

The GA “Urges” Board of Pensions to Extend Benefits to Same-Sex Partners

by James R. Tony

The General Assembly Action

The recent 219th General Assembly (GA) passed a resolution that “1. Urge[d] the Board of Pensions ...to extend eligibility for spousal and dependent benefits under the Plan to Benefits Plan members, their same-gender domestic partners, and the children of their same-gender domestic partners.... 2. Approve an increase in dues for the Benefits Plan of up to 1 percent, effective January 1, 2012...”

Participation in the Board of Pensions (BOP) plan is mandatory for all installed pastors. The *Book of Order* stipulates that the terms of call for an installed pastor, “shall include participation in the Benefits Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), including both pension and medical coverage...” (G-14.0534). In the language of the *Book of Order* the word “shall” makes an action mandatory.

This means that when a congregation has an installed pastoral position (even in a vacancy situation), the congregation must pay DUES for plan participation. Dues are not paid for individual coverage; thus, they are not like “premiums” to an insurance plan. Instead dues are a percentage of salary; they are paid into common funds: a retirement fund and a medical fund. Then the common fund is used to make retirement and medical payments to individuals. Thus a portion of what is paid out to any individual who is a “member” of the plan is paid by each and every contribution to the plan. This distinction from ordinary medical insurance is important.

This GA action, if the BOP adopts it, would require church members to support—with their tithes and offerings—practices that Scripture, our confessions, and the *Book of Order* call sin. In authorizing the BOP to raise mandatory dues up to one percent, the mandatory dues could increase from the current 31.5% to 32.5% of the pastor’s effective salary. This amounts to an actual increase of 3.17% to congregations. If this is implemented, the coverage and dues increase will be effective January 1, 2012.

Presbyteries will not vote to approve this requirement. Nothing constitutional or official stands in the way of the BOP implementing what the GA urged them to do. However, the BOP has discretion in how and for whom to provide coverage. Therefore members, sessions and pastors can write letters to the Directors of the BOP and share their deep concerns. They can ask the BOP not to implement this action of the 219th GA.

Some Considerations

1) This action, if implemented, forces sessions and individuals to support financially what Scripture, the confessions, and the *Book of Order* call sin.

2) The *Book of Order* requires that installed pastors participate in the BOP plan. Others may also participate in the plan. Participating clergy and elders cannot be in same-sex relationships, since to do so is prohibited by the sexuality standards for ordained officers in G-6.0106b. The proposed extension of coverage to same-sex partners only applies to church employees, such as youth directors, music directors, Christian education directors, and church secretaries who are not ordained elders. Employers (sessions, institutions and agencies) already possess the freedom to cover their employees through a wide variety of elective plans without using the power of the BOP to coerce other congregations to pay for same-sex coverage. It is noteworthy that the “urging” of the 219th GA did not extend to opposite-sex domestic partners.

3) The General Assembly included a comment in their recommendation that the BOP “be highly urged to provide relief of conscience . . . for those congregations for whom these actions cause a moral dilemma.” It is questionable, however, that a satisfactory relief of conscience can be found. Since covering same-sex partners and dependents crosses the whole breadth of the plan, it would likely require a separate plan and likely require higher dues for those covered. Unless everyone is forced to pay the higher dues, would unequal dues be discriminatory? Would civil law allow unequal dues based on same-sex behavior?

4) The proposed increase of up to 1% does not reflect potential increases to comply with the Federal healthcare plan recently approved by Congress. These significant dues increases affect small churches disproportionately. Some years ago, it took a congregation of about 125 members to support a full-time pastor. Since a majority of PCUSA congregations have 150 members or less, as dues increase and minimum compensation packages increase, and as PCUSA membership declines, more churches may be unable to call a pastor. This increase in mandatory dues, directly affects the ability of churches to do ministry.

This action of the General Assembly regarding BOP coverage demonstrates how the sexual behavior of one part of the church affects us all. If the proposed amendment 10-A is approved by the presbyteries, it will remove the clear standards of “fidelity and chastity” for church officers from the *Book of Order* at G-6.0106b. This would seem to weaken the case that to cover same-sex partners of church employees by the mandatory BOP would be contrary to our standards. The “urging” of the General Assembly demonstrates that even in the short run, there is no freedom to be granted in allowing for a difference of opinion about the moral standard of sexual behavior. Those who wish to change the standard are by this proposal demonstrating their intent to enforce their moral position on the whole church.

Editor’s Note: Write letters directly to the Board of Directors for the BOP, urging them not to adopt the changes the GA requested. The names and addresses of the Directors can be found on the *Theology Matters*’ website www.theologymatters.com.

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