

218th General Assembly summary: Wrap-up

Transcript of Presbyterian News Service VoiceLine recording

by Jerry L. Van Marter

This is Jerry Van Marter of the Presbyterian News Service with a wrap-up of the 218th General Assembly in San Jose, California, June 21-28. The General Assembly acted on nearly 1,000 items of business. For complete information on the actions of the 218th General Assembly, please visit the Web site www.pcusa.org/ga218.

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, capturing a second ballot victory. Later, the Assembly confirmed as vice-moderator the Rev. Byron Wade, 45, pastor of Davie Street Presbyterian Church in Raleigh, North Carolina. Wade, 45, has been a close friend of Moderator Bruce Reyes-Chow for 20 years.

The Assembly elected the Rev. Gradye Parsons as General Assembly stated clerk, succeeding the Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick. Parsons, who is currently associated stated clerk and director of operations for the Office of the General Assembly, won a first ballot victory over three challengers with 57 percent of the vote. He was the choice of the Stated Clerk Nomination Committee.

By a vote of 380-325, the Assembly voted to send a proposed amendment to the presbyteries that would delete G-6.0106b—which requires of church officers “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness.” In its place the Assembly is proposing a new G-6.0106b that ties consideration of candidates for church office to their assent to the ordination vows in the Constitution. The Assembly voted 540-161 not to change the definition of marriage in the Constitution from “a man and a woman” to “two people.”

By a vote of 504-171, the Assembly endorsed the “Amman Call,” which includes affirmation of the United Nations resolutions that are the basis of a projected “two-state” solution, a shared Jerusalem, guarantees of the human rights of refugees and occupied peoples, and a call to resist extremism and push for reconciliation. The Assembly affirmed the efforts of all those who are seeking peace in Iraq, but stopped short of calling for immediate U.S. withdrawal of troops from that country. And the Assembly voted to oppose preemptive military action against Iran.

The Assembly approved by a vote of 547-149 a statement calling for tolerance and peaceful relations between Christians, Jews and Muslims. The Assembly said the three faiths share a common commitment to love God and neighbor and care for the poor, though the Assembly acknowledged that the three religions hold “differing understandings of how God has been revealed to humankind.”

The Assembly voted 436-280 to initiate the process of amending the Heidelberg Catechism to restore the original German text of the 1562 document. A 1962 PC(USA) translation inserted the term “homosexual perversion” into the answer to question 87 of the catechism. No other church uses the 1962 translation. The Assembly also voted, by a vote of 536-154, to initiate the process of including the Belhar Confession in the denomination’s Book of Confessions. Belhar was written in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa to address the apartheid situation in that country but it also points to the persistent sin of racism globally.

By a vote of 624-88, the Assembly voted to refer the proposed revision of the church’s Form of Government back to the Office of the General Assembly “for a period of study and consultation with churches and presbyteries.” The new timeline calls for a revised proposal to be submitted to the stated clerk in October 2009 for distribution to the church by mid-January 2010 for consideration by the 2010 General Assembly.

The Assembly unanimously endorsed “An Invitation to Expanding Participation in God’s Mission,” a broad-based agreement growing out of a mission consultation in Dallas last winter that promises greater cooperation to support Presbyterian mission than has been seen in the PC(USA) in many years. The Assembly urged all Presbyterian governing bodies and mission groups to accept the invitation. The Assembly rejected a fifth churchwide special offering to support the salaries and expenses of mission workers around the world. Research indicates widespread opposition to an additional special offering. The PC(USA) currently receives the One Great Hour of Sharing offering, the Pentecost Offering, the Peacemaking Offering and the Christmas Joy Offering.

By a vote of 472-180, the Assembly directed 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 of the denomination, while remaining consistent with General Assembly policy statements adopted in 1992 and 2006, which support a woman’s right to choose but urge that abortion be the choice of last resort.

By a vote of 552-110, the Assembly approved “A Social Creed for the 21st Century,’ exactly 100 years after the “Social Creed” of 1908 spoke to the harshness of industrial life at the turn of the 20th century. The new creed, which is being considered by many U.S. denominations, calls for pay equity, greater workplace health and safety, criminal rehabilitation through restorative justice, abolition of the death penalty, tax and budget policies that reduce disparities between rich and poor, affordable housing, sustainable use of resources and just immigration policies.

On a voice vote, the Assembly adopted “Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness.” The statement calls for Presbyterians to engage in more education and advocacy efforts around mental illness issues and to work to be more welcoming to persons with serious mental illness and their families and to work to end the stigma attached to serious mental illness in the church and the world. This is Jerry Van Marter of the Presbyterian News Service. Thank you for calling VoiceLine for these reports from the 218th General Assembly in San Jose. And now, more than ever, pray for peace.