writes, “The church that is simply of this world has nothing to bring to this world. It does not engage the world, it only reflects it.”

The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, moderator of the General Assembly, was quoted by the New York Times as saying, "My biggest concern is, 'How does the church move forward?'"

That's fine, but the biggest concern of people, including Christians, around us runs deeper. They're asking “Why even have church—any church? What good is it?” Pollster George Barna reports that for the first time the majority of adults believe there are biblically legitimate alternatives to conventional church when it comes to experiencing and expressing their faith. Says Barna, tens of millions of people are experiencing and expressing their faith in God independent of any connection to a conventional church. Thus the PCUSA announced the loss of 57,000 members at this GA.

Echoing again Douglas John Hall, "The church that is simply of this world has nothing to bring to this world."

So then is the answer for us to be against the world, or against today’s PC(USA)? Evangelicals have often fallen into the Christ-against-culture trap. The problem is that when we see ourselves as countercultural or alternative we’re still letting the culture define us in a negative way.

I for one am not interested in living against something. I want to live for something!

That’s why I’m excited about the Presbyterian Global Fellowship. The Presbyterian Global Fellowship seeks to be a parallel society living a new vision for the church within the PC(USA).

In PGF we treat the PC(USA) for what it is: a relic of a Christendom that is disappearing before our very eyes. I’ve called our denomination a rotary dial phone wanting to be taken seriously in a digital world. I’ve personally appealed to the leaders in Louisville to become the Gorbachev who will bring about the painful perestroika to make our denomination viable in a new era.

One of the most helpful ways of understanding the missional vision of PGF is from Craig Van Gelder, and plays out the grand tension of “the church always forming and reforming.” While ecclesia semper formanda is missional, ecclesia semper reformanda is confessional. The interplay creates the balance between change and continuity. Thus, the church lives both “outside in” and “inside out.” “Outside in” means we must always be contextual, taking the outside—culture—and bringing it into our structures. We are always forming. We renew our identity in keeping with the changing context.

But we also are always reforming “inside out,” confessionally, by looking inside to our past for the timeless truth which will enable/empower us to have a faithful/real/transformative impact in our context. The Spirit-led missional church carries within its DNA both the passion to engage the new (outside in) while stewarding a proper understanding of the old (inside out). This continuous forming and reforming are the dynamics of gospel and culture.

It is at this point that today’s PC(USA) failed. San Jose offered an unconditional invitation for the “outside” to come in without asking the “outside” to be transformed by “inside.” Anything inside
confessions, Scripture, Book of Order) that did not fit comfortably with the outside was asked to leave. Or as I heard someone say, “The Bible got voted off the island.”

PGF has a very high view of “the outside!” We acknowledge with sadness and regret that the church has much to confess in our poor treatment of women, homosexual persons and Muslims through the centuries. We are sinners. We continue to believe, however, that conversion and transformation are at the heart of the church’s mission. Most of all we do not believe that the power to accomplish this lies with us, the PCUSA or even the Church.

The heart and soul of missional Christianity is that God himself is the primary acting subject, not the church. PGF is about the missio dei—the missioning God or the God of mission. We seek to join the in-progress, kingdom-building work of the Holy Spirit in persons, families, cities and nations. God is bringing in his Kingdom and we want to be part of it!

PGF is a lot about going back to the basics: how to share faith, new ways to see God at work in the world, building authentic Christian community, along with a few high techie things like a great website. We’re not into marketing or adapting corporate tactics to the church. When a sports team is on a losing streak, a good coach takes them back to the fundamentals.

Then in another sense, PGF isn’t looking back. There’s so much excitement in looking forward. It’s more fun to be at the beginning of something new than to be at the dying end of something old. PGF is a place to learn together who we are and what we are about to become. What if we’re wrong? As an evangelical I sometimes wonder. How could so many good people on the other side be wrong about these things? How can I be so sure that my reading of Scripture and Spirit is correct?? And if it’s not, what then? Should that possibility stop me in my tracks? I don’t think so, but it calls for humility and civility toward those with whom we disagree, knowing that in the end God will sort it all out.

13 Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (The Holy Bible : New International Version. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ec 12:13)

Along with my friends in PGF, I am passionately praying that our meeting this August 14-16 in Long Beach will show the way from San Jose toward God’s future.

Yours in Christ,
Vic Pentz

Posted by Outbox Administrator on July 01, 2008 at 07:54 PM

On The Road From San Jose: A New Vehicle For A New Day?

By Vic Pentz

I recently wrote an open letter, “Do You Know the Way FROM San Jose?” [see above] inviting readers to join us at the Presbyterian Global Fellowship Conference in Long Beach, August 14-16. In the letter I ventured my analysis of where we are at the moment as evangelicals
within the PC(USA), given the troubling actions of the recent General Assembly.

In emphasizing a missional vision, I gave the impression to some that I believe that the political and institutional realities post-GA are not important and that the work of others to create a new system of connectionalism within our PC(USA) is not relevant to PGF’s work of missional transformation.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Ecclesiological integrity and connectional effectiveness are critical factors in our witness to the world. Regarding integrity, our denominational connections must be grounded in a common understanding of Christian faith and life, otherwise they hinder rather than enhance our ability to be Christ’s witnesses. The current state of the PC(USA) presents serious challenges to such a basis for our connections. Regarding effectiveness, in the classic Frank Lloyd Wright sense, form indeed does follow function. We need to operate within a structure that facilitates the missional transformation of mainline Presbyterian congregations, something we do not currently have.

PGF was founded in 2006 on the bedrock of orthodox Christian faith. Our thrilling vision of a global network of Presbyterians joining the “God of mission” in today’s world came from obedient surrender to the inspired, infallible Word of God. Behind the “F” in PGF has always been our dream of a vibrant connectional network expanding geographically beyond, but grounded theologically in the Reformed identity of the PC(USA).

All this is to say, PGF is about much more than providing “skills” and “tools” to be effective Christians in postmodernity. We are a response to the God we discover in Scripture and the Confessions of the PC(USA). Therefore, while we are not the driving force behind efforts at institutional reform, as many have noted, nonetheless, we will join with others in these efforts and consider them important to the fulfillment of our core mission of transforming mainline Presbyterian congregations.

We look forward to working with Presbyterians for Renewal and others to foster a fellowship that tries to model what a faithful 21st-century network of Reformed congregations might look like. As congregations, we need to focus our financial resources where they will have their greatest impact for Christ. We need to make sure that all pastors and congregations who share our grave concerns about recent decisions have the freedom to follow their conscience and convictions while remaining here with us. The issue for evangelicals in the PC(USA) is no longer power but freedom. The levers of power are firmly in the hands of those pursuing a different agenda. The question is whether in the shadow of the dominant machinery we will be granted the freedom to invest our resources, arrange our ministries and order our life together in ways that honor God. For that, we need to bring together wise leaders who can accomplish this network building within the PC (USA) and who will create the form for missional function.

Again, PGF enthusiastically supports these efforts. We will join with others in the work of engineering the vehicle. We hope to provide the fuel of inspiration along with a map and a route we hope many will want to travel together.

Come to our Inside/Out Conference in Long Beach, August 14-16, to pray, discuss and strategize next steps, both missional and connectional.

Together we can move beyond San Jose.

Yours in Christ, Vic Pentz

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A Letter From The Outreach Foundation Following The
218th General Assembly

July 3, 2008

In the light of the recent 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), we want to make clear our continuing beliefs and commitments.

There was much in the Assembly’s actions to give thanks for, including approval of:

· A mission budget that will allow, for the first time in decades, an increase in the number of PC(USA) missionaries; from 196 this year to 215 in 2009 and 220 in 2010
· “An Invitation to Expanding Partnership in God’s Mission,” a statement about new patterns of collaboration in mission that The Outreach Foundation helped to write
· A Christ-centered commitment to foster the growth of “Christ’s Church Deep and Wide” through a focus on discipleship and evangelism
· A new Strategy for Church Growth for African American Congregations
· More balanced statements on working for peace in the Middle East.

But we disagree with and deeply regret other actions by the Assembly which compromise the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s capacity to participate fully in God’s mission in the world. Despite the prayerful work of the commissioners, the Assembly in San Jose erred in dramatic ways.

· In wrestling with matters of ordination and human sexuality, issues that reflect tensions within the broader culture, the Assembly set aside the plain teaching of Scripture and adopted positions which put our denomination at odds with nearly all of our mission partners and with the global body of Christ.
· In its attempt to foster more open relations with other faiths, the Assembly did not adequately lift up the uniqueness and sufficiency of Jesus Christ and his call to be his witnesses among all the peoples of the earth.
· Although it approved a mission budget which seeks to reverse the historic decline in the number of PC(USA) missionaries, the Assembly voted down an annual special offering that would have helped to fund the reversal.
· At a time when the PC(USA) needs to focus on missional integrity instead of institutional retrenchment, the Assembly remained fixed on matters related to church property and congregational affiliation.

Amidst all of the discord in the PC(USA), we are thrilled at the ways we see God at work in the world. We rejoice at how God continues to use faithful Presbyterians in his work of gathering up all things in Christ Jesus, and we are more committed than ever to proclaim Christ’s good news together with our global partners.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the one true Lord and Savior. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12, NRSV)

We believe that the church’s only true authority is the Lord who has given his Word to the church as the supremely trustworthy guide for faith and practice.

We believe that humankind’s highest purpose is to live for the glory and honor of God.
We believe that each congregation is called to organize its life and to focus its resources around its primary purpose of being an agent of God’s mission in the world.

We believe that the usefulness of any church organization or body, including The Outreach Foundation, is determined by its faithfulness to the mission of God into which Christ calls us.

Therefore, at this time when the needs of the church and the needs of the world are great, we recommit ourselves to connecting Presbyterians with God’s mission in vital, transforming ways, and we open ourselves to the Spirit to expand our vision and extend our reach, for Christ’s sake.

We will continue to invite congregations and individuals to partner with us, receiving mission gifts in our office and sending those gifts directly to missionaries and mission partners around the world who proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

We will continue to help congregations build relationships with global partners, seeking together to learn from the faith and faithfulness of the global church.

We will continue to work to further the peace, unity and purity of the church, and we will pray that the church will increasingly be built up for God’s mission, trusting not in ourselves but in the One who gives us good news to share.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21, NRSV)

The Trustees of The Outreach Foundation
  Rick Wesley, Chair
  Rob Weingartner, Executive Director

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Source:
http://www.theoutreachfoundation.org/News/onlinenews/TOFletterfollowingthegeneralassembly.html

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Press Release from The Presbyterian Renewal Network on Actions by the 218th GA

June 27, 2008

Today the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) lies gravely wounded, by the hand of its own General Assembly. This Assembly has struck multiple blows, threatening to sever the sinews that hold us together as a Christian body and as a part of the larger body of Christ. This is a day for grieving.

The General Assembly today, by majority vote, has conveyed to our congregations and to the world that it rejects the Bible’s teaching and our Reformed confessions’ affirmation that homosexual behavior does not comport with Christian faith.

The Assembly also is asking our presbyteries to remove by their vote the constitutional requirement of “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness” as a standard for officers in this denomination.

Moreover, this Assembly has adopted a constitutional interpretation that is intended to strip the church of its ability to set any binding standards for the behavior of its officers.

These decisions place the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual jeopardy. They threaten to cut us off from God’s ancient law, given for our good, by which God prohibited adultery and all other sexual relations outside the marriage of man and woman. They threaten to cut us off from the apostolic Church, which laid only a few behavioral requirements on the new Gentile believers—among them that they “abstain from sexual immorality.” These actions threaten to cut us off from the PCUSA’s birthright in the Reformation, with its insistence that all matters of faith and practice be decided on the basis of “Scripture alone.” They threaten to cut us off from the vast majority of the global Church today, which holds firmly to the orthodox faith that this Assembly so lightly casts aside. These actions threaten to cut us off from our own denomination’s members and congregations, which also by large majorities affirm the biblical teachings on these matters.

We grieve for the Assembly’s terrible loss of faith. We grieve for the thousands of churches in our denomination who receive this news with shock and dismay. And we grieve for all those who are encouraged by this action to engage in sinful behaviors that God does not bless. The Church’s calling is to hold out to them the Gospel message of forgiveness and redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As pastors and members of this denomination’s 11,000 churches, it is our turn to recall the response of Nehemiah, and weep over the news of this destruction of God’s house. It is our turn to say that we have sinned. It is our turn to come together to repent and to rebuild.

This is not a day without hope. We join the hundreds of thousands of faithful Presbyterians in looking to the Church’s Savior in this hour. We reaffirm our love for the Savior and his Church. We invite Presbyterians to join us in seeking God’s help to turn back this effort to lead the
Church to a place where it is in danger of becoming no Church. None of the damage done by this Assembly is final or irreversible.

Marie Bowen Moderator, Presbyterian Renewal Network Executive Director Presbyterian Pro-Life
Bradley Long Executive Director Presbyterian Renewal Ministries, Int’l
Tim Meredith Constitutional Presbyterians
Robert Pitman John Snyder Co-Moderators Knox Fellowship
Terry Schlossberg Executive Director Presbyterian Coalition
Sid Rice Executive Director Literacy & Evangelism, Int’l
Bill Young Executive Director Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship
Gabrielle Avedian Executive Director Presbyterian Forum
Jim Berkley Director Presbyterian Action for Faith & Freedom

Alan Wisdom Vice-President Institute on Religion and Democracy Presbyterian Action
Charles Burge Executive Director Presbyterian Lay Committee
Sue Cyre Executive Director Presbyterian for Faith, Family, and Ministry
Sylvia Dooling President Voices of Orthodox Women
Paul Detterman Executive Director Presbyterian for Renewal
Renee Guth Executive Coordinator New Wineskins Association of Churches
Melany Hamilton Co-Director Presbyterian Elders in Prayer
Kristin Johnson Executive Director OneByOne

Additional signatures will be added as they are received from members of the network.

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###
What Happened at General Assembly of 2008? And Where Do We Go from Here?

Part 1: A Summary of Outcomes from the 218th GA

Presbyterians will remember San Jose in June of 2008 less for several days of unseasonably hot temperatures than for the heat generated by actions of the 218th General Assembly (GA). Not every action was negative, but in a number of significant actions the faith of the Church took a beating at that meeting.

It can be argued that no General Assembly writes the future of the denomination and that no General Assembly adequately represents the will of the churches that make up our denomination. The churches that make up our denomination now need to respond in ways that make it clear that truth will be defended and correctives will be applied. This will be done by the actions of presbyteries, which have ordinarily shown themselves collectively to be more representative of our churches and of Christian orthodoxy than is our General Assembly.

In this series of reports of the GA we will begin with a summary of critical actions taken and proceed to several specific reports, including the meaning and implications of a number of the actions. And we will include the avenues of recourse available to us to bring the necessary correction. We begin with the summary.

The General Assembly is organized into periods in which it is broken into committees and periods in which it acts as one body, called plenary. The GA begins and ends in plenary. Most of its business begins in committee and ends with a final decision in plenary. Overtures from presbyteries and synods, and recommendations from General Assembly task forces, committees, councils, and entities are considered first in committee. The committees’ recommendations are then sent to plenary for action by the body as a whole. We are reporting the final outcomes.

A few items of business are decided only in plenary. Elections are an example. This GA elected its Moderator Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow of San Francisco; a new Stated Clerk: former Associate Stated Clerk, Rev. Gradye Parsons; and scores of Presbyterians—members, elders, and ministers—to General Assembly entities.

Actions on the Big Issues

The biggest issues at this General Assembly fall into three categories: 1. Standards for sexual relationships; 2. Matters directly related to faith and theology; and 3. A proposal for a new Form of Government. These were the areas most closely attended to by the joint renewal team at the GA.

There were a number of decisions in other areas that are of interest to Presbyterians. We are reporting a few of those decisions as well. For a complete report of decisions, we refer you to http://www.pcbiz.org/Committee2.aspx. We record the GA item number in parentheses following each item reported.
1. Standards for sexual relationships
The GA had a large number of items before it in this area.

- GA is recommending that the presbyteries vote to strike the current text of the Book of Order that requires officers to “lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church,” including living “either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness.” In its place, the GA is recommending the following language,

  Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards. (05-09)

Within the next few months presbyteries will vote to reject or to ratify this change. The results of the voting will be known within a year.

- In an associated action, GA adopted an authoritative interpretation (AI) of the constitution that rendered existing AIs of “no further force or effect.”

  Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect. (05-09)

- GA approved the following AI:

  “The 218th General Assembly (2008) affirms the authoritative interpretation of G-6.0108 approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006). Further, the 218th General Assembly (2008), pursuant to G-13.0112, interprets the requirements of G-6.0108 to apply equally to all ordination standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Section G-6.0108 requires examining bodies to give prayerful and careful consideration, on an individual, case-by-case basis, to any departure from an ordination standard in matters of belief or practice that a candidate may declare during examination. However, the examining body is not required to accept a departure from standards, and cannot excuse a candidate’s inability to perform the constitutional functions unique to his or her office (such as administration of the sacraments).” (05-12)

The effect of this AI is to permit each candidate to judge whether he or she has departed from an ordination standards, either in belief or practice. We do not expect the new AI to pass constitutional muster.

- In addition, the GA adopted a response to a question which may obligate session moderators to ordain and install any candidate approved by the session. The question raised was whether a moderator has a constitutional obligation by virtue of office to perform an otherwise constitutional ordination or installation if it is contrary to his or her conscience. The GA response reads, in part, that the Book of Order “suggests the moderator has a positive obligation to preside at the service of ordination and/or installation….Without the concurrence of the session, there is no provision on the basis of conscience for a moderator to refuse to fulfill the functions of the office of moderator.” (04-14)
• An overture was disapproved that would have changed language regarding marriage in the Book of Order from a man and a woman to “two persons,” thus allowing same sex marriages if the change were ratified by the presbyteries:

“Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage is a civil contract covenant between a woman and a man two people and according to the laws of the state also constitutes a civil contract. For Christians marriage is a covenant through which a man and a woman two people are called to live out together before God their lives of discipleship. In a service of Christian marriage a lifelong commitment is made by a woman and a man to each other between two people, publicly witnessed and acknowledged by the community of faith.” (W-4.9001) (04-08)

• GA amended and then adopted an overture affirming the PC(USA) commitment to equal rights under the law for “lesbian and gay persons” and further to:

Direct the Moderator of the General Assembly to appoint a special committee, representing the broad diversity [and theological balance] of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to study the following, and report to the 219th General Assembly (2010), including any policy recommendations growing out of the study:

a. The history of the laws governing marriage and civil union, including current policy debates.
b. How the theology and practice of marriage have developed in the Reformed and broader Christian tradition.
c. The relationship between civil union and Christian marriage.
d. The effects of current laws on same-gender partners and their children.
e. The place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community.

An amendment to add language clarified the Assembly’s intent:

This overture seeks to renew and strengthen the commitment of the PCUSA to equal protection under the law, encourage steps to reinforce this commitment and to affirm the importance of pastoral care and outreach to non-traditional families, including those same-gender commitment partners. This overtures advocates for equal rights and does not seek to redefine the nature of Christian marriage. (04-13)

• GA began an effort to create new resources on sexuality for teens. This action was in the wake of finally discarding a sexuality curriculum for children and teenagers that promoted acceptance of homosexual practice and abortion and that had been in contention since the mid-1980s.

The Presbytery of Grace overtures the 218th General Assembly (2008) to direct the General Assembly Council to produce adolescent human development resources based upon Scripture and the Reformed theological tradition. These resources would explore all facets of adolescent development including human sexuality.

