

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE 220th GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PRESBYTERY TOWN HALL MEETING

JULY 28, 2012

Election of Moderator/Vice Moderator

On the fourth ballot, Rev. Dr. Neal Presa was elected Moderator of GA220. He is currently the senior pastor at Middlesex Presbyterian Church in Middlesex, New Jersey, and will begin teaching classes on preaching and worship at New Brunswick Theological Seminary this fall. Considerable controversy arose concerning the confirmation of Vice Moderator Rev. Tara Spuhler McCabe. On April 28, Rev. McCabe solemnized the marriage of two women in Washington DC, in violation of the PC(USA) Book of Order. She resigned the office on Wednesday, and Rev. Dr. Tom Trinidad (Senior Pastor at Faith Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado) was confirmed to take her place.

Mid-Councils Commission

The General Assembly declined to follow the recommendations of the Commission on Mid Councils the previous General Assembly established. This General Assembly voted not to allow the creation of non-geographic presbyteries not to allow the elimination of synods in the PC(USA). Other significant parts of the commission's recommendations were either rejected or given to a new administrative commission for further study and recommendation.

Divestment

The Mission Responsibility Through Investment committee of the PC(USA) brought to the General Assembly a recommendation to divest from three companies - Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard and Motorola Solutions – in protest of the use of their products by Israel in the new settlements. This issue had a lot of energy and commissioners heavily lobbied on both sides. In a very close vote of 333 to 331, the General Assembly voted not to approve the divestment but instead to call for ways to “positively invest” in the region. In a related item the General Assembly issued a call to boycott products produced by Israeli companies in the Occupied Territories (particularly AHAVA Dead Sea Laboratories beauty products and Hadiklaim dates).

Marriage and Civil Union

The General Assembly rejected a motion that would have re-affirmed the existing word of the Book of Order defining marriage between “a man and a woman.” Yet, shortly following this in a very close vote (308 to 338), the General Assembly defeated a motion to change the definition of marriage to be between “two people” instead of “between a man and a woman.” Also, the General Assembly turned down a request for Authoritative Interpretation that would have permitted ministers to perform marriages in States where it is permitted by State law. The Assembly did approve a two-year “season of serious study and discernment concerning the meaning of Christian marriage.”

Book of Confessions

The General Assembly voted to approve a new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, which will include scripture citations. This will be sent for approval by presbyteries. The General Assembly also voted to send The Belhar Confession, back to the presbyteries for another vote. The Belhar Confession was defeated by the presbyteries last year. The reason most give for defeating The Belhar Confession last time is a concern that it elevates unity above theological conviction and contains words that will likely be used to discourage dissent. Since both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belhar Confession would be in our Book of Confessions it requires a super-majority vote by presbyteries for approval.

Ordination Standards

By a vote of 437-169, the Assembly refused to restore “fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness” to the *Book of Order*. That language was removed a year ago in voting by the presbyteries. The defeated language would have added to G-2.0104b “the commitment to live a chaste and disciplined life, whether in holy marriage between a man and a woman or in single life.”

By a vote of 329-275 the Assembly voted to propose an amendment to the ordination standard in G-2.0104a that the manner of life of church officers should “include repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace.” This addition will go to presbyteries for their vote to approve.

The Assembly voted approval of the following resolution with a notable deletion/addition: “The 220th General Assembly (2012) acknowledges that faithful Presbyterians earnestly seeking to follow Jesus Christ hold different views about what the Scriptures teach concerning the morality of committed, same-gender relationships. Therefore, while holding persons in ordered ministry to high standards of covenant fidelity in the exercise of their sexuality, as in all aspects of life, we [~~decline to take an action that would have the effect of imposing on the whole~~] **acknowledge that the** Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) [**does not have**] one interpretation of Scripture in this matter. We commit ourselves to continue respectful dialogue with those who hold differing convictions, to welcome one another for God’s glory, and not to vilify those whose convictions we believe to be in error. We call on all Presbyterians to join us in this commitment.”

Polity and Confessional Standards

Based on a prior ruling of the Moderator on another matter, a commissioner moved the Moderator to rule the overture changing the definition of marriage out of order because it contradicted the Book of Confessions in three separate places. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) was asked to respond. Referencing the Book of Confessions (BOC) the ACC indicated that in its opinion the BOC was not a rule book but rather a collection of theological statements with internal conflicts. On the other hand the ACC, discussing the Book of Order (BoO) said, the BoO “...contains the standards by which we operate. We have been asked occasionally if it is necessary to amend the Book of Confessions in order to amend a similar provision in the Book of Order. The answer is no.” The ACC then ruled that the marriage Overture was not in conflict with the BOC even though it directly contradicted it. Based on this opinion the Stated Clerk advised the Moderator who ruled that it was not out of order. Another Commissioner challenged the ruling and sent it to a floor vote where the Assembly voted 70% to affirm the view of the ACC.

Other Actions

- Gradye Parsons was elected to a second term as Stated Clerk without opposition.
- A New hymnal, “Glory to God,” was approved for us in the denomination.
- Voted to challenge the denomination to establish 1001 new worshipping communities over the next 10 years.
- General Assembly asked the Board of Pensions to consider sharing its benefits program with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians as well as other possible partners.
- General Assembly directed the Committee on the Office of General Assembly to study presbyteries’ ability to pay obligatory per capita funds;
- The General Assembly approved a statement that corporal punishment is never appropriate in the discipline of children-neither in the classroom nor by parents.
- General Assembly approved a resolution encouraging participation in the Words Matter project of the WCC, an offshoot of the 1993’s “Re-Imagining” campaign, which among other ideals seeks to extricate “Lordship” language from denominational theology and worship due to its masculine/dominating connotations.
- The General Assembly did not take any action in response to the Presbytery of the Redwoods’ refusal to follow the order from the GAPJC to rebuke Jane Spahr (for performing same-sex ceremonies).
- The General Assembly refused to take any action to amend the opening sentences of the new Form Of Government which many believe supports a theology of universal salvation.