

Some Important Actions of the 219th General Assembly, 2010

There are many reasons to be concerned about the actions of the 219th General Assembly. But there also are reasons to offer up thanks and praise to God. We are most thankful for commissioners who, though they were on the losing side of some votes that mattered greatly to them, spoke boldly and well, both in committee and before the whole assembly. The witness to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus was strong and faithful, and we rejoice in that.

We are thankful that the Church's historic and biblical teaching on marriage was maintained by this General Assembly.

And, we are thankful for the reelection of the GAMC Executive Director Linda Valentine who is leading that part of General Assembly's work with a commitment to the mission of Jesus Christ. Her election, along with the affirmation of her new deputy, Roger Dermody, mostly recently associate pastor at Bel Air Presbyterian Church, reflect an encouraging trend in staffing decisions in Louisville.

The joint renewal effort was active and effective in working with commissioners and overture advocates. The strong and persuasive voices in committee and on the floor were well known to us. They effected a number of important restraints on the assembly.

Three significant proposed Constitutional amendments were approved by the General Assembly (GA) and **will be voted on by presbyteries this year.**

1. Remove "fidelity and chastity" from the *Book of Order*.
2. Adopt a rewritten Form of Government
3. Add the Belhar Confession to the *Book of Confessions*

We recommend a "No" vote on each of them.

In addition, the Assembly approved

- urging the Board of Pensions to extend benefits to same-sex domestic partners
- study of documents on marriage
- a commission to act on the make-up of presbyteries and synods
- continued work to retranslate the Heidelberg Catechism (*Book of Confessions*)

Another attempt to remove the requirement for "fidelity and chastity"

AMEND THE *BOOK OF ORDER* by amending G-6.0106b to remove the "fidelity/chastity" requirement from our ordination standards. The GA approved striking the "fidelity/chastity" requirement for ordained officers and replacing that requirement with vague language. This amendment would remove the explicit acknowledgment in the *Book of Order* that "fidelity/chastity" is among the moral requirements taught in Scripture and the confessional standards of our denomination.

The "fidelity/chastity" language was added to the *Book of Order* in 1997 in response to a General Assembly Permanent Judicial Committee opinion (Remedial Case 206-3), stating that explicit language must be added to the *Book of Order* if the church wanted to maintain the "fidelity/chastity" standard, which summarizes the understanding of sexual morality that has been held by the Church throughout its history. This will be the fifth time in 15 years that presbyteries will vote on this language. The PC(USA) has repeatedly made a deliberate decision to maintain this standard in spite of cultural pressures to normalize behavior that Scripture and the Church universal regard as sinful. Adoption of this amendment requires approval by a majority of the presbyteries. It is critical to the well-being of our denomination that this amendment, like others before it, be defeated.

Rewrite of the Form of Government in the *Book of Order*

AMEND THE *BOOK OF ORDER* by replacing the entire "Form of Government" section with two sections, a new "Foundations" section and a completely rewritten "Form of Government" section. Many commissioners in the committee and on the floor demonstrated a keen knowledge of obvious problems with the document they received (i.e. "church" is no longer defined as "denomination," and the line stating, "It is of particular importance that sessions: . . . send to presbytery and General Assembly requested financial contributions" was removed). They were problems cited in resources provided by the Coalition. But the assembly did not have sufficient time to deal

with the most basic difficulties of the document. It remains an unsuitable replacement for our current “Form of Government.”

Attempts to amend the “diversity” provision of the proposed document (both in committee and in plenary) were unsuccessful; therefore the “Foundations” section (F-1.0403) still states that God unites people without regard to “theological conviction”—a statement that many regard as a broad universalism—and specifies, “The PC(USA) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership,” suggesting that standards for membership are the only qualifications for office in the church. This sentence conflicts with the “fidelity/chastity” requirement for church officers which is retained in the proposal, but is not in the “Foundations” section. The proposed document says that conflicts like this very basic one would have to be resolved by the courts of the church. Thus, the constitution becomes an ambiguous document needing “professional” interpretation.