GA added a comment:

We choose to plant the seed of peace. We set aside our individual desires to “win” and to further our own agendas and put our faith in God, and send this overture on without trying to advocate one position or another, trusting not only God, but our fellow Presbyterians to do what is right not only for our children but for our denomination. We send this overture on in the hope that the next step of the process will cultivate the seed we have planted, faithfully stepping out in mutual trust. (12-08)
2. Matters directly related to faith and theology

The GA began the process of amending the Book of Confessions to change a catechism and to add a new confession. The Book of Order requires that a committee be appointed to study the proposed changes and bring recommendations to the next GA. The response of the 2010 GA to those recommendations will determine if the changes to the Heidelberg will proceed to a vote by the presbyteries and the required additional vote of a subsequent GA (See Book of Order, 18.0200 for the process of amending the Book of Confessions).

- Amend the language of the Heidelberg Catechism. As of 7/9/08 the precise action had not been verified by the Office of the General Assembly. The overture that was the subject of the action is as follows:

  “The Presbytery of Newark overtures the 218th General Assembly (2008) to correct translation problems in five responses of the Heidelberg Catechism as found in The Book of Confessions and to add the original Scripture texts of the German Heidelberg Catechism. The following changes are proposed:

  “1. Amend the answer to 4.019 as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

  “A. From the holy gospel, which God himself revealed in the beginning in the Garden of Eden, afterward proclaimed through the holy patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed through the sacrifices and other rites of the Old Covenant ceremonies of the law, and, finally, fulfilled through his own well-beloved Son.”

  “2. Amend the answer to 4.033 as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

  “A. Because Christ alone is God’s own eternal Son natural son, whereas we are accepted adopted for his sake as children of God by grace.”

  “3. Amend the answer to 4.055 as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

  “A. First, that believers one and all, as partakers of the Lord Christ, and all his treasures and gifts, shall share in one fellowship. Second, that each one ought to know that he is obliged to use his gifts freely willingly and with joy for the benefit and welfare of other members.”

  “4. Amend the answer to 4.074 as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

  “A. Yes, because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God. Since both redemption from sin through the blood of Christ and the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit are promised to these children no less than to their parents, infants are also by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be incorporated into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the Old Covenant Testament by circumcision. In the New Covenant Testament baptism has been instituted to take its place.”

  “5. Amend the answer to 4.087 as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown as italic.]

  “A. Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, 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.’ Certainly not; for as Scripture says no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, greedy person, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or anyone like that shall inherit the kingdom of God.” (13-06)

- GA set in motion approval of Belhar Confession as an addition to the Book of Confessions:

  “1. Direct the Moderators of the 216th, 217th, and 218th General Assemblies (2004, 2006, and 2008)—in consultation with the Stated Clerk, the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC), the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, and the Office of
Theology and Worship—to initiate the process described in G-18.0201b by appointing a committee separate from any committee assigned to the Heidelberg Catechism, to consider amending the confessional documents of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to include the Belhar Confession in The Book of Confessions and to report to the 219th General Assembly (2010)." (13-07)

• GA approved a study guide on the Trinity paper that was received, but not adopted, by GA in 2006. (13-13)

• GA approved by voice vote a call for “understanding, mutual respect, and peaceful relations between the Christian and Muslim communities.” They set in motion a study “of current and evolving Presbyterian theological understanding of our relationship with our Muslim sisters and brothers,” and urged that “such a study be done in a context of relationships and dialogue.” The action included:

Encourage and provide resources to presbyteries and local congregations to improve good relations and mutual understanding between Presbyterians and Muslims at the local level for the same reasons. Practices might include participation in sacred and holy observances in each other’s traditions, shared meals, dialogue groups, and joint community projects, among others. (07-07)

• GA amended and adopted a second overture on Christian/Muslim relationships:

“1. Commend to the church for study the actions of previous General Assemblies calling for tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful relations between the Christian and Muslim communities.

"2. State that [the PC(USA) affirms that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship a common God, 1 although each understands that God differently] though we hold differing understandings of how God has been revealed to humankind, the PC(USA) affirms our belief in one God, the God of Abraham, whom Jews and Muslims also worship; and that, as children of this loving God, we share the commandments of love for God and neighbor 2, the requirement to care for the poor; and acknowledge Abraham as an expression of our common commitment to one God.”

“3. Build on this understanding by calling for further dialogue among Jews, Christians, and Muslims, viewing each other as equals, and learning from one another to
- promote peace, resolve conflict;
- ensure human rights, prevent discrimination;
- develop dialogue, emphasize commonality;
- recognize differences, celebrate diversity;
- advocate justice, oppose bias.

“4. Commend the First Presbyterian Church of Rockaway and other Presbyterian congregations that have initiated dialogue with Muslim and Jewish communities, and to encourage other congregations to initiate three-way dialogues among Jews, Christians, and Muslims consistent with the Presbyterian Principles for Interfaith Dialogue. 3
- To encourage congregations of these faiths to celebrate religious holidays together, setting aside days of worship during which there can be congregational suppers, and dialogue groups. 4
- To encourage sustained activities that will promote understanding, respect, and good will, using worship resources and promotional materials prepared by the Offices of Interfaith Relations and Theology and Worship, the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, and other General Assembly Council (GAC) and Office of the General Assembly (OGA) offices as appropriate.
“5. Commission a study on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations that would have the same scope and authority as the 1987 study on Christian-Jewish relations, to be carried out by the Interfaith Relations and Theology and Worship Offices of the General Assembly Council.

“6. Call for identification of violations of the civil rights of Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the United States and other areas of the world, along with other incidents of violation of religious freedoms, as part of the regular human rights report to the General Assembly. (07-01; footnotes can be found on PC-biz)

• GA approved by voice vote:

The Presbytery of Baltimore overtures the 218th General Assembly (2008) to support A Common Word Between Us and You, an invitation to dialogue and cooperation from 138 Muslim clerics, and to commend this document to our congregations, governing bodies, and seminaries for study and consideration as a primary source for engaging in substantive interfaith dialogue with the goal of greater understanding and cooperation among members of the Abrahamic faith traditions as the pathway to a new era of global peace and justice. (07-02)

• GA approved a resolution on Growing God’s Church Deep and Wide:

The 218th General Assembly (2008) strives to help Christ’s Church Grow Deep and Wide under the guidance of the Holy Spirit by:

1. Declaring a churchwide commitment to participate in God’s activity through Jesus Christ in transforming the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) during the 2009–2010 biennium in keeping with Jesus words, “… Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (John 15:4) and the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18–20, “… All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

2. Encouraging synods, presbyteries, sessions, and all agencies, entities, and networks of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to commit to foster the growth of Christ’s Church Deep and Wide in the following areas:

   a. Grow in Evangelism: Share the good news of Jesus Christ. Invite persons to join in the church’s worship and fellowship. Baptize children and adults…
   
   b. Grow in Discipleship: Rediscover Scripture, including daily reading and study. Nurture relationships with Jesus Christ in the context of our Reformed heritage…. (12-02 See PC-biz for complete wording of the action.)

3. Proposed New Form of Government

The GA chose not to send a new Form of Government (nFOG) to the presbyteries for a vote. Instead, they referred the nFOG to the Office of the General Assembly with a comment that includes a plan to bring it back to the GA in 2010:

Comment: The referral to the Office of the General Assembly is for a period of consultation and study with churches and presbyteries through a system or systems designed and implemented by the Form of Government Task Force and members of the 218th General Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions. The participation of every presbytery in the period of consultation and study will be strongly urged. New members of this expanded task force are to be chosen from the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions by the Moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008), in consultation with the moderator and vice moderator of the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions. The new task force will revise the Form of Government Task Force Report, taking into account the concerns and suggestions gleaned from the consultation and study process. The guidance of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, the overtures, and the
testimony received by the 218th General Assembly (2008) Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions and the committee’s comments are referred to the task force for serious and studied consideration. The revised report of the Form of Government task force is to be submitted to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly no later than October 15, 2009, for distribution to the church at large no later than January 15, 2010, for consideration by the 219th General Assembly (2010). The Assembly Committee on Form of Government Revisions submits the following unedited comments, from subcommittees of the committee, for consideration in the continuing study and revision of the Form of Government:(06-01; the comment includes a long list of revisions suggested by the GA committee that can be found on PC-biz)

Other Actions of the GA

Per capita.
- GA disapproved overtures that would have limited per capita to administrative and operating expenses and removed from per capita such items as support for the NCC and WCC. (3-10; 3-11)

- GA approved an OGA publication titled “Introduction to the Per Capita Budget” as “a statement of the principles, values, and purposes for the General Assembly per capita budget.”

Relationship with churches seeking dismissal
- GA established a legal fund for defense against the New Wineskins:
  - Provide funds to the Office of General Assembly for the purpose of sharing the cost of legal fees defending our Constitution against the New Wineskins Non-geographic Presbytery of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and a group which has joined that denomination.
  - From these funds, reimburse the Presbytery of Northern New England for half of all of its remaining legal costs up to a maximum of $185,000.
  - That the Office of the General Assembly establish and promote an Extra Commitment Opportunity (ECO) account that will be the source of this support and welcomes contributions from the whole church.(3-21)

- GA adopted a commissioners’ resolution to encourage a pastoral approach to churches seeking dismissal:
  - The 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
  - Directs the Stated Clerk to send this resolution to the presbyteries, synods, and sessions, indicating the will of the assembly that presbyteries and synods develop and make available to lower governing bodies and local congregations a process that exercises the responsibility and power “to divide, dismiss, or dissolve churches in consultation with their members” (Book of Order, G-11.0103i) with consistency, pastoral responsibility, accountability, gracious witness, openness, and transparency.

  2. Believing that trying to exercise this responsibility and power through litigation is deadly to the cause of Christ, impacting the local church, other parts of the Body of Christ and ecumenical relationships, and our witness to Christ in the world around us, [the General Assembly] urges [congregations considering leaving the denomination], presbyteries and synods to implement a process using the following principles:
    - Consistency: The local authority delegated to presbyteries is guided and shaped by our shared faith, service, and witness to Jesus Christ.
    - Pastoral Responsibility: The requirement in G-11.0103i to consult with the members of a church seeking dismissal highlights the presbytery’s pastoral responsibility, which must not be submerged beneath other responsibilities.
    - Accountability: For a governing body, accountability rightly dictates fiduciary
and connectional concerns, raising general issues of property (G-8.0000) and specific issues of schism within a congregation (G-8.0600). But, full accountability also requires preeminent concern with “caring for the flock.”

- Gracious Witness: It is our belief that Scripture and the Holy Spirit require a gracious witness from us rather than a harsh legalism.
- Openness and Transparency: Early, open communication and transparency about principles and process of dismissal necessarily serve truth, order, and goodness, and work against seeking civil litigation as a solution. (4-28)

General Assembly Council:
- GA changed the name to “General Assembly Mission Council” (8-05)
- GA added a voting representative from Presbyterian Men (Presbyterian Women have had a voting representative for several decades) (8-04)
- GA created “a review committee to review the service of the whole of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its six agencies in implementing the General Assembly’s mission directives,” and another review committee of the GAC to review its “permanent, advocacy, and advisory committees,” and report to the next GA (8-22; 8-16; these reviews are somewhat revolutionary in providing reviews not conducted entirely by the entities themselves)

Social Justice:
- GA adopted a “Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century” (9-09; see PC-biz for the complete wording)

Peacemaking & International Relations:
- GA adopted two overtures that called for evenhandedness toward the parties in the Middle East struggle (11-06; 11-26), but a third which affirmed the “Amman Call,” (11-01) a 2007 WCC document that clearly leans in opposition toward Israel and in support of Palestine. Nevertheless, the GA rejected hostile actions against Israel along with overtures that would have re-energized the divestment process targeted at companies doing business with Israel. Overtures that would have urged the suspension of U.S. military aid to Israel were disapproved.

Health, Life Issues and Abortion:
- The 218th General Assembly (2008) directs the appropriate PC(USA) entities to redevelop congregational resource materials, on the subject of reproductive options, to more adequately reflect the full spectrum of biblical, theological, and pastoral counsel, while remaining consistent with the policy of the 1992 report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion and the 2006 policy on Late-Term Pregnancies and Abortion. The General Assembly Council will report back to the 219th General Assembly (2010). (10-03)
- GA endorsed the principle of single-payer universal health care:
  “1. [Advocate for, educate about, and work toward] [Endorse in principle the provision of singlepayer universal health care reform [in which health care services are privately provided and publicly financed] [through national health insurance that is privately provided (improved Medicare for all in principle) and publicly financed].” (10-06; see the item on PC-biz for the complete wording)
- GA approved an annual “Relief of Conscience Plan Report” that includes details of the plan, the process for participation, an accounting of the total number of participating churches, the dollar figure paid under the plan and the dollar figure of funds dispensed under the Board of Pensions adoption programs. (15-02)
Two new committees:
This GA created two committees to experiment with alternative methods of discernment and decision making: Committee 16 on Worship and Spiritual Renewal, and Committee 17 on Youth. Committee 16 brought no items to plenary for action. The Youth Committee brought a number of action items to plenary. See their reports on PC-biz.

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A Letter from G. David Lambertson

From the Executive Presbyter of Central Washington Presbytery

June 27, 2008

Dear Sisters and Brothers:

Over the last few days the 218th General Assembly acted on a number of important issues. I believe the action taken this morning is of major concern to many in our Presbytery. After considerable debate the 218th General Assembly voted to approve major changes to ordination examination standards. The one action of the Assembly has two parts:

First, the Assembly sends to the Presbyteries a constitutional amendment. Shall G6.0106b be amended as follows?

Those who are called to ordained service in the church are to lead lives of obedience to Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Scriptures and guided by the confessional standards of the church. Suitability for the offices to which they have been elected is determined by the governing bodies where the examinations for ordination/installation take place. By their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and/or installation, officers declare their fidelity to the standards of the church. Whether the examination/installation decision complies with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.”

The constitutional amendment will be sent to the presbyteries, voted on by all the presbyteries, during the next year and with a simple majority will be approved or disapproved. Normally, the Stated Clerk declares constitutional amendments as approved or disapproved by June 1.

The second part of the approved action of the 218th General Assembly approves an Authoritative Interpretation stating:

Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190th General Assembly (1978) of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and the 119th General Assembly (1979) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.

It is important to understand that the Authoritative Interpretation is approved by the 218th General Assembly and in force now.

I will have more to say to you, Brothers and Sisters, in the days ahead. Right now, I want you to hear of this major action of the Assembly.

May God direct us in following Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church,

G David Lambertson

###
Letter from Rev Al Sandalow
First Pres, Ellensburg
July 1, 2008

Dear Friends in Ministry in Central Washington Presbytery;

By now, you have certainly heard of the damaging actions taken at the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) last week in San Jose. I was there as a part of the Presbyterians for Renewal GA team and had a ring side view of this troubling meeting.

Let me say, that our Presbytery was ably represented by Commissioners Curt McFarland and Robert Welsh and you would be proud of their efforts.

What are the problems GA has handed us? Certainly, there were the usual batch of annoying, one sided reports on a wide variety of issues, that would be bigger problems if it wasn’t for the fact that no one ever reads them. But, it was the issues that circle around ordination that once again created the most serious problems.

Let me start by putting this into perspective. First, we have long observed that in general, General Assemblies tend to be more theologically liberal or progressive than the Presbyterian Church in general. There have been plenty of GA’s that have taken positions that are not in step with the church as a whole. Often, these efforts are simply rejected by the Presbyteries when changes to the Book of Order that are proposed come before them for a vote. This Assembly fit the picture perfectly.

Second, the liberals have learned that to win their votes they need to tell lots of heart wrenching, personal stories of people in emotional pain because of what the church believes. This is the main way they attract enough commissioners from what of many of us call the “mushy middle” to their side to win the critical votes on ordination issues. They simply don’t have the votes on their own. If you listened to the debate, you never heard any of the pro-homosexual ordination folks quoting scripture or the confessions.

That said, if you look at all the critical votes taken on homosexual ordination, they were almost all 53-54% for and 47-46% against – not much of a majority. We need to be careful that we do not jump to the conclusion that the denomination has suddenly shifted to some radically liberal majority. Frankly, the percentages haven’t changed much.

So, what changed this year that made this GA’s decisions so potentially damaging? Two things:

First, those on the pro-ordination side have found a major loophole to exploit, by essentially modifying the Constitution without having to ask the Presbyteries for concurrence. This has been done by the past two GA’s by passing “Authoritative Interpretations” of the Book of Order; “AI’s” for short. Essentially, an AI is a statement of what the constitution means on some issue; much like what the secular Supreme Court issues in their decisions.

What this assembly and the last assembly did was to rule, with two AI’s, that each church and Presbytery has the final authority on what standards of belief and practices they will accept in their ordained officers. There are no longer ANY national standards for ordination or behavior. This has been called “local option”.

Thus, a Presbytery could decide it’s OK to believe that homosexuality is blessed by God and that it is OK for an ordained church officer to be in a same sex relationship. Several Presbyteries have already done this and a few other seem to have been waiting in the wings for this decision to be passed.

Second, since 1978 and 1979 our denomination’s stand on homosexuality and ordination have been guided by two actions forbidding ordination of “self-affirming, practicing, homosexuals”. Originally
called “definitive guidance”, this standard has been affirmed many times by subsequent GA’s and had the standing of an AI on this issue. The prohomosexual ordination groups have long sought to have this AI removed and this year they were successful. This is a grievous loss of a tool that has served the church well for 30 years.

The final piece is that this assembly also took the actions to have the Presbyteries remove G-6.0106b from the Book of Order and replace it with a very vague affirmation (see below1). Even though the previous actions have effectively bypassed this standard, it is still an important part of the puzzle that has guided our standards on human sexuality. Additionally, the Assembly called for the removal of the phrase “homosexual pervasions” from the Heidelberg Catechism, a move that is historically correct, but obviously intended to remove any condemnation of homosexuality from our confessions.

**So, what do we do?** I think we need a strong, but measured response. We should not let a small percentage of the church run the orthodox faithful out by Machiavellian political maneuvering. However, just whining about how unhappy we are will get us no where against their “the end justifies the means” strategy.

We have warned the GA that adopting a “local option” for ordination will effectively divide the church and break down our unity and connectional nature. I think we need to show the PC(USA) this is not mere talk, but take swift action to show the church how this will begin to play itself out.

Attached is a proposal for how we might respond as a Presbytery. I think it speaks for itself and makes it very clear that we will not accept ordinations made in violation of the Book of Order and that we will not blindly stumble down this path until it is too late to turn back.

I would invite your comments and thoughts. I know that summer is a difficult time to gather people together, but I think a swift response is important, both for the sake of the churches in our Presbytery who will be grieved by this GA’s actions and to speak to these GA actions while the issues are still fresh.

If there are enough of you interested, we can meet to discuss this (or some other) response. If enough support arises, perhaps we can call a special meeting of the Presbytery to take official action. I think we need to act soon.

I am tired of this. Yet, the Apostle Paul reminds us: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Gal 6:9

Don’t give up! Let’s see this through.

Yours in Christ,

Al Sandalow
1st Ellensburg

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1. “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. Those who are called to ordained service in the church, by their assent to the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003), pledge themselves to live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions. In so doing, they declare their fidelity to the standards of the Church. Each governing body charged with examination for ordination and/or installation (G-14.0240 and G-14.0450) establishes the candidate’s sincere efforts to adhere to these standards.”
Jeremiah 6:14 "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."

We believe that events at the 217th and 218th have brought our PC(USA) denomination to a point of crisis. Actions of these assemblies have broken the connection and covenant that has existed in our church for since the first meetings of our General Assembly.

