

June 28, 2008

To Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) congregations

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The 218th General Assembly adjourned just a few short hours ago. Even now, 973 commissioners and advisory delegates are making their way back home from San Jose, CA, where they worshiped daily, discussed and debated overtures, and celebrated the countless ways Presbyterians are engaged in ministry near and very far away — all with a focus on discerning the mind of Christ for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and seeking ways to live out this assembly's theme: "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8).

Beginning today and continuing over the next two years, elected commissioners will be about the task of interpreting the actions they took at this assembly. Already, their decisions have been broadcast across the church and, in this Internet world — with information received in real time, live blogs, and more — many people have already weighed in on the assembly's actions, sharing their thoughts and feelings about the implications of those decisions on our life together in the PC(USA).

The assembly dealt with well over 400 business items. Some items had undivided agreement, including a covenant to join together to carry out mission together and a churchwide commitment to "Grow God's Church Deep and Wide." There was an action to continue to study a revised Form of Government, and one committee devoted its time entirely to youth issues. In addition, we continued our longstanding work toward peace in the Middle East. More information on these and other actions will be coming soon.

A few of the many assembly actions will make, or already have made, headlines across the country. Most likely, you will read about the actions from a number of sources over the next many days and weeks, but we want you to hear about this important gathering directly from the General Assembly. That is why we are writing this letter to you.

Perhaps the subject that will make the most headlines has to do with the ordination standards of our church. It is a subject with which Presbyterians are familiar and one that tends to evoke great debates and deep emotions. With that in mind, we want you to know what the assembly did—in the actual wording—in regard to ordination standards and what will happen next.

- By a 54% to 46% margin, the assembly voted to propose an amendment to our Book of Order to change one of our current ordination standards. The change is to replace the current language that says officers of the church must live by "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" (G-6.0106b) to this new 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.
- By a 53% to 47% vote, the assembly adopted a new Authoritative Interpretation (AI) on G-6.0106b: 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.

- By a 54% to 46% vote, the assembly adopted a new AI on G-6.0108 which restores the intent of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church report (2006) to allow someone who is being considered for ordination or installation as a deacon, elder, or minister to register a conscientious objection to the standards or beliefs of the church and ask the ordaining body to enter into a conversation with them to determine the seriousness of the departure.
- The assembly left unchanged the definition of marriage found in the Directory for Worship (W-4.9000)—“a civil contract between a woman and a man.”

By its actions, the assembly has initiated a new opportunity to focus ordination on primary allegiance and obedience to Jesus Christ, as well as to Scripture and the church’s confessions. The assembly places the responsibility onto sessions and presbyteries for discerning a candidate’s fitness for ordination.

In all of this, it is important to note that the assembly has not removed the church’s standard of “fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness.” For the proposed change—making obedience to Christ the ordination standard—to become part of the Book of Order, a majority of presbyteries will need to ratify it over the next year.

We know the assembly actions may do little to ease the anxiety that seems to permeate our life together as a denomination. The debate isn’t new and the future holds difficult challenges. As the Rev. Dan Holloway, moderator of the committee that took up the items on ordination standards, said, “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.” Our hope is that none of us will act or react immediately to the decisions, choosing instead to pray and talk with one another about these issues.

During the question-and-answer time for the Stated Clerk election on Friday morning, now Stated Clerk-elect Gradye Parsons spoke of the story of Jesus being in the boat with his disciples in the middle of the lake when a storm arose (Luke 8). If fear could have capsized their boat, the disciples would have found themselves working hard to tread water in the midst of the wind and waves. Yet, Jesus calmed the storm and proceeded to question them about their faith.

Like the disciples, we, the PC(USA), are in the boat together, sometimes not altogether sure where we are headed. We see the storm approaching and our fears rise with the waves. Yet, as he was with the disciples, so, too, is Christ in our midst—calming the wind, settling the waves—being present and guiding us as we proceed ahead.

Gradye offered the following mantra as a summary of the Luke story: *Get into the boat. Go across the lake. There will be a storm. You will not die.*

As we move forward from this assembly, we know that storms may come, but we put our confidence and trust in the one who both calms the storms and leads us into God’s future with hope.

The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow - Moderator of the 218th General Assembly

Elder Linda Bryant Valentine - Executive Director, General Assembly Council

The Rev. Gradye Parsons - Stated Clerk of the General Assembly