Therein lies the biggest problem with the proposed replacement for the current “Form of Government”: it is incomplete and vague, allowing great leeway for unrestrained Authoritative Interpretations by future General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commissions and future General Assemblies. By removing basic and significant provisions from the *Book of Order*, the proposed “Form of Government” requires each governing body to determine its own standards and procedures and to write those procedures in its own manuals. These procedures are not minor details that can appropriately vary from one presbytery to another, but rather are key aspects in our life as a denomination, such as how presbyteries relate to Pastor Nominating Committees and congregations in the calling of a pastor, procedures for preparation for ministry, and even the number of and subjects of ordination examinations. These important provisions are included in our current “Form of Government,” giving minority sessions and congregations the protections of having church-wide standards approved by both the General Assembly and the majority of presbyteries (as is necessary for amending the *Book of Order*). When such provisions are removed from the *Book of Order*, church-wide standards and protections are lost and future changes require only the approval of a governing body to change its Manual of Administrative Operations.

Adoption of this amendment requires approval by a majority of the presbyteries. It is important that the proposed “Form of Government” revision (both the “Foundations” and the proposed “Form of Government” revision) be defeated.

Proposal to adopt the Belhar Confession

AMEND THE *BOOK OF CONFESIONS* to include the “Belhar Confession.” The Belhar Confession was adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa to focus on unity among churches involved in apartheid.

The Belhar Confession lifts up “unity” as the highest value, stating that, “. . . anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted.” This has become a lop-sided focus by some in our denomination (the Peace, Unity, and Purity report is an example): unity at the expense of purity. Because the Belhar Confession does not acknowledge the authority of Scripture, the Belhar is easily open to misuse, specifically by those working to see homosexual practices become acceptable in the church and those who wish to change the definition of marriage from being limited to the covenant between a man and a woman. The Belhar could easily be used to say those who uphold biblical moral teaching are threatening the unity of the church!

The issues of racial equality and reconciliation are already fully addressed in the context of acknowledging the authority of Scripture in the “Confession of 1967,” which is already a part of our *Book of Confessions*. Adoption of this amendment to add the Belhar Confession to our *Book of Confessions* requires approval by 2/3 of the presbyteries. The “Belhar Confession” should be defeated.

In addition to recommending these constitutional changes, the G.A. took the following actions of significance:

“Urged” extending BOP benefits to same-sex domestic partners

The GA “urged” the directors of the **Board of Pensions (BOP) to increase mandatory dues paid by all congregations and use that money to extend Medical and Pension Plan benefits to same-sex domestic partners of PC(USA) employees covered by the Plan and to their children on the same basis as benefits are provided to heterosexual spouses and their children.** The wording approved by the GA includes:

. . . extend eligibility for spousal and dependent benefits under the Plan to Benefits Plan members, their same-gender domestic partners, and the children of their same-gender domestic partners, on the same basis as, and equivalent to, benefits made available to Benefits Plan members, their spouses, and the children of their spouses.

Every church member and every congregation is affected by this decision. The *Book of Order* requires that, as a part of the terms of call for all installed pastors, all congregations must pay for their pastors’ participation in the denomination’s Medical and Pension Plan offered through the Board of Pensions (BOP), a corporation that was created to provide these services to our denomination.

Because of the “community nature” of the Plan, the cost to a church is not related to the actual cost of insuring that congregation’s own pastors or their families. Instead, each congregation is required to pay dues consisting of a fixed percentage of the “effective salary” (salary plus housing allowance) of their pastors. Dues paid by each congregation go to pay a portion of all benefits for everyone in the plan. Congregations are currently required to pay 31.5% of their pastors’ “effective salary” (salary plus housing allowance) to the BOP. The GA authorized the BOP, effective January 1, 2012, to increase Pensions dues by 1 percentage point (increasing a congregation’s total dues from 31.5% to 32.5% of the “effective salary” of all its pastors), which is a 3.17% increase in what each congregation will be required to pay to the BOP for Medical and Pension Plan coverage. Although an increase in Pensions dues requires GA approval, approval by the GA is not needed to raise dues for the Medical Plan.

The financial cost is significant, but it is not the most serious issue. The GA’s action requires members and congregations to support—with their tithes and offerings—practices which Scripture and our Confessions call sin. Of interest is the decision of the G.A. to withhold benefits to domestic partners that are not of the same sex, thus clearly favoring same-sex relationships. If the BOP accommodates this request of one GA, the BOP will be mandating that congregations pay to subsidize a lifestyle that is in direct conflict with the Constitution of the denomination the BOP exists to serve.