Claiming that our unity is in found in Christ or in mission, then removing every common element of belief or personal standard, creates a false unity, as if what we believe and what we do has no bearing on our life together.

While we respect our General Assembly, we affirm with our Book of Confessions:

“As we do not rashly condemn what good men, assembled together in general councils lawfully gathered, have set before us; so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance. So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them.

But if men, under the name of a council, pretend to forge for us new articles of faith, or to make decisions contrary to the Word of God, then we must utterly deny them as the doctrine of devils, drawing our souls from the voice of the one God to follow the doctrines and teachings of men. The reason why the general councils met was not to make any permanent law which God had not made before, nor yet to form new articles for our belief…” (BoC 3.20)

Thus, following the highest authority in our constitution, our Confessions, we make the following affirmations:

1. That first and foremost, the church is captive to the Word of God and that God’s Word is not subject to the whims of any council that drifts upon the winds of modern cultural norms. We are compelled to follow truth as it is revealed to us in Scripture and to see that truth is embraced by our congregations and our ordained leadership.

“That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior’s rule, “By their fruits ye shall know them.” And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.” (G1.0304)

2. That we reject any actions that allows any part of the church to modify or ignore any mandatory provisions of the Book of Order without the advice and consent of the Presbyteries. Thus, we declare that actions taken to make mandatory ordination standards optional will have no force or effect in Central Washington Presbytery.

3. For thirty years our denomination has been well guided by the DG/AI on Human Sexuality given in 1978. We believe that this report continues to accurately and graciously reflect the truth of Scripture on matters of homosexuality. We proclaim this guidance continues to hold authority in Central Washington Presbytery in all standards of belief and practice at the congregational and Presbytery level.

4. We reject as false the idea that there can be unity in our church without unified standards for faith and behavior in those who serve the church as ministers, elders, and deacons. There can be no universal ordination for the whole church when there are no shared ordination standards. Thus, we reject any ordinations done by any body that does so in violation of G-6.0601b and proclaim that such ordinations will have no force or effect in Central Washington Presbytery.

5. We regret that some Presbyteries have chosen to ignore the clear message of Scripture and our confessions on matters of human sexuality and have adopted ordination standards that
neither conform to the historic Christian faith nor the standards of our church. Central Washington Presbytery will survey the actions of these Presbyteries, through the Committee on Ministry, and shall direct that all ordained members of any Presbyteries determined by the to be in violation of our ordination standards shall not be allowed to labor within our bounds, nor submit a Personal Information Form directly to any Pastor Nominating Committee without prior approval of the COM.

6. Finally, we believe that we have come to a tipping point as a denomination. We affirm the words of Wolfhart Pannenberg:

“Those who urge the church to change the norm of its teaching on this matter must know that they are promoting schism. If a church were to let itself be pushed to the point where it ceased to treat homosexual activity as a departure from the biblical norm, and recognized homosexual unions as a personal partnership of love equivalent to marriage, such a church would stand no longer on biblical ground but against the unequivocal witness of Scripture. A church that took this step would cease to be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

We believe that the PC(USA) has come to the brink of becoming the church that Pannenberg warns us about. If the piece by piece dismantling of our historic and orthodox Christian faith and ordination standards continues and future assemblies fail to take actions that reverse the damaging actions of the 217th and 218th General Assemblies’, we will consider that the General Assembly of the PC(USA) has broken the bonds that hold us together and will look at every and all options to address this, including options whereby our Presbytery may functionally withdraw from the PC(USA).

###
Curt McFarland’s Reflections on GA

CWPGA2008
Monday, July 7, 2008
Reflecting on GA

I’ve been asked by several for a recap on the GA, now a week past. Here is what I’ve written and sent:

I’m writing this from Belfast ...

GA was very discouraging. I went as a delegate because the church I am a part of (First Pres Yakima) and members of the Presbytery I belong to (Central Washington Presbytery) have talked and talked about our growing displeasure with actions of previous GAs. If we are going to complain it seemed only reasonable and consistent to do the hard work and get directly involved.

I found myself on the losing end of the vote most times. A quick personal perspective on the three greatest sadnesses:

1) At the GA level there is increased talk but no real commitment to the denomination being focused on the local church (I sensed very clearly that power is focused at the top and pronouncements and directives come from above (the Stated Clerk nomination was a good demonstration of this) or from those above directing the GA delegates in a short intense period of time),

2) Very little desire to face the reality of the continuing decline in membership, attendance, and trust (response when this question was raised was that some committee had passed something to address that and that local churches should send along more overtures (but most overtures with the potential to help transform the denomination were all sidelined or defeated)),

3) the greatest of the greatest sadnesses ... it seems to me that the Bible can no longer be used as a source of authority for discussions and deliberations at the GA level. The division on what authority the Bible has and on how to interpret the Bible has grown quite vast (case in point was the book sent to each GA commissioner prior to the GA with chapters written by many of the most distinguished professors of PCUSA seminaries (another question is asked, why are churches reluctant to support the seminaries? I could often tell how I should vote by looking at the results of the Theological Students advisory vote and doing the opposite! completely dismissing the standard interpretation of passages related to sexual activity and offering a justification why those passages say nothing about sexual boundaries but actually the Bible affirms most all sexual inclinations which are obviously God-given).

On another occasion as sexual boundaries were being discussed on the floor of the GA Jack Rogers was asked by a commissioner to speak as an expert Bible scholar on the subject (I wonder if he had a particular agenda?), following that Professor Robert Gagnon was asked by a commissioner to speak from the other perspective and the Stated Clerk ruled that out of order (technically the Stated Clerk was correct in his ruling since Jack Rogers as a former moderator always has voice at GA while Professor Gagnon does not, but it was not correct or healthy in any other sense of the process). In the course of the GA the Bible was mentioned possibly 6-8 times and I had the sense that if it was quoted in a more evangelical manner it would be dismissed by the whole and viewed as a divisive and manipulative maneuver.
We are post-Biblical at the denominational conversation level. Discussions were based on emotions and experiences more than any Biblical foundation. Instead of a few random statements that what God wants is for us to love everyone (who can disagree with that) as support that God wants us to remove any meaningful boundary standards for ordination why wouldn't we have the best of both sides of the debate walk the assembly through a 15-30 minute Bible study on the topic under debate, with respectful Q&A after, ask for prayer, and then proceed to floor debate and vote. Instead each subcommittee is put into a time-pressured discussion process (where it seems from an answer to a question I asked from the floor that the authority voices and experts each sub committee hears from is unbalanced and clearly biased in the direction already intended by those guiding the voting delegates). We are then asked to trust the subcommittees who have done all of the hard work and listened to more expert testimony. I see it all as a rather unhealthy process but I haven't yet sorted out what can be done to improve the process.

Sadly at this GA (again from my perspective ... many others believe it was an exciting and wonderful gathering), we detached further from the powerful, historic, evangelistic, connectional, Biblical foundations many have treasured through the centuries.

I would recommend the PFR blog and website, both very good in describing the GA. My GA blog (which you are now reading) ... is a bit unorganized and unfinished but hopefully provides some insights

In Christ,

Curt

###
The 218th General Assembly fully lived into its theme, “Do Justice, Love Kindness, Walk Humbly with your God.” It took important and historic steps toward a more welcoming church and spoke prophetically on many issues.

Authoritative Interpretations

The General Assembly...

- Passed the John Knox overture to restore the full reach of the 2006 Authoritative Interpretation (A.I.) of G-6.0108, permitting presbyteries to consider the full scope of candidates' faith, life, and any declared "departure" - and (not incidentally) overturning the recent, unhelpful GAPJC decision in Bush vs. Presbytery of Pittsburgh.
- Issued an Authoritative Interpretation that "interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members" from 1978 and 1979 "and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect."

Both of these A.I.'s became effective with the close of G.A. and do not need to be ratified by the presbyteries.

Covenant Network Co-Moderators Deborah Block and Jon Walton said, "This is a day that has been thirty years in coming and we give thanks for the hope that it offers to so many in the church who have been and still are excluded from ordained office."

The effect of the two A.I.’s is to allow presbyteries to consider all candidates for ordination, regardless of sexual orientation, individually and on the same terms.

Amend G-6.0106b

The G.A. also passed an overture that would amend G-6.0106b, which currently requires that candidates live 'in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church' and singles out 'fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness' as an example of confessional standards.

If 87 presbyteries vote in favor, that language would be replaced with a requirement that candidates 'live lives obedient to Jesus Christ the Head of the Church, striving to follow where he leads through the witness of the Scriptures, and to understand the Scriptures through the instruction of the Confessions.' The proposed amendment would reaffirm the pre-eminent authority of Jesus Christ in the life of the church, and refocus this section on discipleship rather than debates about human sexuality.

The G.A. “strongly encouraged” presbyteries to “consider this overture using a process of listening and discernment.”

Additional Overtures

The G.A. passed two other overtures supported by the Covenant Network.

- It approved an overture from Denver strongly reaffirming our church's longstanding support for full civil and legal rights for same-gender couples and their families, and authorizing a study of the theological meaning of marriage.
- It began the four-year process for approving a more faithful translation of the Heidelberg
Catechism, correcting several mistranslations including an egregious 1962 translator's *insertion* of the term "homosexual perversion" in a list of sins in Q. 87.

Other Significant Actions

Commissioners elected the youngest-ever **Moderator, Bruce Reyes-Chow** (a plenary speaker at the 2003 Covenant Conference in Washington). They also **elected Gradye Parsons as Stated Clerk**, by a strong majority on the first ballot. (Gradye was the unanimous choice of the Stated Clerk Nominating Committee.)

The G.A. also took any number of interesting and important actions, including...

- beginning the process for adding the Belhar Confession from South Africa to our Book of Confessions,
- adopting a new Social Creed for the 21st Century,
- endorsing the "Amman Call" for a just, two-state resolution in Israel/Palestine,
- supporting peacemaking efforts in Iraq,
- unanimously endorsing a plan for enhanced cooperation in international mission
- adopting major reports on mental illness and on homelessness, and
- issuing strong statements on gun violence, pay equity for women, and workers' rights.

CovNet Events

In a week full of special events, Covenant Network hosted two sold-out gatherings. Our **Commissioner Convocation Dinner** drew 300 people to San Jose’s beautiful City Hall Rotunda on the eve of G.A. **Susan Andrews**, Moderator of the 215th G.A. and currently Executive Presbyter of Hudson River, recalled past attempts to remove the exclusive provisions of G-6.0106b and our hopes for the week ahead in “From Syracuse to San Jose: The Perseverance of the Saints.”

**John Buchanan**, Moderator of the 208th G.A., pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Editor/Publisher of the *Christian Century*, and founding Co-Moderator of the Covenant Network, keynoted the **Covenant Network Luncheon** on Monday, June 23. He expressed Covenant Network’s continuing vision of “A Church as Generous and Just as God’s Grace.” McCormick Seminary President **Cynthia Campbell** remembered Jack Stotts, President Emeritus of both McCormick and Austin Seminaries, who among much else delivered the address at Covenant Network’s first G.A. Luncheon in 1998.

More Info

Detailed stories about these and many other G.A. matters can be found on the **G.A. News Service website**. Full text and vote counts on specific business are still posted on **PC-Biz** under the relevant committees.

###
More Light Presbyterians / Good News from San Jose!
218th GA votes 54% to 46% to end LGBT discrimination!

Posted Friday, June 27 2008 @ 02:15 PM

San Jose: This is an amazing moment in history. I give thanks to God for all of you who have been praying, believing and working for the Presbyterian Church (USA) to end discrimination against its own lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender daughters and sons, sisters and brothers in Christ.

Today, the 218th General Assembly of the PCUSA voted 54% to 46% to end discrimination against LGBT members of our Church; and to provide spiritual and ordination equality for LGBT Presbyterians.

The Assembly approved the Boston Ordination Equality Overture which called for a deletion of the "fidelity in marriage, chastity in singleness" requirement and lifted up our historic Constitutional questions for ordination and installation. This part of the overture requires ratification by the presbyteries in the next year.

The second part of the overture provides a new Authoritative Interpretation struck down the anti-gay policy statements beginning with the 1978 Definitive Guidance and the subsequent 1979 ruling that homosexuality is not compatible with service in the Church, sinful and not part of God's design. These profoundly uninformed and homophobic statements from the past of our Church have no further force or effect with the approval of this Boston Ordination Overture.

More Light Presbyterians gives thanks to God for all of the Commissioners, Youth Advisory Delegates and other delegates who are serving faithfully this week. There is clearly a sea-change in our Church, society and world as more people are letting go of the old beliefs and prejudice about homosexuality, same-gender loving persons and embracing what it means to recognize Christ and the divine image within all of God children, no exceptions.

Our work of witness, education, truth-telling, sharing our stories within our local churches, on our college and seminary campuses has just begun! We have one year to pray and work so that this Boston Ordination Equality Overture will be thoughtfully and prayerfully considered, heard and ratified by our presbyteries. You can count on More Light Presbyterians having "every hand on deck" working 24/7 by providing educational resources and empowering local leaders so that we can honor the good work of faith, justice and love done today.

The joyous work of being the Church and sharing our faith to achieve the ratification of the Boston Ordination Equality Overture will begin on June 28 at the close of this Assembly. For this moment, on this day, we rejoice in the fact that this Assembly has provided a way forward for our beloved Church.

Together we are building a Church for all God's people!

with hope and grace,

Michael

Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D., Executive Director & Field Organizer
More Light Presbyterians, 369 Montezuma Avenue # 447, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501
(505) 577-0086 mobile, (505) 820-7082 office, michaeladee@aol.com, www.mlp.org
More Light Presbyterians Applaud General Assembly Action

**PCUSA Welcomes All to Service in the Church**

SAN JOSE, CA – June 27, 2008 – More Light Presbyterians said a decision today by the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to lift its ban on ordination for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons is good news for Presbyterians and Christians across the country and world.

“This is a great moment affirming God’s love for all people. We are thankful to the Commissioners at this Assembly who upheld standards for leadership and service in our Church, and at the same time eliminated categorical discrimination that has denied ordination to LGBT persons based simply on who they are and who they fall in love with,” said Michael J. Adee, Executive Director and Field Organizer for the organization.

The action by the General Assembly removes G.60106b from its Book of Order, the Constitution which governs the Church and replaces it with new language. Formerly, it required fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness to be eligible for ordination as deacons, elders or ministers.

“The intent of this standard, passed over a decade ago, was to bar LGBT persons from full membership and service in our Church since marriage equality is not yet available to most in our country,” Adee said.

New language passed by the General Assembly reaffirms historic standards of the Church that focus on faith and character which has withstood the test of time, and did not exclude anyone based on sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status.

**Looking to the Future**

“A new spirit of acceptance and the recognition that we have many different kinds of families in our churches has taken hold,” said Vikki Dearing, Co-Moderator. “This reflects the hearts and spirits of people in the pews. We rejoice with the many that will now be able to answer God’s call to serve in our Church.”

We believe that God is doing a new thing in our Church. We believe that a more loving and welcoming Church is where the Spirit is taking us. We invite everyone who wants to know how to become a more welcoming and affirming place for all God’s children to contact us. Together we are building a Church for all God’s people!


###
Don Stroud Report on 218th General Assembly

TAMFS Thanks GA
That All May Freely Serve Thanks the General Assembly for its Prophetic Witness
With gratitude to God, the board, staff, and community of That All May Freely Serve rejoice in the vote by the 218th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to open the door to the gifts and callings of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer members by removing its institutional barriers to ordination.

Working alongside More Light Presbyterians, the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, and other fairness-loving organizations, That All May Freely Serve and our New Church (R)evolution has experienced a new opening to the Holy Spirit at this Assembly. Through worship, hospitality, prayer, creative educational events, and more, together we invited the church to join the welcoming generation and vote for its future. Today’s action demonstrates a choice by the church to draw an ever-widening circle.

In our joy, we are especially mindful of all the saints—those with us, and those who have gone to be with God—whose dedication and faithfulness has made such a day as this possible. Now we commit ourselves to bringing this invitation of a hope-filled future to the 173 presbyteries. Spreading this good news to all of the denomination will require the cooperation, hard work, and contributions of every fairness-minded Presbyterian.

Won’t you join us?

Also see the New Church (R)evolution announcement:
http://newchurchrevolution.googlepages.com/news#Delete%20B

###
Appendix A:
Santa Barbara Document "Appropriate Response"
Appropriate Response

A Declaration of Theology and Action

I. An Appeal to the Presbyteries, Congregations, and Christians in the PC (USA)

With many in the church we have over many years carefully and prayerfully followed the actions, decisions, controversies, and perspectives manifesting across the Presbyterian Church (USA). We have studied, discussed, and wrestled with the many difficult issues. We have pondered over and prayed over events, statements, litigations, and meetings. Through all this we have intentionally moved slowly, cautiously and thoughtfully, recognizing that misinformed acts and reactionary stands are neither helpful nor faithful. We believe that if we have erred it is on the side of reticence and silence. Through this season of discernment, study, and prayer we have sought an appropriate response to the gracious call and command of God to submit our lives to the Lordship of Christ Jesus and to give our lives to fulfilling the Great Ends of the Church.

We stand profoundly grateful to God, certain that he has through this time of reflection, study, and participation with the broader church given us a word of guidance for our congregation, our presbytery, and the church as a whole. This word is not a new word or a word that seeks division, schism, or the creating of a new and separate body. Rather it is an acknowledgment and reaffirmation of our history, theology, and polity and passionate appeal that our church as a whole and every constituent congregation and presbytery within it turn from the naturalistic theology, romanticism2, folly, and idolatry that have too often been allowed to shape and characterize our church and return to its first love, Jesus Christ, Lord of the church and the One Word which we alone must hear and obey. Our intention is to stand in faith and unity against the destruction of our church, its confession, and its witness. We seek and call for a return to the Scriptures, our Reformed theology, and the standards of our Constitution. We joyfully and gratefully acknowledge that within our history we have worked together to reconcile our differences. We have been able, on numerous occasions in our long history to restore our structural unity and thus we now seek the higher good of restoring our confessional unity and integrity. We call the church to pursue and know the genuine, God given peace, unity, and purity that is the necessary fruit of faithfulness, integrity, and godliness. And we call the church to return to its first work of mission centered around and upon the life changing and world changing word of the Gospel and to follow our Lord’s command to go out into all the world to make disciples in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There can be little doubt that the church we have loved and served is in the midst of a profound crisis that is clearly worsening. The hope vested in the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity has—thus far—failed to materialize. Arguably the 217th General Assembly’s approval of the Task Force Report, even as amended, has only moved us further into crisis. The report’s recommendations—now authoritative interpretations—may open the door for local license3 and certainly have led increasing numbers of sessions and presbyteries to clearly articulate what beliefs and practices are considered essential and non-negotiable4. Additionally, many are taking up issues of property, per capita, and even separation from the

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2 Romanticism refers to a broad, and thus difficult to define worldview. For our purposes it is important to look at epistemological issues (how we know what we know). Romanticism emphasizes idealism over realism and knowledge drawn from feeling and intuition over reason and empiricism. Romanticism would define the universal through the particulars whereas realism (and thus evangelicalism) would take the opposite course, defining the particulars from the universal. Romanticism is open to contradictory ideas remaining un-reconciled and still valid viewing these as part of a grand, inscoluted whole that lies beyond reason but may be known intuitively and experientially. For two helpful studies see: Bernard M. G. Reardon, Religion in the Age of Romanticism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Stephen Pickett, Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

3 Local license or local option refers to a local governing body (session or presbytery) abandoning, ignoring, or annulling (whether temporarily or permanently) standards of the national church in favour of locally agreed upon values or rules. The PUP report, in allowing conceivably any doctrine or practice to be declared a scruple by a candidate, theoretically allows the national standards of the church to be trumped by locally held opinions and interpretations. Ultimately the full implications of the PUP authoritative interpretations will not be known until cases are brought to church courts which could happen as early as October 2006.

4 In addition to this document before the Santa Barbara Presbytery the following may be noted as examples: Both San Diego and Santa Barbara presbyteries have passed “essential tenets” guidelines for ordaining, installing, and receiving ministers into their membership. The Presbytery of Central Florida has approved a resolution declaring that G-6.0106b is an essential requirement for ordination and will
PC (USA). While our history as a church is replete with controversy and conflict, it is painfully clear that we stand before the most threatening crisis in our church’s long history. The depth and significance of the current controversies must not be underestimated. While many would say, “Peace, peace…” there is in fact no peace and little chance of finding peace if the church continues to ignore, deny, or simply re-nounce the serious issues we face. We can no longer afford theological sound bites, confessions that are PowerPoint deep, and “truths” that are little more than romantic wishes and emotional subjectivism. We must have the courage to sincerely and fearlessly address the issues dividing us and move beyond tepid pronouncements or declarations of peace while denying all reality and ignoring the real issues confusing and dividing us. We must make an appropriate response, to God and to those he has placed under our care, and to those who are disrupting the peace unity, and purity of the church through ignorance, error or evil.

The Session of Community Presbyterian Church of Ventura California calls upon the Santa Barbara Presbytery and all congregations and governing bodies within the PC (USA) to unite behind the Scriptures, confessions, and polity of the church. We call upon every member, pastor, elder, and governing body to study this document and “test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.” Test our words and actions before the Scriptures, confessions of the Church and standards of the Reformed tradition. If you find that we are speaking contrary to these standards do not listen to us! But if you find that our perspective and actions are faithful to the Scriptures and our constitution then we urge you to stand with us. “Let no fear or temptation keep you from treading with us on the path of faith and obedience to the Word of God in order that God’s people be of one mind upon earth and that we in faith experience what he himself has said: ‘I will never leave you, nor forsake you.’ Therefore, ‘Fear not little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.’”

II. Concerning the Present Situation of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

The issues tearing apart the church are neither peripheral nor incidental. At stake is nothing less than our integrity, our future, our mission and our message. At question is whether we have been, are, and can be trustworthy before God or whether we will abandon the faith once and for all delivered to the saints for a populist, culturally determined Gospel that is hostile to not recognize any ordination done in violation to this standard. Other presbyteries, including Pittsburgh and Holston are considering similar actions. The Sacramento Presbytery has passed four resolutions dealing with ordination standards, per capita, and property. The Presbytery of San Francisco will soon address conflicting resolutions that reflect the tensions across the larger church: one calls for the strict maintenance of constitutional standards while the other seeks full inclusion of any person into the life and witness of the church. As of this writing almost thirty presbyteries are considering resolutions that affirm constitutional standards. In the September 12th edition of the Charlotte Observer twelve pastors representing nearly 3,500 members of the PC (USA) published a full page statement which declared the actions of the 217th General Assembly “collectively represent grievous error and a significant departure from the biblical and confessional principles of the Christian faith.”

To give some examples: First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge and Kirk of the Hills in Tulsa have both filed suit against their presbyteries seeking affirmation of full rights and ownership over their property. Kirk of the Hills, the largest church in its presbytery with over 2,800 members has gone even further with its pastors renouncing the jurisdiction of the church and the congregation overwhelming approving a resolution to leave the PC (USA) and join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Milwaukee Presbytery has allowed a small member congregation to also join the EPC—though requiring it to pay $150,000 for the right to maintain its property. Across the denomination many congregations are pondering if, when, and how to leave the PC (USA) and examples abound in the news. Exacerbating issues, secret advisory papers drafted by the offices of the General Assembly and the GAC and recently made public, show the denomination intends to squelch all dissent and retaliate against any seeking to withhold control over church property. Tactics advised include defrocking offending ministers, lawsuits against ministers and elders, and removal of sessions. Trust and co-operation are all but non-existent.

Andrew Walker (King’s College, London) and Robert Wuthnow (Princeton) have both suggested that the larger church is heading for the third great schism. The issues tearing at the PC (USA) are similarly affecting many other churches and denominations and leading to the unique situation in which evangelicals within the PC (USA) have more in common with evangelicals in the Episcopal and Methodist Churches (to give two examples) than they do with progressives within their own church (and vice versa). The whole of Christendom may well be heading towards a split across and through countless denominations and traditions which divides the holy catholic church into two camps or perspectives: evangelicals and progressives. Certainly the gap between these two within the PC (USA) is expanding.

1 Jn. 4:1. See also: Jer. 29:8; II Peter 2:1

8.04, Book of Confessions, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part I. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, while written in an entirely different political setting, was nevertheless wrestling with nearly identical theological issues and thus forms a crucial document for our day and situation.
the work of Christ. Ensnued within claims of piety and words of faith are alien principles that have entered our church dam-
ing the theological basis and standards that have defined and shaped the church. At issue is a natural theology that forms the essence of the progressive theology in the PC (USA) in contrast to evangelical theology which forms the essence of Reformed theology within the church. In spite of shared language there are profound, even mutually exclusive, differences between the progressive theology that has long sought center stage and the Evangelical theology that has long formed the center and foundation of Presbyterian belief and currently defines the majority of our members and congregations. While some may hope for and proclaim that there is room within the PC (USA) for both (or all) sides the fact remains that these perspectives are in many places mutually exclusive and irreconcilable. One cannot declare Jesus “the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the only way to the Father” and simultaneously declare that he is but one way among many. One can not affirm the authority of the Scriptures over all matters of faith and practice while simultaneously proclaiming that experience, emotions, and opinions have equal (or greater!) voice. One can not hold that the ethical standards of Scripture are to be required while simultaneously holding that truth is uncertain and each must choose their own course, beliefs, and behaviours. There is always room for diversity within the church, even when beliefs deal with non-essentials or are not mutually exclusive. But that is not the case today within the PC (USA). Essentials upon which the church has been built and which exist as standards in our Confessions are routinely denied, annulled, or simply ignored while counterfeit alternatives are raised as viable options without any recognition that these contradict our history and tradition. With the loss of our defining doctrines the PC (USA) has become increasingly directionless, messageless, and meaningless.

Natural theology is most simply described as “bottom up” while evangelical theology may be described as “top down.” Obviously these are over simplified and thus not wholly accurate but they allow those inexperienced with the concepts to begin wrestling with the issues at stake. Evangelical (i.e. Reformed) theology has always started at the top, beginning with questions about the nature, will, and work of God and only secondarily with questions of what this means and how we are to respond. Natural theology works from an opposite direction, wrestling first or primarily with what we are as God’s creation and how we experience God and then deducing from these who God is and what He does. This simple difference has profound implications and leads to vastly different perspectives. To find an example one need only look at the issue of homosexuality. Where evangelical theology would hold that the will of God revealed through His acts (creation, et al.) and testifies to in the Scriptures declares the practice of homosexuality to be sinful, natural theology would hold that because such feelings or attractions exist in one whom God made then God logically approves of the practice and lifestyle. From the top down the lifestyle is viewed as antithetical to the Christian life while from the bottom up it is viewed as a faithful expression of God’s diverse creativity. These views, based upon profoundly different starting points and theological perspectives and methodologies are difficult, if not impossible to reconcile. In fact, no significant attempt of evaluating or reconciling such disparate doctrines has been made as the church has instead been content to grant both the stamp of legitimacy and propriety in the name of diversity and the nebulous ethic of tolerance.

The word evangelical comes from the Greek word euangelion, meaning good news. Today it is broadly and not always accurately used. According to Karl Barth, one of the most important reformed theologians in our history, “Evangelical means informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the 16th century Reformation by a direct return to Holy Scripture.” Evangelicalism when used in its strict theological sense is not bound to a particular tradition but cuts through all sectarian lines. Evangelicals are first upwardly or vertically focused with the horizontal focus coming as a certain and necessary response to revelation and relationship with God. Evangelicalism is centered upon God not humanity, the sacrifice given to us not the sacrifice we make, the power of God to heal and save not the intrinsic power or worth of the human being. It draws its guidance from Scripture, finding here the authoritative instruction about both God and faithful human response to His revealed will. Donald Bloesch has noted that “Evangelical theology aims not only to be faithful to Scripture, but also to expose the unfaithfulness of the Christian community to Scripture.” Evangelicalism is profoundly concerned with the poor and the righting of injustice. And it is all these (and more!) because of its passionate Christocentrism which rigorously holds Jesus Christ at the center of all of life, the focus of God’s activity, the revelation of His will, and the source and goal of all creation.

For a helpful study of the differences between progressive and evangelical theology see: Gerrit Scott Dawson and Mark R. Patterson, *Given and Sent in One Love: The True Church of Jesus Christ* (Lenoir North Carolina, Reformation Press, 2005), pp. 79-86.

To give one recent example, advice on the Presbyterian Women page of the PC (USA) web site stated: “Talk about Christianity in a way that is not imperialistic. Do not assume that Christianity offers something better than other religions” (http://www.pcusaw.org/pw/resources/bias-free-guidelines.htm). It is impossible to reconcile this with the evangelical perspective set forth in either the Book of Confessions or Book of Order (cf. G-1.0100 “All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.” The Reformed tradition has always held that it has something better to offer than other religions and his name is Jesus.


While diversity of belief, experiences, and practices has long characterized the PC (USA) it has never been successfully reconciled. For decades we have been encouraged to “celebrate our diversity” without ever being called to reconcile our diversity or wrestle with the difficult and painful questions about the legitimacy, propriety, and truth of disparate beliefs and truth claims. We hold that not everything proclaimed or believed is true. Nor is every belief affirmed under the banner of diversity legitimately Reformed or in some cases, even Christian, and therefore to be received as valid for the church. For true peace, unity, and purity to exist and flourish, for our mission to continue and deepen, for the church to be faithful before God and relevant to the people of this world we must value theological legitimacy over theological diversity.¹⁵

The issues tearing at the PC (USA) today are theological. Appeals for tolerance, reforms of polity, and pursuit of our mission may have some value but are not theological answers and thus can not, ultimately, answer the theological difficulties tearing at us. The church must decide what it believes if it is really going to be whole, healthy, and functional and it must make an appropriate and fitting response to the Triune God of grace. This is especially true for us within the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. For we are a confessional church. Our very existence is based on confessions held and expressed over and against other possible expressions of faith, beliefs, and practices that lie outside our tradition and even outside the Christian faith. Our very life and faith are grounded upon the fact that in the face of many beliefs and claims of truth one may hold, some are not true, not accurate, and not of God. They are inherently and essentially inappropriate as they are inconsistent with the work and nature of God. The PC (USA) is a confessional church whose very existence is defined and mission shaped by what we hold to be true. To now hold disparate doctrines, to believe that any belief is valid and valuable, to encourage each to determine their own ethical lifestyle is not only logically ludicrous, it is categorically contrary to the whole of the Reformed tradition and the church catholic. Yet it is this attitude and perspective that is increasingly shaping the theology of the PC (USA) and in the process, deceiving many.

That is of course not to say that Reformed theology—or any theology for that matter—should be considered perfect, complete, or beyond need of correction and improvement. Indeed, a hallmark of our confessional tradition is that our theology is “Reformed always being reformed by the Word of God and the call of the Spirit.”¹⁶ But this phrase, when taken in its entirety reveals the inherent tension that must remain. While our theology grows in understanding and our message is translated into ever new contexts and cultures, the Word of God underlying such human statements remains fixed and unchanging. Where our confessions and mission are consistent with the Word they may be called faithful and true, even where still in need of further improvement or clarification and even when held “in tension” with other doctrines. But where our theological statements contradict, annul, or transcend the Word they may be, indeed must be, declared deficient, untruthful, scandalous, and heretical. The Reformed tradition approaches theology humbly but not stupidly. Acknowledging that God is ultimately beyond all attempts of description it nevertheless holds that he can be truly known, accurately described, and actually obeyed. Admitting that all attempts to describe God are mere human efforts to describe what is eternal and beyond full human description, it nevertheless remains foolish to imagine and perrnicious to proclaim that any description may work and one confession is a good as another. The proponents of such error and folly, have in fact moved outside of the PC (USA), being an essential renunciation of the church through denial of its essential tenets, history, and theological perspective.

It is obvious, but important enough to state explicitly that this paper and the theology it expresses are written from and addressed to a Reformed and Presbyterian perspective. In other words, we are not interpreting, critiquing, or correcting the theology of the Episcopal Church, the Methodists, Lutherans, or anyone else within the Christian family. There are under the large umbrella of Christian orthodoxy many theological traditions and doctrines. Doctrines held by one tradition within the Christian faith may be different than those in another and may even contradict them. The understanding of the nature of the Lord’s Supper, for example, is decidedly different in the Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions, but not sufficiently so as to render any one of these as unorthodox or unfaithful. Different traditions hold different doctrines on baptism, grace and works, free will and election, eternal security and perseverance, eschatology, and many others, while still remaining Christian and united around the essential articles of faith. Each of these traditions has particular historical-theological-cultural character-

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¹⁵ The greatest hope in recent years that this might occur evaporated with the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity. In spite of good intentions, high hopes, and hard labor, the task force in the end failed to address the real theological issues tearing us apart. Instead of seriously wrestling with the profound differences of theological perspectives within the PC (USA) they instead only tangentially addressed them, that is, (for those mathematically astute) without touching them at all. While speaking of the centrality of Christ or the authority of Scripture no word of guidance is given to help the church discern what these mean, where it may have erred and why, or how to reconcile the different understandings attached to such statements. The task force, while affirming the authority of Scripture abdicated all responsibility of leading the church into legitimate and faithful interpretation by simply expressing that Presbyterians disagree over interpretation. In the end their report failed by offering a polity solution to a theological problem and thus leaving the greatest problems before us essentially untouched and certainly unresolved.

¹⁶ G-2.0200. Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.
ristics which shape their doctrine, life, and witness. The Reformed tradition also has unique and defining characteristics, particularly “its affirmation of the majesty, holiness, and providence of God who creates, sustains, rules, and redeems the world in the freedom of sovereign righteousness and love.”

The purpose in this paper’s theological reflection is first to call the PC (USA) to understand that some doctrines, practices, and philosophies, regardless of claims, are simply not Christian. They are not a part of any orthodox tradition or its confessions and practices and must be acknowledged as such. And second, it is to call the PC (USA) to understand that some doctrines, practices, and philosophies, while genuinely Christian are not part of our particular tradition. It is our purpose and hope that the PC (USA) will discern these differences and seriously endeavor to stand for the truths of the Christian faith. And it is our purpose and hope that the PC (USA) will grasp the unique and valuable perspective of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition and not lightly ignore, forget, or deny our particular historical experience of God and the Gospel.

We are a church within the Reformed tradition. As a church we must stand courageously for the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. As members of the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition we may joyfully acknowledge that we share many common beliefs and practices with the larger church. And we must endeavour to learn from our sisters and brothers in other traditions while remaining faithful to our own tradition and its unique and valuable witness. Our intent in this study is to simply express that much of what is currently defining our church today is not Reformed and in some case not even Christian. We can not accept or believe everything or anything and long remain either Presbyterian or even Christian. Our future, our faithfulness, our mission depend upon our rightly discerning the truth of God and his revelation. We must have a truthful and accurate understanding of the nature and work of God and a response that is fitting and appropriate to the reality of God.

It is time for the PC (USA)—that is, its members, congregations, and governing bodies—to express what the church believes, and as necessary corollary of this declaration, it must express what it does not believe. In doing this, it need not express all that it believes nor hold that these expressions are inerrant and final. For fuller descriptions already exist—primarily for us in the Book of Confessions, and also in Reformed theological works such as Calvin’s Institutes, Weber’s Grundlagen Der Dogmatik, Barth’s Church Dogmatics—and any human work can be better expressed to more accurately describe the eternal reality behind it. Nevertheless, it remains crucial in our time that the PC (USA) courageously affirm (decide?) what it believes.

We must reaffirm that our words of confession may accurately—if not fully—express the truth of God revealed to us by His acts and witnessed to by the Word written and proclaimed. And we must in our affirmation, have the courage to discern and denounce error and heresy wherever they occur. We must utterly reject as inappropriate the naïve but popular folly, proclaimed in the name of tolerance and diversity, that the church can and may hold disparate doctrines simultaneously and proclaim both as true. It is time for the PC (USA) to reject the hopeless ambiguity and uncertainty that have marked our confession in recent decades and stand for the truth of the Gospel revealed through Jesus the Saviour of the world. And it is time that this be done by more than a few leaders, individuals, or congregations who in recent years and decades have boldly stood for the Gospel. As the life and future of our church are at stake, it is required in our day that all who love the Lord Jesus stand for the truth of his gospel and renounce and repent of the errors—great and small and of which, in their variety we are all guilty—that have overwhelmed our confession, mission, and ethics. It is time for the faithful to rise and fearlessly express the message we have been entrusted to bear. It is time for those who sit on the fence of indifference to rise from their Laodician complacency and grasp the severity of the situation, perceive the call of God in this hour, and rise to the church’s need of their witness. And it is time for those who have for decades rejected the clear teaching of the Scriptures and

17 Other great themes of the Reformed Tradition include: (1) The election of the people of God for service as well as for salvation; (2) Covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order in the church according to the Word of God; (3) A faithful stewardship that shuns ostentation and seeks proper use of the gifts of God’s creation; (4) The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God (G-2.0500. Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II).

18 Or, as the Constitution puts it: “The creeds and confessions of this church reflect a particular stance within the history of God’s people. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers” (G-2.0500b. Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II).

19 “Dear friends, although I have been eager to write to you about our common salvation, I now feel compelled instead to write to encourage you to contend earnestly for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” Jude 1:3 NET.

20 Again, as the Constitution states: “In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives witness to the faith of the Church catholic. The confessions express the faith of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church in the recognition of canonical Scriptures and the formulation and adoption of the ecumenical creeds, notably the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds with their definitions of the mystery of the triune God and of the incarnation of the eternal Word of God in Jesus Christ” (G-2.0300). And again: “In its confessions, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) identifies with the affirmations of the Protestant Reformation. The focus of these affirmations is the rediscovery of God’s grace in Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. The Protestant watchwords—grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone—embody principles of understanding which continue to guide and motivate the people of God in the life of faith” (G-2.0400).
the essential tenets of the Christian faith to honestly acknowledge their renunciation and peaceably leave the church as the Constitution requires.\textsuperscript{21}

### III. A Theological Declaration

We hold, with deep gratitude and humility, that God has called us to speak with one voice and given us a word which must be proclaimed. After years of discerning, praying, studying, and conversing the time has come for all in leadership and all congregations to affirm again the heart of what we believe and express afresh what we hold true and dear in these troubled times. “We believe we have been given a common message to utter in time of common need and temptation”\textsuperscript{22} and we invite all within the PC (USA) to join us in this affirmation.

We live in an age that is profoundly skeptical of any truth claim especially any raised over and against others. Our age is uncertain that truth exists, that truth can be known, or that any perspective should be proclaimed as such. It is also a time of rampant subjectivism where each not only decides what is right in their own eyes, but is actually encouraged to do so. The skepticism and subjectivism combine to cause profound trauma and confusion within the church as each looks within to determine what is right and true for them. The very nature of the church takes a new shape as doubt and diversity become our confession and the ancient confessions that have always defined us are lost to the god of uncertainty and subjectivity.