Marriage studies commended to church

Several items of business related to **marriage** were acted on by the GA.

- a. The GA voted to commend both the **“committee (majority)” report and the “minority” report** from the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage,” to sessions and presbyteries for study. The “minority” report upholds the biblical understanding of marriage. We recommend that churches engage in this study and grow in their understanding of God’s purpose for marriage between a man and a woman.
- b. The GA declined¹ a recommendation to amend the Directory for Worship in the *Book of Order* that would change marriage from “a man and a woman” to **“two people.”**
- c. The GA turned down* a recommendation to adopt an **Authoritative Interpretation (AI)** of the Constitution that would allow PC(USA) ministers to perform (or choose not to perform) “marriages” between persons of the same gender if they had obtained a marriage license, and would allow sessions to permit (or choose not to permit) use of church facilities for such ceremonies. If such an AI from the GA had been approved, it would have taken effect immediately without presbytery approval.

Thus, this General Assembly retained the biblical and historic teaching on marriage. The recommended study will undoubtedly lead to more overtures. We should seek a predominance of overtures affirming marriage as Scripture defines it.

Created a commission

GA created a **Commission to act with the full powers of the GA to re-draw presbytery and synod boundaries and to create, divide and combine presbyteries and synods.** In addition to authorizing the Commission to act by the direction of the 219th GA, in plenary session the GA added a protection on how the Commission could become involved in particular presbyteries and synods by specifying that presbytery boundaries can only be changed after the Commission has been invited to be involved “upon a majority affirmative vote of the affected presbytery or presbyteries” and synod boundaries can only be changed when the Commission has been invited to be involved “upon a majority affirmative vote of the presbyteries in the affected synod or synods.” The Commission is also authorized to “supervise the Special Administrative Review Committee on Puerto Rico and act on any recommendations they may make within the powers given to the commission.” The Coalition had recommended a “committee” (with powers limited by the *Book of Order*). The work of this “commission” is a matter that requires attention.

Continued effort to retranslate the Heidelberg Catechism

The GA voted to allow the “Special Committee on the **Heidelberg Catechism**” to remain in place another two years and expanded its scope of responsibilities. The Special Committee was appointed 2008 with the narrow assignment of “correcting translation problems” in five responses in Q/A 19, 33, 55, 74 and 87 of the Heidelberg Catechism as found in *The Book of Confessions* and to add the original Scripture texts of the German Heidelberg Catechism.

Currently, the answer to Q 87 (about the necessity of repentance to salvation) quotes from 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and includes the term “homosexual perversion,” as one of the sins listed in the translation of those verses. Many who favor eliminating the denomination’s “fidelity/chastity” requirement anticipate that the new wording selected for the answer to Q 87 will be changed to language accepting of homosexual practices. In the enthusiasm for reviewing and retranslating this entire catechism, it is easy to lose sight of the significance of the catechism’s teaching on the necessity of repentance to salvation and the fact that although wording of English translations of that passage varies, all homosexual practices are included as sin by the Greek words used in that Scripture text.

This GA’s action was to expand the work of the Special Committee on the Heidelberg “to recommend to the 220th GA (2012) a new translation of the present Heidelberg Catechism in *The Book of Confessions* in cooperation with the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCNA) and the Reformed Church of America (RCA)” and to “consider inclusion of appropriate Scriptural citations and/or textual references that correspond to each article of the Catechism.”

ⁱ When this GA Committee’s report was before the plenary session of the GA and portions of the report had already been acted on by the GA, a commissioner made a motion from the floor to “answer” all of that committee’s remaining items (which included the constitutional amendment to change marriage to “two people” and the AI allowing “marriages” between two people of the same gender) with the action the GA had already taken in commending the reports on marriage to the church for study. The motion to answer all of that committee’s remaining items by that previous action was approved 348 yes to 324 no. (So the “Directory for Worship” change on marriage and the AI on marriage were never brought up for individual votes in plenary.) A motion the next day for the GA to reconsider that action failed by a wide margin.

* Same explanation as above applies to this item of business.