Other ages have had to face different points of error or confusion. Athanasius addressed a church wrestling with the nature of Christ and the Trinity. Augustine confronted the errors of Pelagius on grace and salvation. Luther and Calvin stood against the corruption of the church that had replaced grace and justification with self-righteousness, works, and indulgences. Barth stood against the natural theology of Third Reich Germany that was increasingly allowed (by the church!) to shape the church’s theology, mission and ethics. In every age the church is called to address the errors, misunderstandings, corruptions, and heresies that occlude the truth of the Gospel and thus its message and mission. Rarely, if ever, is the church allowed to choose its battles. Instead these usually emerge from the issues, values, and philosophies of the current culture in which the church is placed. In every case and era it is required of the church, as a necessary element of its mission, to address these values and philosophies, affirming what is true and critically assessing what is false all under the authoritative and defining revelation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And in the process it must consciously resist the temptation to take the popular and easy course of changing the Gospel to fit the values and philosophies of the day.\textsuperscript{23}

In our time the issues at the center of our debate are not the Trinity or the nature of Christ, they are not about justification or even ordination standards or homosexuality. The primary issue facing (and confusing) the church today is the nature, reality, and means of revelation and, from the human side, what constitutes a real and proper knowledge of God. Secondly, and inseparably bound to this, is the question of what constitutes righteousness before God. While many areas and details of theology and ethics may be specifically addressed we hold that the root of error and misunderstanding today revolves around our understanding of God’s revelation, Christian epistemology, and misunderstandings regarding the nature of and distinctions between inherent and imparted righteousness. We hold that the natural theology manifesting in the progressive wing of the church and defining its theology is radically inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture and our Reformed tradition. This misuse of Scripture and redefining of essential and/or traditional elements of Reformed theology has led the church into confusion, biblical illiteracy, and even heresy. We hold that a clear—if brief—word of correction must be voiced if we are to be faithful to God and the word he has given us and faithful in leading the church through the dangers raised against its witness.

In view of the errors of natural theology manifesting within the progressive wing of the church and the devastating harm these doctrines and their proponents are bringing to the peace unity and purity of the church we therefore confess the following evangelical and Reformed truths:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{i.}
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{21} G-6.0108, footnote 1. \textit{Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.}

\textsuperscript{22} 8.08, \textit{Book of Confessions, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part I.}

\textsuperscript{23} This has become the common approach of the PC (USA) and the dominant methodology of the progressive wing of Protestantism. The values and philosophies are made authoritative and the church is then required to shape its message and mission around these values. The history of both Judaism and the church reveals disastrous results whenever this is allowed and calls us to remember such lessons, lest we repeat them.
“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but through me.”
John 14:6

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber…. I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved.”
John 10:1, 9

“For we teach and believe that this Jesus Christ our Lord is the unique and eternal Saviour of the human race, and thus of the whole world… Wherefore we quite openly profess and preach that Jesus Christ is the sole Redeemer and Saviour.”
Second Helvetic Confession, Ch. XII

“All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule, and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in the age but also that which is to come.”
Preliminary Principles, Constitution—G-1.0100, PC (USA)

We hold, with the testimony of the Scriptures and in consistency with the Reformed faith and the church catholic that there is but one mediator between God and the human race, one Saviour, Redeemer and King, the Lord Jesus Christ. By his name alone salvation is graciously given as the Father freely determines and in him alone are we reconciled, redeemed, and restored to God and the life He intends. In accord with the singular message of Scripture, Reformed theology, and the holy catholic church we affirm that Jesus is unique, unrivaled, and singular in nature, being, and work, the center of God’s saving work and the singular goal of creation.

We reject therefore the errors of progressive and revisionist theology that deny or annul the singular saving work of Christ by proclaiming that Jesus is but one way of salvation among others of equal validity, truth, and efficacy. We reject and denounce any testimony that seeks to limit his saving work, power, or efficacy to that of mere example of spirituality, godliness, or morality. Further, we reject the false doctrine that would hold that there are areas of life in which we would not need God’s justification and sanctification through Christ. We believe that any holding or teaching such errors have departed from the Reformed faith, are deceived, and have become promoters of heresy.

ii.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,
glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14 NRSV

Christ is the visible expression of the invisible God.
Colossians 1:15—Phillips Translation

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.
Hebrews 1:1-2, ESV

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation;
therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners,
to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church.
Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter I

The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but his Word and Spirit only, do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation.
Larger Catechism, Question 1

We believe that Jesus Christ is the One Word of God to whom we turn, whom alone we obey and trust in life and in death.
We believe, in keeping with the Scriptural witness and the central tenets of the Reformed faith, that God’s nature and work finds their primary revelation in the person and work of Christ, for with Luther we hold that “elsewhere God is utterly incom-
prehensible but comprehensible in the flesh of Christ alone.”

Thus it is to Christ alone that we turn to know God and learn of His ways, work, and will. For Christ Jesus, as the Word of God incarnate, is the essential form of God’s revelation and the only means by which we may know of the nature, will and work of God. We hold that God’s revelation in Christ receives primary witness through the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and is made efficacious and perspicuous through the illumining grace of the Holy Spirit.

“We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.” We reject the false claims of modern Gnosticism and neo-mysticism that boast of secret, personal, innate or inner knowledge that openly contradicts God’s self revelation, whether this knowledge pertains to the nature or work of God or a human response of belief, lifestyle, or ethics. We reject the voices of culture that call us from the holiness of God to take up lives marked and characterized by self, pleasure, license, materialism, and injustice.

iii.

Every word of God proves true….Do not add to his words,
lest he rebuke you, and you be found a liar.
Proverbs 30:5, 6

The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.
Isaiah 40:8

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction,
and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God
may be proficient, equipped for every good work.
II Timothy 3:16-17

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory,
man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture,
or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture:
unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations
of the Spirit, or traditions of men.
Westminster Confession, 1.6

We hold that the Scriptures by God’s inspiration and the interpretive work of the Holy Spirit do manifest themselves to be the Word of God written, and thus wholly sufficient to lead the church into true wisdom, godliness, reform, obedience, and worship of God. As God’s written Word the Scriptures are trustworthy, authoritative, and able to express God’s will to every age and people. “Insofar as Christ’s will for the church is set forth in the Scripture, it is to be obeyed.”

We reject the false doctrine that would raise alongside or over the Scriptures other authorities, opinions, and voices intended to transcend, correct, repeal or annul the word of God. While fully affirming that God does speak through the voice of the Holy Spirit we deny and reject any claim of hearing his voice that contradicts or denies the clear teaching of Scripture, whether this concern is the nature and work of God or the character and detail of the godly life he intends. We hold, with the guidance of Calvin, that opinions formed without the leading of the Word of God are of no account to the church and are voices without authority or relevance to the Christian life.

24 The full quote is as follows: “I have no God whether in heaven or in earth, and I know of none, outside the flesh that lies in the bosom of the Virgin Mary. For elsewhere God is utterly incomprehensible, but comprehensible in the flesh of Christ alone.” Quoted in H. R. Mackintosh, The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1962), p. 231.


26 8.12, Book of Confessions, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part I.

27 G-1.-0100c, Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.
iv.

*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

II Corinthians 5:17-21

*My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

I John 2:1-2, NRSV

*From this we confess and avow that there remains no other sacrifice for sin; if any affirm so, we do not hesitate to say that they are blasphemers against Christ's death and the everlasting atonement thereby purchased for us.*

Scots Confession, Chapter IX

*Therefore, it is necessary for us to be righteous before we may love and do good works.

We are made truly righteous, as we have said, by faith in Christ purely by the grace of God, who does not impute to us our sins, but the righteousness of Christ, or rather, he imputes faith in Christ to us for righteousness.*

II Helvetic Confession, Chapter XV

We hold, with the testimony of Scripture and our Reformed Confessions, that our righteousness before the Triune God is itself a gift of God through Christ, wholly imparted and thus entirely an act of grace. While the Bible uses many and varied terms to describe the depth and reality of this mystery—redemption, ransom, reconciliation, deliverance, propitiation, expiation, and others—these together testify to the fact that our righteousness, that is our right standing before God, is the fruit and effect of his act in and for us. We hold that Christ Jesus is our righteousness, our justification, our sanctification and this righteousness, extrinsic to us by nature, is made ours only through the sacrifice of Christ and the inner work of the Holy Spirit and true faith which is its fruit and effect.

We reject as false any doctrine or teaching that holds that persons by their nature bear or possess an intrinsic, natural, or innate righteousness before God based upon human works, nature, spirituality, or by the fact of their being created in God's image. We reject as heresy any doctrine that would hold the human race as essentially righteous, holy, and pleasing before God apart from the work of salvation in Christ Jesus or that certain attributes or actions are sufficiently righteous in themselves to be without need of the justifying work of Christ Jesus and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

v.

*And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.*

Leviticus 26:12

*You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.*

Joel 2:27

*I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel,*

*when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.*

Ezekiel 37:26-28
After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said,
"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you,
since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life
to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you,
the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

John 17:1-3

For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give
the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

II Corinthians 4:6

The Spirit of God quickens people to an awareness of God’s grace and claim upon their lives.
The Spirit moves them to respond by naming and calling upon God, by remembering
and proclaiming God’s acts of self-revelation in word and deed,
and by committing their lives to God’s reign in the world

Book of Order, W-1.1002.

We hold that God’s revelation of himself is personal, relational, and thus saving. Our knowledge of God is neither noetic nor
a postulate of human reason or discovery but the result of God being among us, drawing us to himself as his people and
redeeming us to be a nation of priests before him and through this, unveiling himself to us. God’s salvation is not so much a
thing bestowed as the consequence of his relational presence among his people and their appropriate response to this presence. God gives himself in loving, redeeming relationship, moving our hearts to repentance, our minds to understanding and
our wills to obedience. His saving work is revelatory and his revelatory work saving and transformational.

We reject the populist doctrine that one can know God without true relationship—making God a postulate of human know-
ledge—or that one can have a relationship with God without true knowledge of his revealed will and work—making God little
more than the fabrication of subjective romanticism or Gnostic mysticism. We reject and renounce any and all claims of the-
tological knowledge and/or a relationship with God that leads one into a faith and life that contradict or deny his revealed will
made clear in the Scriptures.29

We hold that the above five statements express specific points that must be heard and confirmed and proclaimed in our day.
These essential and defining doctrines of the Reformed faith are being annulled by alien principles leveraging for a place of
authority in the PC (USA). In stating these principles we neither seek nor make new statements or requirements. On the contrary, we seek the opposite and place these before the church as a reminder of what we have always held, always believed, and always sought to manifest in our communion. It is not these statements that are new but those that have been raised against them claiming authority over against the Scriptures as other “words”—as if any truly existed!—other saviours
over or alongside Jesus the Messiah of God—and other forms of knowledge and sources of truth than those revealed by
God through his saving, revelatory work. The anemic and impotent state of the church today is the result of its confusion over
doctrine, its faithlessness, immorality, materialism, and its subtle replacement of the Gospel of Christ for another gospel that
is nothing more than the romantic hopes of a lost humanity. We call the church to study these issues, wrestle with their truth
and implications, challenge where they are wrongly or poorly stated, and discern what the Spirit is saying to the church of our
day.

In this act of study and discernment, we fully and sincerely affirm the importance of mutual forbearance, agreeing that be-
lievers of good conscience will disagree.30 We affirm the importance of listening, mutual dialogue, and humility for only when
we acknowledge the imperfection of each of our perspectives and learn from one another will we grow in the fullness God
intends. However there must be limits to this forbearance.31 The Constitution, in calling us to this standard, makes clear that
difference of opinion does not mean absence of truth. The Scriptures and Constitution command and expect that we will

28 Noetic: 1) of or pertaining to the mind. 2) Originating in or apprehended by the reason. Or, put most simply, true knowledge of God is not mere “head-knowledge” separated from actual life and practice.

29 Psa. 1:1-2; Matt. 15:7-9; John 3:19-20; I John 1:6, 2:4; Rev. 3:17.

30 G-1.0305, Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.

31 This fact is completely lost in the PC (USA) today.
firmly hold to the truth of the Gospel and our Reformed witness. Even as the Constitution calls us to mutual forbearance it reminds us that

No opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no consequence what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, we are persuaded that there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty. Otherwise, it would be of no consequence either to discover truth or to embrace it.\footnote{G-1.0304, \textit{Book of Order}, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.}

It would be institutional suicide and utter faithlessness before God to equate forbearance with uncertainty or require toler- ance to mean denial, agnosticism, or rejection of truth. In certain times and seasons situations demand that we affirm afresh what we believe, value, and refuse to surrender. Regrettably the term and practice of forbearance have become wholly misunderstood within the church and as such have become not an aid to its peace, unity, and purity but a cause of its decay and ruin. The Constitution acknowledges that “there are truths and forms with respect to which men of good characters and principles may differ.”\footnote{G-1.0305, \textit{Book of Order}, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.} These statements reflect a humility that has characterized our tradition from its first days and manifests in the consistent refusal to hold the Reformed faith as alone true, best, and uniquely of God. We have always held that others believe differently and their beliefs are to be honored, respected, and allowed. But this does not necessarily mean within the church generally or the Reformed tradition specifically. To allow and respect the conscience of a Muslim, a Mormon, or atheist does not mean we agree with them, hold their doctrine, or welcome them as equal members within the church. As a confessional church—an essential and irrefutable characteristic of the PC (USA)—we state our beliefs and reasons for holding them, welcoming all who would agree, to join us in our confession and life. Those who disagree on sec- ondary or peripheral issues we acknowledge as full members in the holy, catholic church though outside of the Reformed tradition.\footnote{Within the 348 member churches of the World Council of Churches there exits broad parameters of belief. Nevertheless, both the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and Jehovah’s Witnesses are denied membership because of heterodoxy, i.e. beliefs that stand outside of and contrary to even the broadest understanding of Christian faith and doctrine.} Those who disagree on essential articles of faith and ethics, whose conscience is held captive to other doctrines, values, and philosophies we bless, love, and pray for but do not receive as members, officers, or pastors with equally valid perspectives. Indeed, on the very page that calls us to forbearance and to respect the consciences of those who believe differently is the reminder:

That our blessed Savior, for the edification of the visible Church, which is his body, hath appointed officers, not only to preach the gospel and administer the Sacraments, but also to exercise discipline, for the preservation of both truth and duty; and that it is incumbent upon these officers, and upon the whole Church, in whose name they act, to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous, observing, in all cases, the rules contained in the Word of God.\footnote{G-1.0303, \textit{Book of Order}, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II (italics mine).}

It is both unreasonable and unfaithful to hold, simultaneously, theological and ethical tenets that are disparate and mutually exclusive. This does not refer to discussions and debates over non-essential issues nor does it request or expect a perfectly homogeneous church. This would be unreasonable, unfaithful, and unhealthy. We refer to central, crucial, and essential doc- trines and ethical practices that are in danger of being lost by the church and non-Reformed, non-Christian teachings that are increasingly held as equally valid and legitimate with our historical standards. Currently within the PC (USA) there exist those who hold to the biblical and historical standards of the Reformed faith and others who have promoted serious, even heretical departures from these standards. Sadly, many in leadership of the church have ignored the clear mandate of the constitution and refused “to censure or cast out the erroneous and scandalous.” Indeed, all of us within the church are guilty of participat- ing and furthering the decline of the PC (USA) as we have together refused to stand for the truth of the Gospel, too readily accepted vapid substitutes, fallen for the lies of materialism and the idols of self-centeredness, and failed to live out the clear teachings of the Word of God. The consequences are grave. As a confessional church we have all but lost our confession. As a body we have lost all sense of real unity and instead become content with the protheses of connectionalism and toler-
Appropriate Response  
A Declaration of Theology and Action

ance. But in losing real unity we have lost our witness and are in the process of losing our very existence. At some point, if we have enough courage, we will need to wrestle with the question of whether our divided house and hearts have not led us to lose our God. The failure of some of our leaders—within and across the General Assembly, synods, presbyteries, permanent judicial commissions, and sessions—to maintain this standard (and numerous other standards) has brought us to a point at which others must arise to correct the errors and deficiencies that have gone uncorrected for decades while realizing the damage done may be too deep to heal. But it is clear that we can no longer remain silent and in our silence give tacit approval to that which is foolish, idolatrous, and evil. We can no longer be content with sitting on the sidelines wringing our hands or naively hoping that all this will simply go away. We can no longer cry, “Peace, peace…” when there is no peace. It is time to set aside our denial and acknowledge the magnitude of our problem the weight of which is greater than tolerance or celebration of diversity can bear or heal.

It is time for the church to choose whom it will follow: whether it will be the magnanimous gods of the age who rise without form or reality from every creed and who speak equally through every opinion and feeling or whether we will turn again to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. Many of our number have chosen the former and effectively left the fold of the PC (USA) and its theological traditions. Their boasts of faithfulness and full participation to the contrary, they have already left the church, if not in fact then in principle. It is time, in the name of integrity and honesty, for those who have denied and rejected the central tenets of the Reformed faith to graciously separate from the body and leave the church to those who have remained faithful to its standards, doctrine, and traditions. It is time for all within the PC (USA) to decide afresh whom it will follow. But as for us, we will serve, follow, and love the Lord God revealed in Christ and borne witness to in the Holy Scriptures, the God who graciously dwells among us making us his people.

IV. Faith and Full Participation in Christ Jesus

“One becomes an active member of the church through faith in Jesus Christ and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life”

Our disunity within the PC (USA) is further exacerbated by our confusion regarding the nature and character of the church, and what it means to be a member and an officer within it. Misunderstanding of participation, membership, and leadership within the church has led to a misshapen and deformed ecclesiology. The PC (USA) stands confused over the nature, character, and mission of the church and this confusion has brought devastating consequences. For where the nature of the church is confused the mission of the church is lost. It is therefore necessary that we reaffirm our understanding of the church as well as what it means to be a member of it. These standards of membership in turn form the basis and standard of ordination as elder, deacon, and minister of Word and sacrament making it even more crucial that they be determined, understood, and held by the church.

The church is God’s creation and work. We believe that the Father, from the creation of the human race, has faithfully, preserved, instructed, multiplied, honored, adorned, and called from death to life, a gathering of faithful people. We affirm that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, making us his new creation, and calling us to be ambassadors of reconciliation and witnesses to the transforming power of Christ’s resurrection. As such, the church exists as the body of Christ, a people of integrity, purity and devotion, born of God and ceaselessly striving to faithfully respond to the faithfulness of our Father in heaven. We are, by God’s gracious work, a people of faith.

Faith in Jesus Christ is the only basis for church membership and thus Active Membership—that is the beginning of full participation in the life and witness of the church and the standing upon which all ordained offices are contingent—means

36 Weinsheimer’s brilliant distinction is worth noting: “Tolerance is a social and political, not cognitive, value. It promotes peace, not truth.” This is found in Joel Weinsheimer, Eighteenth Century Hermeneutics: Philosophy of Interpretation in England from Locke to Burke (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

37 G-5.0101, Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.

38 3.05, Book of Confessions, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part I.


40 Acts 1:8.

41 See Rom. 7:4, 12:5; I Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12, 5:23. See also 5.130, 6.054, 6.186, Book of Confessions, Constitution of the PC (USA) part I and G-1.0100, Book of Order, Constitution of the PC (USA) part II.

42 G-5.0103, Book of Order, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.
nothing less than genuine, vibrant faith in Christ which accepts and exhibits his Lordship over all of life. By our faith, we are justified, that is declared righteous in His eyes and reconciled to God. Thus, faith provides understanding of God’s nature, will and work, binds us in trusting relationship to the Lord, and defines the shape of our lives. For these reasons, the health of the church and its members is directly tied to the depth, integrity, and truth of the faith they hold and live. Where this faith exists with integrity and vibrancy one can be assured of the health and future of the body. Where this is annulled, culturally defined, or simply forgotten the church will certainly fall into impotency and irrelevance. We hold that it is this latter state that accurately and increasingly describes the PC (USA) today. Thus we call all we can and certainly those within the PC (USA) to return to the living God in that full faith that lays claim upon and transforms the whole of one’s life.

We understand faith to be “the sure and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gracious promise in Christ is both revealed to our minds and confirmed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” Faith is not an opinion, perspective, or feeling. It is more than mere personal conviction. Faith is the fruit and effect of the Holy Spirit’s work on our lives. Revealing the truth of God to our hearts, the Spirit enables us to see and comprehend God’s will and enables us to wholeheartedly follow and live a life that is pleasing to God. We hold that faith means understanding, receiving, and appropriately responding to the essential tenets of the Christian faith, that is, the real acts and revealed nature and thus truth of God our Father. These are learned from the Bible’s witness and include our affirmation...

- of the Trinity and God’s existence as one being in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- of the Lordship of Jesus.
- of Jesus Christ’s dual nature, fully God and fully human.
- that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried.
- of the forgiveness of sins through faith in the person and work of Christ.
- of Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead and ascension to heaven
- that salvation is through Christ alone
- that salvation is by grace through faith, not of works.
- of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, who with the Father and the Son works to effect our salvation.
- of the Bible’s inspiration and authority.
- that God has, through Christ, called a church into being to do His will and proclaim His nature and work.
- that we are to live holy lives after the example of Christ.
- that we are to go into all the world, making disciples of all people and teaching them all that Jesus said and did.
- that Jesus will return to gather his church to himself and reign forever over all creation.

V. Faith as Response

The Christian life is a specific response of faith by which we publicly submit the whole of our lives to the lordship of Christ, entrust the whole of our lives to his mercy and grace, live the whole of our lives in joyous expectant obedience, and give the whole of our lives to the manifestation, exhibition, and expansion of his kingdom. Most practically, this means personal commitment to and sharing in the proclamation of the good news, participation in the life and worship of the church, prayer, study of the Scriptures and faith of the church, and supporting the church through the giving of money, time, support, and service.

For faith informs and transforms our lives. Knowing and trusting God’s will and work we are justified (declared righteous) and living our faith before God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we are sanctified (made righteous). In faith we turn to God and in the process, turn from all that would keep us from him and his blessings.

Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go. It’s rotten through and through. Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you. What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense… In Christ’s body we’re all connected to each other, after all.

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* This should not be considered an exhaustive list of all that one might include as an “essential tenet.” This simply notes some crucial points of faith that have been held by the church across its whole history, proclaimed in the Scriptures and repeatedly affirmed in the confessions and confessions of the PC (USA). The Scriptures and *Book of Confessions* provide a fuller and richer understanding of the content, object, and meaning of faith.

* G-5.0102, *Book of Order*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) part II.

* Ephesians 4.22-25 (*The Message*)
We hold that faith in Christ and purity of life are the two, necessary, sides of the one act of Christian discipleship. One can not have one without the other.\textsuperscript{47} Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.\textsuperscript{48} This means that faith not only receives God’s gifts and blessings, it endeavours to throw off all that would limit, deny or annul them. Faith, and thus church membership, is to put off the old and put on the new life God intends and thus, as an act of faith, in obedience and love to God, and in pursuit of that life Christ came to give, we put off our sinful nature seeking to reflect the image of Christ Jesus.

**PUT OFF- Marks of the sinful nature\textsuperscript{49}:**

- Sexual immorality: adultery, impurity, fornication, homosexual behavior, lust, pornography, orgies, prostitution, carnalness
- Malice: slander, deceit, murder, bitterness, falsehood, dissension, gossip, discord, revenge, hatred, unwholesome talk, coarse joking, obscenity, abusive talk, strife, disobedience to parents, treachery
- Greed: envy, love of money, theft, jealousy, idolatry, covetousness, swindling
- Lack of self-discipline: fits of rage, drunkenness, debauchery, laziness, love of pleasure
- Pride: selfish ambition, arrogance, boasting, conceit
- False spirituality: witchcraft, false teaching, empty religion

**PUT ON- Marks of the new life in Christ:**

- Sexual purity: fidelity to marital vows between a man and a woman, chastity in singleness
- Love: honesty, peacemaking, speaking the truth in love, forgiving, a mastered tongue, self-control, patience, kindness, sincere, impartial, merciful, considerate, forbearing, compassionate, thankful, loyal, gentle
- Humility: regard for authority, submissive
- Freedom from greed: contentment, faithful stewardship, financial/vocational integrity, generosity
- Sound doctrine: passion for godliness, worship of the true God, love of the Truth

Not one of us is free from sin, not one of us perfect\textsuperscript{50} and thus we are all ever in need of God’s grace and forgiveness which are available to all who confess their sins.\textsuperscript{51} We are ever in need also of the loving guidance and support of the church, recognizing that Scripture teaches us to rescue and restore one another in love.\textsuperscript{52} Only together, in humility and confession, in the fullness of mutual encouragement and love, can we grow into the life Christ died to provide. Nevertheless these Scriptural standards declare the will of God for our lives and the goals toward which we are to strive.

We stand eternally grateful to God for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and seek through these theological statements and the resolutions that follow to be a part of its restoration and healing. It is our intent to build up, unify, encourage, and strengthen the church in every way possible. It is our aim to advance the efficacy of its mission and ministry. It is our desire to protect the church from schism and heresy, doing all that is within our power to help build a church that brings glory to God through the display of his truth, purity, holiness, grace, and love. Where hard words and painful diagnoses have been expressed let it be known that it was done so not with joy but sorrow and heaviness of hearts deeply grieved over the state of our church. But we speak out from a deep trust in the power of God and hope that the church can be reformed, renewed, and unleashed to fulfill the Great Ends of the Church to the glory of God who alone is Saviour and Lord.

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**RESOLUTIONS FOR THE PRESBYTERY OF SANTA BARBARA**

\textsuperscript{*} Romans 6.1-23; 1 Corinthians 6.9-11; Galatians 2.20; 5.13-18; Ephesians 4.17-24; Colossians 2.11-12; 3.1-3; Titus 2.11-3.8; 1 Peter 1.13-2.12; 4.1-7

\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered} John 10:10.

\textsuperscript{*} These are composite lists derived from the following moral/ethical summaries in the New Testament: Mark 7.21-23; Romans 1:26-32; 13.8-14; 1 Corinthians 6.9-11; Galatians 5.16-25; Ephesians 4.22-5.21; Colossians 3.1-17; 1 Timothy 6.3-10; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; Hebrews 12.14-13.6; James 3:14-18; 1 Peter 2:1-3; 4.1-7

\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered} Rom. 3.23, 3:10-18; 1 John 1.8-10; Ecclesiastes 7.20.

\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered} 1 John 1.5-2.6

\textsuperscript{\textasteriskcentered} Matthew 18:15-20; Galatians 6:1-2; James 5:19-20.
The purpose of this paper, with its theological reflection and resolutions, is to provide a theoretical reason and practical actions that can unify the church and further its peace and unity. It is our belief that true ideas and faithful acts are the greatest conciliatory hope for the church. Holding that “truth is in order to goodness” we turn from the theological foundations to practical applications in full hope of providing a faithful and useable means of uniting the church, bringing peace and reconciliation, and concretely manifesting the purity Christ calls us to know and live.

**Toward Peace, Unity And Purity**

**Rationale:**

Our recent General Assembly’s adoption of the Theological Task Force’s Report on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church focuses attention on the responsibility of each governing body within the denomination to apply the constitution in its particular setting. The following resolutions are presented to accomplish this at our presbytery level and to provide leadership and guidance for our member congregations.

**Resolutions:**

1. In its discernment of the essentials of Reformed polity and for the sake of the peace, unity, and purity of the church, the Presbytery of Santa Barbara adopts the principle that compliance with the standards for ordination adopted by the whole church in the *Book of Order* is an essential of Reformed polity. Therefore, any departure from the standards for ordination expressed in the Book of Order will bar a candidate from ordination and/or installation by or membership within this governing body. Provisions of the *Book of Order* are signified as being standards by use of the term "shall," "is to be," "requirement," or equivalent expression. Those violating these standards shall be ineligible for ordination, installation, and/or service as minister of Word and Sacrament within our presbytery.

2. To promote the peace, unity, and purity of our presbytery, we resolve that the Presbytery of Santa Barbara shall not receive into membership, nor recognize as a member, anyone who has been made eligible for ordination or installation via the granting of an exception for his or her departure from the essentials of Reformed polity which denies or annuls any of the ordination standards as set forth in the Constitution of the PCUSA (G-1.0500) as described above.

3. In its discernment of the essentials of Reformed polity and for the sake of the peace, unity, and purity of the church, the Presbytery of Santa Barbara adopts the principle that compliance with the standards for ordination adopted by the whole church in the *Book of Order* is an essential of Reformed polity. Since every session member has vowed to be governed by our denomination’s polity, any conscious and collective departure from the essentials of Reformed polity is a sign of spiritual illness. The presbytery has the express power (a power that only the presbytery can exercise) to provide pastoral care for the churches and members of presbytery, visiting sessions and ministers on a regular basis (G-11.0103g). Therefore, the presbytery will counsel, guide and, if necessary, correct any session that is spiritually ill or in rebellion.

4. In its discernment of the essentials of Reformed polity and for the sake of the peace, unity, and purity of the church, the Presbytery of Santa Barbara adopts the principle that compliance with the standards for ordination adopted by the whole church in the *Book of Order* is an essential of Reformed polity. Since every pastor has vowed at ordination to be governed by our denomination’s polity, any conscious and deliberate departure from the essentials of Reformed polity is a sign of spiritual rebellion and/or illness. The presbytery has the express power (a power that only the presbytery can exercise) to provide pastoral care for the members of presbytery, visiting sessions and ministers on a regular basis (G-11.0103g). Therefore, the presbytery will counsel, guide and, if necessary, correct any pastor that is spiritually ill or in rebellion.

5. To promote the peace, unity, and purity of our presbytery, we resolve that the Presbytery of Santa Barbara shall therefore work pastorally with any pastor, session or congregation that contemplates or seeks dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA); shall not preemptively take any coercive action against any pastor, session or congregation who merely considers faithfully following the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) in another Reformed denomination; and shall not treat property as a basis for unity or as an opportunity for division. The presbytery interprets “use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (USA)” in G-8.0201 to mean, in the judgment of this presbytery, solely whatever furthers the Great Ends of Church (G-1.0200); interprets its express power “to coordinate the work
of its member churches, guiding them and mobilizing their strength for the most effective witness to the broader
community for which it has responsibility” (G-11.0103b) to mean that in some cases, a congregation, with its prop-
erty and financial assets, may be dismissed from the Presbyterian Church (USA) without penalty.

Stewardship and the Great Ends of the Church

Rationale:
Per-capita payments were established in 1803 as voluntary contributions to the church to aid commissioners who live at a
distance in attending meetings of higher governing bodies. This idea is continued to the present day with the Book of Order
allowing per-capita funds to be used for meeting the expenses of those attending. Nevertheless, over the decades and cen-
turies the per-capita has grown in both the amount assessed each congregation and the number of areas funded by per-
capita revenues. Numerous attempts of reform have been made including the 1986 General Assembly ruling that "only those
ecclesiastical functions which enable the General Assembly to plan, oversee, and evaluate the mission of the church will be
funded by per capita." But these attempts at reform have brought little change and today the per capita continues to grow
and fund areas far beyond meeting expenses or the mission of the church.

In 2006 the General Assembly anticipated $13,155,538 in per-capita revenue. Of that $718,895 was designated for permanent and special committees53, $783,895 to ecumenical groups54, $2,097,613 to Presbyterian Historical Society, $992,476 to Constitutional Services, and numerous other expenses.55 In fact these expenses are so great and so many that the General Assembly anticipates expenditures of $15,201,911—over 1.8 million dollars more than expected per-capita revenue.

We hold that 1) the historic and constitutional grounds for the per capita have been lost; 2) millions of dollars are spent upon
areas that many within our congregations find controversial and even reprehensible; 3) the vast majority of money spent from
per-capita apportionments does not further the mission of the church; 4) mission is best done within and by the local church
and presbyteries; and 5) as part of the larger church with no desire to withdraw or separate, we are morally obligated to par-
ticipate in supporting our share of legitimate expenses, prioritizing these and all presbytery expenses according to the great ends of the church (G-1.0200).

Resolutions:
1. In order to further the ministry of the presbytery and faithfully steward the funds entrusted to us, we the member
churches of Santa Barbara affirm our higher moral obligation to further the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) and,
as a presbytery, to coordinate and guide the collective ministry of our member churches (G-11.0103a, b). Therefore,
we resolve to willingly and cheerfully contribute to the Presbytery of Santa Barbara the full per-capita apportionment
determined by the presbytery with the understanding that funds so designated will be used by the presbytery to fur-
ther its mission and ministry.56

2. To promote the peace, unity, and purity of our presbytery and faithfully steward the funds entrusted to us, we resolve
that the Presbytery of Santa Barbara shall honor the protest of every congregation that chooses to exercise its right
to withhold its per capita while also considering remittance of per capita to General Assembly and synod to be a high
moral obligation. Be it further resolved that this presbytery holds its express powers and duties enumerated in G-
11.0103a & b to include higher moral obligations.57

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54 For example: National Council of Churches ($325,000); World Council of Churches ($458,402); and others. Of the 348 member churches/denominations in the WCC the PC (USA) is by far the single greatest financial contributor. For details one may read the entire 57 page Financial Report of the WCC online at: http://www.oikoumene.org/fileadmin/files/wccmain/2006pdfs/Financial_Report_2005_final.pdf
55 The General Assembly Per Capita Statement of Activities has 35 separate lines under expenditures, far more than space allows here. This document may be found online at http://www.pcusa.org/financials/percapita/0706pcenetassets.pdf.
56 Anticipated Santa Barbara Presbytery for 2006-07 per capita assessment will be $18.63 per member.
57 This is permitted by ruling of the 1999 General Assembly: “If churches refuse to pay their portion...the presbytery has the responsibility to pay the full amount irrespective to the specific collection from churches, as long as funds are available within the presbytery” (Italics mine). 211th GA minutes (1999, 65, 107, 16.008-.009, Req. 99-1). Note: This was an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of the constitution
3. In order to further the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) and faithfully steward the funds entrusted to us, we the member churches of Santa Barbara refuse to withhold or redirect per capita funds for any reason other than the furthering of the Great Ends of the Church. We therefore agree and pledge that any funds withheld from per capita will be designated for and given to the Presbytery or the mission work of the PC (USA) that best and most faithfully fulfills this higher moral obligation.

4. In order to further the ministry of the presbytery and faithfully steward the funds entrusted to us, we resolve to explore the propriety, feasibility, and advisability of pursuing remedial and legislative action to correct inappropriate use of per-capita funds by the General Assembly and the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii.

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**Peace, Unity, Property**

**Rationale**

Historically, we Presbyterians are connectional, constitutional, and confessional. All too often, we have also been combative and conciliatory as evidenced by our numerous splits and mergers. While we have a long tradition of encouraging people to advocate strongly for their positions, we also have a deeply rooted ethos to be conciliatory, even in the midst of great strife.

Since the 217th General Assembly in 2006, many faithful believers within the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been experiencing crises of conscience that may lead them to reassess their relationship with the denomination and even seek dismissal from this denomination. This has resulted in increasing discord and turbulence in the denomination over the issue of property. In 2005, the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly (SC) engaged legal counsel regarding possible actions to be taken against pastors, sessions and congregations who might seek a claim on church property and/or dismissal from the denomination. Their advice included many standpoint and other measures that are designed to squelch all potential dissent possible. This unrestrained preemptive grasp for power and control has forced congregations into a defensive posture and required them to consider a faithful and appropriate response.

There are two problems with the Stated Clerk’s preemptive act and the advice he received. First, these unbiblical tactics fundamentally forsake and damage the connectional nature of our community by being both harsh and preemptive. The compulsion of civil law cannot replace true connectionalism. Indeed, it destroys it. Second, despite much public rhetoric by the SC about peacefulness, community and conciliation, there has been no official repudiation of this legal advice. The lack of repudiation feeds the fear that those who would exercise freedom of speech will face preemptive retaliation. The result is compulsion through intimidation and the ruin of biblical peace, unity, and purity. Further, it forces churches to consider how they may defend themselves against possible legal action raised against them by their own denomination even as they pursue to faithfully fulfill the great commission of Christ and the Great Ends of the Church described within the Constitution.

by the General Assembly which has the force of law. It is worth noting that the General Assembly’s Advisory Committee on the Constitution has declined to speculate on circumstances that would make funds unavailable. It currently remains the express power of the presbytery to make this assessment and designation.

**58** This is found in two documents: *Processes for Presbyteries in Responding to Congregations Seeking to Withdraw and Church Property Disputes: A Resource for those Representing Presbyterian Church (USA) Presbyteries and True Churches in the Civil Courts.*

**59** Some recommendations included in these documents are the following:

1) the formation of administrative commissions to: (a) remove pastors who merely seek to discuss the possibility of being dismissed from the denomination (Processes, III.4.D.1.b); (b) assume original jurisdiction in order to prevent the Session from calling a congregational meeting to vote to request the presbytery to exercise its G-11.0103i power to dismiss the congregations (Processes, III.4.D.2.d); (c) “to keep the presbytery in a ‘defensive’ secular legal posture (let the schismatics seek Caesar’s help)” (Processes, III.4.F.2); (d) prior to disciplinary charges being filed, to remove a pastor from office on the presumption of guilt (Processes, III.4.F.3.A.1).

2) Preemptively file an affidavit against the title of property trust of the real estate. (Church Property Disputes: A Resource for those Representing Presbyterian Church (USA) Presbyteries and True Churches in the Civil Courts, page 3). In other words, the presbyteries are being encouraged to file a lien or encumbrance against congregational real estate in public records. Effectively, this is a way of warning people that there is a claim against the ownership of the property. It would make it difficult for a congregation to use the property as collateral or to sell it.

3) Label the defendants as schismatics in all legal filings (Church Property Disputes: A Resource for those Representing Presbyterian Church (USA) Presbyteries and True Churches in the Civil Courts, page 3).
Against the actions of the SC and the advice he has received are the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) and the first Historic Principle of Church Order, namely, “God alone is Lord of the conscience” (G-1.0301). First, our goal is to further the Kingdom of God. This may or may not include this denomination. The Presbyterian Church (USA) is only a part of the Church. Second, Presbyterians have historically given wide latitude in discussing all manners of issues. To squelch discussion or dissent preemptively is troubling. 1 Corinthians 6 is clear in directing believers to come together before going to secular court. We are deeply concerned that the denomination has created a war chest for anticipated secular legal battles. As people of faith, as ordained officers who are bound together by common vows, we should follow biblical principles for conflict resolution rather than employing scandalous tactics that are designed to win at all costs and maintain existing power structures. In John 17:21 Jesus prays that those who believe in Him would be one. We believe that the unity Christ calls us to is beyond denominational lines. The Presbyterian Church (USA), like all Christian denominations, is only one part of the Church over whom Christ alone is the head (G-1.0100). Therefore, whatever furthers the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) serves for the “use and benefit” of our denomination (G-8.0201).

Be it resolved that this presbytery:

1. respectfully, yet strongly, requests that the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly publicly repudiate the coercive, unbiblical, and unconstitutional practices advocated by his legal counsel regarding actions to be taken in secular or church courts against pastors, sessions and congregations who might contemplate or seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA). Furthermore, the Presbytery instructs its stated clerk to send this paragraph to the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly in a personal letter notifying him of the will of the presbytery on this issue.

2. recognizes and acknowledges its authority under G-8.0000 and G-11.0103i to evaluate questions concerning church property in light of the particular circumstances presented in each instance and to exercise its good judgment in accordance with Authoritative Interpretations of G-11.0103 made by the General Assembly in 1988, 1989, and 1990.

3. shall therefore work pastorally with any pastor, session or congregation that contemplates or seeks dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA);

4. shall not preemptively take any coercive action, as currently recommended by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, against any pastor, session or congregation who merely considers faithfully following the Great Ends of the Church (G-1.0200) in another Reformed denomination;

5. shall not treat property as a basis for unity or as an opportunity for division.

6. interprets “use and benefit of the Presbyterian Church (USA)” in G-8.0201 to mean solely whatever, in the judgment of this presbytery, furthers the Great Ends of Church (G-1.0200);

7. interprets its express power “to coordinate the work of its member churches, guiding them and mobilizing their strength for the most effective witness to the broader community for which it has responsibility” (G-11.0103b) to mean that in some cases, a congregation, with its property and financial assets, may be dismissed from the Presbyterian Church (USA) without penalty.

Preparing For The Future

Rationale:

More than ever healthy, covenantal relationships with the larger church are necessary if the church is to remain faithful, vibrant, and useful. Historically—and perhaps ideally—such covenantal relationships existed through and across the larger denomination which shared a unique heritage and confession. Sadly, this is no longer the case. Growing divisions, mistrust, and vastly different theological perspectives and values have led to a fragmented church. New covenantal relationships are therefore necessary in order to protect faithful congregations within hostile presbyteries, unite for the maintenance of Reformed standards of faith and practice, accountability, mission, and fellowship. New covenantal relationships are also necessary for assessing the state and future of the PC (USA) and determining a response of faith and integrity. We have long boasted in our connectional nature within the PC (USA). While we do not deny this reality, we hold that it is fractured and dysfunctional. Additionally, we hold that the higher standard expressed in the Scriptures is to be our goal and thus we seek new, vibrant, working relationships built around the unity of shared convictions, mes-
sage, and ministry. Finally, we believe we are called to participate in bringing peace, unity, and purity to the larger
church. With these in mind we adopt the following resolutions.

Resolutions:

1. We, the Presbytery of Santa Barbara resolve to form The New Covenant Task Force comprised of a total of nine
members comprised of roughly equal number of elders and pastors of the presbytery chosen by the moderator
and Executive Presbyter and affirmed by the vote of the presbytery charging them with the following tasks and re-
sponsibilities (as well as others made necessary by their work):
   a. Determine like minded presbyteries and congregations with whom we might enter a covenantal relation-
      ship.
   b. Explore as a presbytery and with other like minded presbyteries and congregations the potential shape,
      function(s), mission, and nature of these covenantal groups.
   c. Study and evaluate issues, decisions, and actions occurring in and through the PC (USA) for the purpose
      of educating the presbytery and, where deemed important or necessary, formulating a response that will
      be presented to the presbytery for its approval.
   d. Explore issues of property, per capita, pensions, and others that effect the presbytery, its member
      churches and ministers, making recommendations to Presbytery regarding actions that further our faith-
      fulness to God, the Great Ends of the Church, stewardship of that which God has given, the Constitution
      of the PC (USA), and our covenantal relationships.
   e. Explore how the Presbytery, with other covenantal partners, might seek to bring reform and renewal to
      our member churches.
   f. Explore how the Presbytery, with other covenantal partners, might seek to bring reform and renewal to
      the PC (USA).
   g. Make regular reports to the Presbytery regarding its findings, work, and recommendations.

2. We the presbytery of San Barbara instruct our stated clerk to send the full text of this document (theological pages
and resolutions) to the stated clerks of every congregation and governing body within the PC (USA) for the purpose
of dialogue, discernment, and in hope that we in some way can participate in leading the church to renewal of life
and faithfulness and thus genuine peace, unity, and purity.
Appendix B:
The Presbyterian Coalition "Altering the Covenant"
Altering the Covenant: A Critique of the Proposed New Form of Government

This paper has been prepared as a critique of the proposed new Form of Government that will be presented to the 218th General Assembly for action. “Altering the Covenant” is a joint effort sponsored by the Presbyterian Coalition. The paper is offered as a gift to the whole church, but we hope especially that it will be a useful resource to commissioners as they do their own reading and study of the document proposed as a substitute for our existing Form of Government.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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April 2008
Altering the Covenant: A Critique of the Proposed New Form of Government

Introduction: Omissions, Changes, and Consequences

A General Assembly task force is proposing a complete replacement of the Form of Government, the section of our constitution that most shapes our life together and our decision making processes as Presbyterians. In this paper we explain why we believe the action of the 218th General Assembly (2008) should be to disapprove the proposed new Form of Government (nFOG).

Should the General Assembly approve the nFOG, and a majority of presbyteries affirm its action, we will have a Form of Government that discards or significantly alters longstanding agreements that have made this part of our constitution useful to the church. For example, the nFOG would erase decisions made by Presbyterians not only in the distant past but also in recent history. Amendments adopted by our presbyteries as recently as 2007 would be discarded or rewritten. Authoritative interpretations by past assemblies and decisions by the General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Commission (GA PJC) would have no anchor in constitutional language, raising questions about their continued application. Many of the problems posed by the nFOG do not lend themselves to correction by amendment because they are conceptual in nature and shape the very meaning of the document.

This nFOG would not simply reorder and simplify our current Form of Government. It would change our polity significantly in many places. Some of the changes are obvious. Some are subtle or obscure.

While not all of the implications and consequences of the document can be known ahead of its actual adoption and application, some become apparent as the following questions are addressed: Exactly what would the nFOG change? What would it omit to become a smaller document? Will the changes proposed in the new Form of Government offer significant benefit to the Church? Will it address important expressed needs of our churches and presbyteries? And, what is the potential for harmful unintended consequences resulting from the extensive changes we have before us. The answers to these questions are critical.

The nFOG will not significantly reduce the size of the Book of Order. There are three parts of the Book of Order. Only the Form of Government section is included.

1. In this document we will refer to the constitutional Form of Government, under which we currently operate, as the existing Form of Government. We will distinguish the proposed new Form of Government, recommended by the FOG task force, by referring to it as the nFOG. When we compare passages from the two versions, we will give the citation accompanied by “nFOG” or “existing FOG.”

2. The Office of the General Assembly offers two resources for comparing the existing Form of Government to the nFOG. The comparison documents run to a total of 242 pages. Readers who attempt to compare the documents will not only find it a daunting effort but also will find that no comparison document will reveal all the changes. Further, the documents are not an aid to understanding the effects of the change.

3. The three parts of the Book of Order are the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules of Discipline.
in the proposed document. If those who have received a bound version of the nFOG compare its size to the existing Form of Government, and not to the entire Book of Order, they will find the nFOG less than a third shorter than our existing Form of Government. Combined with the Directory for Worship and the Rules of Discipline, it will not become a “shirt-pocket” edition.

The existing Form of Government has eighteen chapters. The nFOG has nine. Three of the new chapters make up a new section, called “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” identified by an “F” prefix. The remaining six chapters make up the “Revised Form of Government,” identified by a “G” prefix.

One of the most significant changes in the nFOG is the creation of a fourth part of the Book of Order called “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” which the task force calls “basic” and appears to regard as an interpretive lens for the rest of the book.

In the following pages, we will summarize some of the major problems that would accompany a complete replacement of the Form of Government. The problems fall into six broad sections:

- significant changes in theology;
- significant change in polity;
- introduction of new requirements, and new freedoms that may result in unintended license;
- inadequate checks and balances;
- ambiguity and opportunity for a variety of interpretations; and
- shifting of our governance toward local option: the handbooks.
I. FOUNDATIONS OF PRESBYTERIAN POLITY (CHAPTERS F-1 THROUGH F-3): A SUPER-CONSTITUTIONAL SECTION?

The nFOG Task Force is recommending a significant change in the creation of a new section of the Book of Order titled “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,” which it says “clearly sets apart a foundation for our entire polity.”

The new “Foundations” recommended by the task force combines the first four existing chapters of the Book of Order into three. The new section alters the meaning of the existing chapters significantly and introduces new, more ambiguous language.

Despite our differences, Presbyterians have found the existing first four chapters to be an essential basis for expressing and understanding our polity. Some material in the existing chapters is taken from time-tested historical documents. Though we agree with the task force that the concepts are true expressions of our identity and purpose as a church, we raise concern about the consequences of creating what might be regarded as a super-constitutional section of the Book of Order. Might this section become an “essentials” document by which the entire Constitution would be interpreted? What are the implications for sessions and presbyteries, and for authoritative interpretations, if that should happen?

In this section we will address first several of the theological problems we find in the nFOG. Then we will return to the question of polity and the possible consequences of creating a section of the Book of Order that is “basic” to interpreting the whole.

A. Significant Changes in Theology

1. Diminished Authority of Scripture

The phrase “Word of God”—which in our day is used with a variety of meanings—is routinely substituted for the word “Scripture” in the nFOG’s “Foundations.” Sections on the “Apostolicity of the Church” (F-1.0302a) and on the “Unity of the Church” (F-1.0302d) make no mention of Scripture. Worse, F-1.0302b says that congregations “listen for God’s Word in Scripture” [emphasis added], giving constitutional status to the problematic wording that separates the Word from Scripture. This language is contrary to our confessions—the Confession of 1967, as well as the Westminster—that declare Scripture to be the Word of God written. This would take the issue beyond the realm of differing interpretations of Scripture and into our convictions about the authority of Scripture.

Other places in the “Foundations” also diminish Scriptural authority. References to Jesus and the Holy Spirit are disconnected from Scripture. Under the heading “Openness to the Guidance of the Holy Spirit,” F-3.0301 says that though we are “grounded in Scripture . . . nonetheless the presbyterian form of government is always subject to the Lord of the Church.” Does the “nonetheless” suggest that what is found in Scripture can be distinguished from what is intended by the Lord of the Church?
Our existing Book of Order includes the responsibility of elders to “cultivate their ability to teach the Bible” (existing G-6.0304). This is removed from the nFOG.

Overall, this section would have the effect of diminishing Scripture’s authority for Presbyterians. The very mention of Scripture disappears from some sections; our clear, Reformed witness—that all of Scripture is God’s Word and that the Holy Spirit never contradicts Scripture—is altered.4

2. Inadequate Christology

Much of the problem of the nFOG can only be seen well in a comparison between the existing and the proposed to discover what has been omitted or altered. For example, the nFOG task force writes that the “Foundations” section begins with “a very simple but important statement on the activity of God in the world.”5 The desire to emphasize mission in the nFOG is commendable; nevertheless, the very purpose of that mission—Jesus Christ—is given short shrift in these critical opening statements. The power of the grand opening to our existing Book of Order is muted not only in the new placement, but also in the new language.

The words of our existing Preliminary Principles are both rewritten and relocated below the section on the church’s mission. The Book of Order’s strongest witness to the power and rule of the Church’s Savior would be displaced and weakened.

Notice what is removed: The power of Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus. The clear supremacy of Jesus.


There is another significant shift in Christology in the nFOG. Rich Gospel language from the existing Form of Government disappears. The “Foundations” section, that the task force says is “basic” to the *Book of Order*, curiously makes no reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Our existing Form of Government expresses our mission clearly and well in language omitted from the nFOG:

*Jesus came to seek and to save the lost; in his life and death for others God’s redeeming love for all people was made visible; and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ there is the assurance of God’s victory over sin and death and the promise of God’s continuing presence in the world.*

The changes to these sections on Scripture and Christology are at the heart of both our identity and our mission. We must be especially attentive to the implications of what is lost or altered.

### 3. Expanded Meaning of Inclusiveness

The church’s commitment to inclusiveness is altered in the nFOG in a way that has serious theological implications. The parallel passages of the new F-3.0303 and the existing G-4.0403 differ significantly in implied scope of the inclusiveness to which we are committed as a denomination.

#### Existing G-4.0403

*Persons of all racial ethnic groups, different ages, both sexes, various disabilities, diverse geographical areas, different theological positions consistent with the Reformed tradition, as well as different marital conditions (married, single, widowed, or divorced) shall be guaranteed full participation and access to representation in the decision making of the church.*

#### nFOG F-3.0303

*The Church is called to give full expression in its membership to the diversity of the human family, and shall be responsive to that diversity in its worship, government, and emerging life. It shall not deny participation or representation to persons or groups within its membership for any reasons other than those stated in this Constitution.*

The existing Form of Government expresses what we mean with a list of those we include. The nFOG would expand the meaning of inclusiveness, mandated by the word “shall,” beyond the limits specified by our existing language. The new language would allow some governing bodies to become more inclusive, and other governing bodies to become less inclusive than the existing language permits. For example, the language that mandates the ordination of women (existing G-6.0105) would disappear altogether in the nFOG.

In another part of the nFOG’s “Foundations” document, a list of those to be included would be more specific than our existing Form of Government. The Church catholic embraces “all genders” in the nFOG’s list, while our existing Form of Government refers to “one body”; “a fellowship of believers,” that seeks to include “all people.”

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6. The mention of Jesus’ death and resurrection appears only once in the document, in the polity section on membership: nFOG G-1.0301. This “basic” of our Christian faith is not in the “Foundations.”

7. From “The Church and Its Mission,” existing G-3.0102. That language appears only once in the nFOG: G-1.03, the polity chapter on the Congregation.

8. The list reflects the historical development of our commitment to be inclusive. Previous attempts to change this list to a more generalized statement—and thus a broadened inclusiveness—such as the nFOG proposes, have been rejected, most recently in 1998.
The existing Form of Government requires sessions to report on how the session makeup compares with the specific demographic makeup of its congregation (G-10.0301).9 This reporting requirement is gone in the nFOG, as is the requirement for Committees on Representation.10 By eliminating specificity, the nFOG would allow each ordaining body to determine for itself what constitutes a group of any sort to be included and potentially ordained. Paragraphs G-2.020311 and G-3.010412 in the nFOG are tied to this implied foundational principle of blanket inclusiveness. It is easy to see how this might be used by some to trump retaining the language of the existing G-6.0106b and its clearly exclusive requirement of “fidelity within the marriage of a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.”

B. Significant Change in Polity

In the rationale for their recommendation the task force notes that “no material in the current Chapters I–IV is identified explicitly as ‘foundational’ or ‘basic.’” The task force says, “A ‘Foundations’ section clearly sets apart a foundation for our entire polity,” and “resolves this lack of clarity.”13

The three new chapters would replace the first four chapters of the existing Form of Government and would be unamendable for six years following its adoption.14 This implies a new status for what historically has been integral to the Form of Government.

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9. Currently, minutes must “state the composition of the session with regard to racial ethnic members, women, men, age groups, and persons with disabilities, and how this corresponds to the composition of the congregation.” (existing G-10.0301)

10. Committees on Representation have been seen as so essential to the church’s goal of diversity that the General Assembly has declared that Committees on Representation could not be combined with other committees. (Minutes of the 196th General Assembly (1986), p. 605, 55.108)

11. “Ruling elders and deacons are men and women elected by the congregation from among its members. The nomination and election of elders and deacons shall express the rich diversity of the congregation’s membership and shall guarantee participation and inclusiveness.” (F-2.0303[the nFOG’s reference here is an error; it should be F-3.0303])

12. “The councils of the church shall give full expression to the rich diversity of the church’s membership and shall guarantee full participation and access to representation in decision-making and employment practices.” (nFOG F-3.0303)

13. See the task force rationales for both the “Foundations” (Report, p. 3) and for the Form of Government (Report, p. 21) sections.

14. If the nFOG is adopted by the GA in 2008 and subsequently ratified by the presbyteries, the first opportunity for amendment would be the year 2016.
Our highest church court, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GA PJC), addressed this matter in 2001 when it said that all parts of the constitution must be read with equal weight. It said:

*It is not unusual for a document such as our Constitution, written at different periods of time and under different circumstances, to exhibit tensions and ambiguities in its provisions. Nevertheless, it is the task of governing bodies and judicial commissions to resolve them in such a way as to give effect to all provisions. It is not within the power of any governing body or judicial commission to declare a properly adopted provision of the Constitution to be invalid. The only appropriate avenue to change or remove a provision of the Constitution is through the process for amendment provided within the Constitution itself.*\(^{15}\)

Is the nFOG proposing a change to our constitution that will alter how the constitution is read by the courts? Would the courts be inclined to regard the new “Foundations” section as an interpretive lens for the entire *Book of Order*? We believe very basic theological and polity questions are raised by the “Foundations” section of the nFOG that are not easily fixed by the amendment process.

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\(^{15}\) *Londonderry v. Presbytery of Northern New England.* The church court case was filed in response to the Presbytery of Northern New England’s concurrence with Christ Church (Burlington, VT) that it was valid to ignore the provisions of G-6.0106b when ordaining officers because G-6.0106b conflicts irreconcilably with the church’s obligation to be inclusive (existing G-4.0403).
II. Revised Form of Government
(Chapters G-1 through 6)

We now turn our attention to the six chapters that are proposed to replace fourteen chapters of the existing Form of Government.

Material from the existing chapters has been eliminated in some cases and reordered in others, sometimes to good effect, but more often in ways that make it difficult to see and consider what has been lost, reworded, or reordered. What follows are illustrations of the problems. They are not intended to be exhaustive.

Here again, we find that the major changes fall into general categories, three for this section: the introduction of new requirements, and new freedoms that may result in unintended license; inadequate checks and balances; and the introduction of ambiguity that allows for a variety of interpretations of the meaning of this new part of the constitution. We will address the effects of shifting our governance through new rules and handbooks in a section of its own.

A. Introduction of New Requirements, and New Freedoms that May Result in Unintended License

1. Changes to Per Capita and Mission Monies

The distinction between per capita and mission funds would be eliminated in the nFOG. They would be combined into what is called “requested funds.”

Thus, the General Assembly and synods would have authority to assess a far

Existing G-9.0404d

Each governing body above the session shall prepare a budget for its operating expenses, including administrative personnel, and may fund it with a per capita apportionment among the particular churches within its bounds. The presbyteries shall be responsible for raising their own per capita funds, and for raising and timely transmission of per capita funds to their respective synods and to the General Assembly. The presbyteries may direct per capita apportionments to the sessions of the churches within their bounds.

Sixth unnumbered paragraph of nFOG G-3.0107

The funding of mission similarly demonstrates the unity and interdependence of the church. The failure of any part of the church to participate in the stewardship of the mission of the whole church diminishes that unity and interdependence. All mission funding should enable the church to give effective witness in the world to the new reality of God in Jesus Christ. Each council shall prepare an annual budget. Councils higher than the session may request funds for their mission and for support of the meetings and ongoing functions through which the interdependence of the church is lived out. Presbyteries are responsible for raising their own funds and for raising and timely transmission of requested funds to their respective synods and the General Assembly. Presbyteries may apportion requested funds to sessions within their bounds.

16. In a joint statement in February of 2008, The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly and the General Assembly Council warned of “disastrous financial consequences to our presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly” if the current per capita system were replaced. “From time to time,” the two agencies observe, “calls are made to abandon our system of per capita and mission budgets and simply move to a coordinated budget that would fund both ecclesiastical and mission functions.” Although they do not name the nFOG, their description fits its provision for a single consolidated apportionment.
greater amount from each presbytery. The presbytery would be given new power to raise mission funds in addition to what is currently identified as per capita. The nFOG’s G-3.0107 says that “the presbyteries are responsible … for raising and the timely transmission of requested funds to their respective synods and the General Assembly” [emphasis added].

The nFOG says, “The session shall prepare and approve an annual budget and determine the distribution of the congregation’s benevolences” (nFOG G-3.025). However, the presbytery would have to collect from the congregations an amount sufficient to pay the funds required by the General Assembly and synods. This could mean that the session has the authority to “determine the distribution of the congregation’s benevolences,” but only those funds that are left after the General Assembly, synod, and presbytery assessments have been paid. The nFOG does not protect the responsibility of stewardship that falls to the congregations, and grants taxing authority to presbyteries.

The voluntary nature of per capita under our existing Form of Government has been firmly and repeatedly established by the church courts. Reference to per capita is removed from the nFOG. We must assume that, without an anchor in specific language, GA PJC decisions that ensure the voluntary nature of per capita also would disappear.

2. The Book of Order is Interpreted by ACC Advice to the General Assembly; The Balance of the GA PJC Decisions is Missing

The nFOG assigns to the General Assembly the responsibility and power of... “authoritatively interpreting” the Book of Order. But it eliminates wording of the existing FOG that includes decisions by the GA PJC as authoritative interpretation. However, readers must piece together wording from sections G-3.0110 and G-3.0501c of the nFOG to understand how the ACC and the GA relate to each other in issuing an authoritative interpretation. Nothing in the nFOG G-6.02 clarifies whether the ACC “reports” to GA are to be reviewed, amended or even approved by GA. Thus, this section of the nFOG seems to

### Existing G-13.0103r

The General Assembly has the responsibility and power to provide authoritative interpretation of the Book of Order which shall be binding on the governing bodies of the church when rendered in accord with G-13.0112 or through a decision of the Permanent judicial Commission in a remedial or disciplinary case. The most recent interpretation of a provision of the Book of Order shall be binding.

### nFOG G-30501c

The General Assembly has responsibility and power for ... interpreting the most recent edition of the Book of Order in a manner binding on the whole church, in accordance with the provisions of G-6.02....

17. In the existing Form of Government, two entities can issue an authoritative interpretation of the constitution: The GA PJC and the General Assembly (existing G-13.0103r).
say that the ACC interprets the Constitution and reports that interpretation to GA. Because they are unmentioned, GA PJC decisions are not recognized as authoritative interpretation.

This change would undo a primary means of checks and balances that has served the church well historically and continues to serve the church well today.

**B. Inadequate Checks and Balances**

One example of diminished checks and balances is the omission of the GA PJC to make authoritative interpretation of the constitution, thus increasing the interpretive power of the ACC. There are others; though, again, this list is not all-inclusive.

1. **Loss of Protections for Ministers and Congregations**

   A stated nFOG goal is “flexibility,” intended to free congregations and presbyteries to be more missional. However, such flexibility would not increase a congregation’s ability to do mission so much as it would increase the regulatory power of a presbytery and its ability to define mission. In addition, important due process protections for ministers and congregations disappear. Concerning ministers, for instance, the nFOG vastly broadens presbyteries’ powers to remove pastors altogether from their churches without due process. Only a careful comparison between the proposed nFOG and the existing Form of Government reveals such problems.

   The nFOG’s G-2.0701 would allow a presbytery to dissolve a pastoral relationship without a congregational meeting, should the presbytery decide that the “church’s mission under the word” demands such dissolution. Left unstated is the question: Who would decide? Apparently, each presbytery would need to develop a policy. What would be the congregation’s recourse? The pastor’s recourse? No due-process provision is included in the nFOG.

   Under the existing G-6.0702, a presbytery may presume that a minister has renounced its jurisdiction if that minister “persists in a work disapproved” by the presbytery. Chapter 6 states the various works associated with ministers’ vocations. The nFOG’s G-2.0307 would allow a presbytery to presume that a minister has renounced its jurisdiction simply if the minister “persists in work disapproved by the presbytery.” How might “work” in the new be distinguished from “a work” in the existing book, and what are the implications of the removal of the indefinite article?18

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18. Would “work” be a vocation that has not been validated by the presbytery, or could it be some activity in which the minister is engaged? Could it allow a presbytery—or a commission of the presbytery with such authorized power (see nFOG G-3.30110(5))—to remove a minister from its roll for continuing to engage in some action that a small delegated body of the presbytery deems undesirable?
The nFOG would remove the existing requirements for the content areas of the Standard Ordination Examinations. There would be no constitutional constraint or consistency in the areas of examination set by the GA.\textsuperscript{19}

Congregations also lose important protections and freedoms under the nFOG. For example, the existing requirement for specific notification of a congregational meeting would become “adequate public notice” (nFOG G-1.0501). Each congregation would set its own quorum and decide what is “adequate” notice for annual and special congregational meetings. The congregation would lose the constitutional right to approve and correct the minutes of their meetings. (Compare existing G-7.0307\textsuperscript{20} and nFOG G-1.0505.\textsuperscript{21})

In addition, because the nFOG would remove so many stipulations of the existing Form of Government and relegate others to manuals and rules of individual governing bodies, it would impair the ability of higher governing bodies to hold presbyteries accountable for compliance with the constitution.

\section*{2. No Guaranteed Proportional Session Representation in Presbytery}

The nFOG section G-3.0301 would remove the existing requirement in G-11.0101 that churches with greater numbers of members be represented in presbytery by a greater number of elder commissioners. The existing Form of Government assigns a specific number of elder commissioners based on church membership. The nFOG says, “The presbytery shall adopt and communicate to the sessions a plan for determining how many elders each session should commission to represent it at presbytery meetings,” and only requires that the number of members be taken “into consideration.”

This change would give presbyteries expanded power to assign the number of commissioners that a session could send to presbytery by using some criterion other than the size of membership of a congregation.\textsuperscript{22} This represents the kind of license allowed by the nFOG. Its use would further divorce the decisions of presbytery from its churches’ members.\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{flushright}
Decision-making by presbyteries is further divorced from congregations.
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\textsuperscript{19} That means that each GA would have opportunity to determine the areas of examination, opening the possibility for frequent changes and GA controversies over content areas. Candidates for the ministry of Word and Sacrament could find themselves forced to sit for completely new areas of examination with little time for preparation. Additionally, if the “Foundations” broad “inclusiveness” becomes a basic principle, it would be an obvious area for a new emphasis in examinations.

\textsuperscript{20} Existing Form of Government: “If the congregation does not approve the minutes of a congregational meeting before adjournment, the session shall read, correct, and approve the minutes of that congregational meeting at its next scheduled meeting and shall enter them into the permanent record. At the next meeting of the congregation, the clerk shall have the minutes available and shall report the session’s action. The congregation may ask to have them read and may make additions or corrections by vote."

\textsuperscript{21} nFOG: “The secretary shall record the actions of the congregation in minutes of the meeting.”

\textsuperscript{22} For example, elders serving as chairs of committees automatically might become voting members of presbyteries. In this case, the effect would be to increase the presbytery’s power to choose elder commissioners and diminish the number of elders actually representing the membership of a congregation.

\textsuperscript{23} Representation of members in the higher governing bodies already is affected negatively by the large number of members of presbytery who are not accountable to our congregations.
G-3.0304 of the nFOG allows each presbytery to write its own rule for calling special meetings and for giving notice. 24

3. Decision-making Consigned to Small, Delegated Bodies

The process used to develop the nFOG itself is an illustration of the document’s increasing relegation of decision and policy-making to small, appointed bodies. The recommendation for revising our Form of Government originated with the Office of the General Assembly. After its approval by the GA, the work was carried out by a small, appointed task force faced with fulfilling a huge charge in a short period of time. Their work was based on a rewrite provided by staff. This GA will be asked to respond to the wholesale changes presented in the nFOG in a period of time insufficient for adequate deliberation.

Governing bodies would be enabled to give up even more of their own authority and responsibility than is already permitted in our existing Form of Government. The nFOG provides increased opportunity to delegate decision-making from the larger, more representative bodies to smaller, less representative bodies. In every governing body, then, this practice raises questions: Who decides? Who appoints or elects the group that decides? What are the limits of a committee’s or commission’s powers? What are the options for review and appeal? What time is allotted for serious study and deliberation by the governing body of any decision?

We see this pattern throughout the nFOG document. It is of particular concern in some of the areas already mentioned, such as the loss of protections for ministers and congregations, in which presbyteries may choose to commission small groups to make critical decisions. Whether these decisions are final or subject to review by the presbyteries is up to the individual presbyteries in their policy-making. 25

Thus, under the nFOG checks and balances are diminished at every level. The courts would lose their balancing ability and the power of the ACC in authoritative interpretations is thereby increased. It would be much easier for a presbytery to abuse its power, deprive our congregations—both large and small—of proportional representation, decline to call meetings to address the concerns of minorities, or call hasty meetings that could prevent truly representative decision-making. And decision making would increasingly be relegated to smaller, less representative bodies.

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24. Presbyteries would be permitted to set the requirements so high that virtually no special meetings could be called. The existing G-11.0201 allows for two ministers and two elders from different churches to call a presbytery meeting. It requires that the notice of such a special meeting be sent out ten days in advance.

25. The pattern of this style of decision-making carries through all levels of governing bodies (“councils” in the nFOG). The GA would delegate much of its authority to committees and commissions.
C. Ambiguity and Opportunity for a Variety of Interpretations

We have already presented a number of examples of vague language in our discussion of the nFOG. But ambiguity throughout the document is itself of concern and deserves to be highlighted. A prudent evaluation of the nFOG requires that we ask questions.

What are the implications of creating a separate “Foundations” document?

What are the implications of the new language that omits reference to per capita?

What effects should we expect from the change of language about who interprets the constitution or how the constitution is interpreted?

What will happen if we remove the specifics of what we mean by “inclusiveness”?

What are the ramifications of omitting reference to Nominating Committees, Committees on Ministry, Committees on Preparation for Ministry, and Committees on Representation, all of which assume prominence in the existing Form of Government?

What about the General Assembly Council? It may continue to exist but, in spite of the statement in the rationale on page 23 of the nFOG booklet, there will be nothing in the constitution that makes reference to it or requires the GA to approve its mission design or the work that it does.

How will elimination of all specifics for ordination examinations affect us as a whole body?

In nearly every area to which we’ve brought attention in this document, ambiguity is a primary concern. We would have to anticipate an immediate turn to the courts and the amendment process at GA to begin to restore the clarity we have with our existing Form of Government.27

Unknown Impact on Ordination Standards

Consider, as an example of the consequence of ambiguity, recent decisions of presbyteries in San Francisco and Minneapolis. Their actions were based on what they thought was a new power granted them to decide that G-6.0106b (the “fidelity and chastity” requirement) in the existing Form of Government is not essential to ordination or to exercising the duties of ministry.28

26. The rationale section on page 23 of the booklet version of the nFOG (paragraph nine under “Rationale for B in the online version) says, “…there already exist bodies called ‘councils’ that perform specified functions on behalf of the larger entity. The Form of Government [nFOG] does not require that such bodies cease to exist. It does, however, omit explicit reference to them, so that presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly are free to assign those functions to such entities as they see fit to design and name.” Why is an existing body spoken of as if it does not exist and may be newly designed and named?

27. Even with so little time for presbyteries to respond, the amendment process already has been initiated in an overture from the Presbytery of the Foothills to make extensive changes to the nFOG—a 13-page document.

28. This ambiguity was introduced by the 2006 GA’s adoption of the Peace, Unity & Purity Task Force’s Recommendation 5 as a new Authoritative Interpretation.
We may hope that the actions of these presbyteries will be corrected by the church courts if the courts are faithful to the wording of the existing *Book of Order.* But, given the nFOG’s elevation of a non-specific inclusiveness, the court, whose make up changes with each GA, may find such inclusiveness—especially as set forth in a document that they have titled “Foundations”—a more essential principle.

Lack of constitutional clarity does not serve the church well. More ambiguity and less clarity, as exhibited in the nFOG, will not bring a resolution to conflicts. It is much more likely to invite more challenges, more regulatory actions, and more efforts to re-litigate previously settled issues.

29. This hope is bolstered by recent GA PJC rulings, particularly in *Bush v. The Presbytery of Pittsburgh,* remedial case #218-10, which said: “Candidates and examining bodies must follow G-6.0108 in reaching determinations as to whether the candidates for ordination and/or installation have departed from essentials of Reformed faith and polity. Such determinations do not rest on distinguishing ‘belief’ and ‘behavior,’ and do not permit departure from the ‘fidelity and chastity’ requirement found in G-6.0106b.”
III. SHIFTING OF OUR GOVERNANCE TOWARD LOCAL OPTION: THE HANDBOOKS

Presbyterian polity historically has been based on a belief in the sinful nature of humans and, thus, the need to limit individual powers and provide for decisions made by majority votes. We Presbyterians invented checks and balances in government. We have accumulated a useful body of experience-derived agreements about how we will live together, most of which were developed as cures for real problems needing concrete solutions. It is our existing Book of Order.

The nFOG attempts a clean-up effort. Yet it would remove the accumulated changes of our recent history that introduced processes to clarify and unify what we do. Many of those processes simply vanish. Others are alluded to by language in the nFOG that notifies the governing bodies (now called “councils”) that a “rule” must be written for this or that purpose. In many cases, the “rule”—currently stated in the existing Form of Government—will need to be reinvented by 11,000 sessions or 173 separate presbyteries.

Will our Form of Government be improved by reducing the number of rules and processes in our constitution? It might. Will it be improved by removing virtually all of the existing provisions that unify the way in which each individual body expresses the whole and moving existing provisions to handbooks that may be different for each governing body? We think not. We believe that is a formula for confusion.

The nFOG Task Force has listed seventeen pages of rules and policies that the various governing bodies would be required to provide if the proposed nFOG is adopted. Its list is based on what is in the nFOG. The list does not include material that has been removed. We have identified more than three dozen additional rules or policies that would have to be written to account for the material deleted from the existing Form of Government.

One result would be rules buried in minutes of sessions and presbyteries, and handbooks for governing bodies and committees. It would become a challenge to find, much less apply, particular policies or procedures.

Further, the more serious question of how to amend such rules and requirements would be a constant source of trouble and confusion in our governing bodies. There is no avenue to correct rules in minutes and handbooks beyond changing the mind of the body that adopted them in the first place. If it is not in the Book of Order, it is not subject to review or correction by the courts.

30. While some of the task force’s suggested changes do, indeed, simplify language, the church would be better served by the normal overture/amendment process that allows for more careful and less confusing assessment by churches and presbyteries of the potential consequences of changes.

31. The list includes rules or policies for every governing level. It is available from The Presbyterian Coalition.

32. The GA PJC issued a decision (Hope et al. v Presbytery of San Francisco, 217-1) that said: “[T]his Commission [GA PJC] rules on violations of the requirements of the Book of Order rather than those of internal Presbytery policy.” The court went on to state that “the presbytery’s failure in this case to follow its own stated policy does not rise to the level of a constitutional error.” In this case, the presbytery claimed that “The Synod Permanent Judicial Commission erred in failing to take into account the failure of the Presbytery and its Committee on Preparation to follow its own policies and procedures.” The court refused to intervene to enforce the presbytery’s policies.
So, every governing body with its own set of rules; separate committees of every governing body with their own sets of rules; less connection between governing bodies—this moves us toward a local option, or congregationalism, that would encourage more autonomy among our governing bodies, less accountability, and much less unity in common standards and expectations.

What do all these separate bodies of rules mean to individual elders and pastors? Would it make any difference to a congregation’s ministry whether something is constitutional or simply a rule of the congregation or presbytery? The answer lies in our connectionalism as a Reformed body of believers.

Our existing form of government is based on a presumption that we need each other as an encouragement, as a corrective, as different but complementary parts of the body of Christ in the world. And so we live together under common standards—and processes, too—that apply to us wherever we are in our denomination. When an elder or minister enters our church or our presbytery, we presume that person has met the same basic standards and requirements that we ourselves have met, and lives among us with the same understandings that we have. Our constitution is second only to Scripture as the source of our unity. Our existing Form of Government expresses the relationship in this way:

All governing bodies of the church are united by the nature of the church and share with one another responsibilities, rights, and powers as provided in this Constitution. The governing bodies are separate and independent, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church performed by it through the appropriate governing body.” (G-9.0103, emphasis added)

The nFOG includes a version of this wording, but its overall effect is to permit such individualized processes and policies that churches and presbyteries would not necessarily know or agree with actions taken by another church or presbytery. We must wonder how the act of one governing body would be the act of the whole church under the nFOG. We must wonder, too, what acts might take place that would wound our consciences and for which there would be no recourse.

Conclusion

Since the days of John Calvin, Presbyterians have had a Book of Church Order containing the rules and processes of our unique way of governing ourselves. Our Form of Government was rewritten in 1983 as the result of the merger of the northern and southern streams of our denomination, each of which had its own Book of Order. That rewrite was necessary. The necessity for a rewrite at this time has not been established. Further, this effort to substitute the nFOG for our existing Form of Government is unparalleled in its haste.

The 2006 GA approved an Office of the General Assembly recommendation that called for a task force to revise the Form of Government. We gratefully acknowledge the task force’s service and the contribution of their time and energy in response to this GA request. It was a daunting assignment.

The nFOG is built on a premise of trust and a belief that with fewer
constitutional constraints, we will do what is faithful and right and fair and in the best interest of the whole body—and that we agree on what we mean by those words. There have been times in our history when that was more possible than it is today. We hope and pray for that time to come again. But the nFOG, with its locally developed policies, willingness to experiment, and ambiguous language, is not a document that will take us there.

The comprehensive nature of this rewrite, the significance of many of the changes, and the speed at which a decision is called for raise the stakes for trust. In addition to the problem of hastiness, there are substantive problems with the content, which we have only sampled in this paper. The problems are pervasive and do not lend themselves easily to repair by amendment at the GA. If the GA adopts the document in 2008, presbyteries will vote either for or against it as a whole. Amendments will not be possible at that time.

At the beginning of this document we raised questions which we believe are essential to judging the nFOG. The proposed document does not simply reorder, shorten, or simplify our polity. It changes our polity, our way of living together as Presbyterians. Presbyterians need to be clear about what is gained and what is lost. Presbyterians need to know what effects to expect from the changes. Presbyterians need to know whether the nFOG responds to the needs of the church and will bring significant benefits without serious harms.

We believe the church will not be helped by the changes offered in the nFOG. Should the church desire to amend the constitution, we believe the whole church would be better served by using the normal overture and amendment process that allows for broader guidance and more careful assessment of the ramifications of changes.

**Recommendation**

The Presbyterian Coalition recommends disapproval of the proposed new Form of Government.

If the General Assembly deems this project worthy of consideration, we recommend that it be referred to the lower governing bodies for at least two years of study and response. We should look to our congregations, our sessions and our presbyteries, where we prepare for and do the mission of the church, to speak to any need we have to revise our Form of Government.
We are grateful to *Theology Matters* for publishing an earlier draft of this white paper. The current version is slightly revised, particularly in Section 6.02 on “Interpreting the Constitution: The Advisory Committee on the Constitution.”