

Renewed barrage of overtures targets Israel for PCUSA rebuke

By Alan F. H. Wisdom
Special to The Layman

Like the drive to convey the church's blessing upon same-sex marriage, the campaign to bring the church's condemnation upon Israel will be back at this year's Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly. Both causes suffered narrow defeats at the 2012 assembly, but their proponents are returning with fresh determination.

Since 2004 the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been second only to sexuality issues in generating controversy at PCUSA assemblies. And judging by the volume and ferocity of the overtures advanced this year, the intensity of the anti-Israel activists will again almost match that of the same-sex marriage champions.

The objective of those activists has been to enlist the PCUSA in the international movement to target Israel for "boycott, divestment and sanctions" (BDS). The 2012 General Assembly urged Presbyterians to boycott products from Jewish settlements in the West Bank; however, it turned down a proposal to divest PCUSA holdings in three companies that sell non-lethal equipment to the Israeli military. By a 333-331 vote, the assembly commissioners preferred a resolution that emphasized "active investment" in Palestinian development projects.

A ground swell against Israel?

Nevertheless, the denomination's Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) is coming forward again this year with another proposal to divest from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions. This MRTI proposal will likely be the focus of debate at the Detroit assembly. (See article, page 15)

But there will also be at least eight other resolutions and overtures aimed against Israel. These measures will create the impression of a popular ground swell of Presbyterians demanding that their denomination rebuke the Jewish state.

In fact, however, the overtures come from a handful of presbyteries that have a record of pro-Palestinian advocacy. PCUSA members in general are more moderate, and more divided, on Israeli-Palestinian issues.

In a 2009 Presbyterian Panel survey, PCUSA members chose "addressing extremism and the threat of violence" and "freedom of worship" as their highest priorities in the Middle East. "Limiting the influence and military capacity of the Iranian government" was endorsed by 64 percent. Some 40 percent said it was "very impor-

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The 221st General Assembly is almost here

The Layman

The start of the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is quickly approaching. Beginning June 14, the PCUSA's biennial event will welcome thousands of Presbyterians to Detroit, Mich., before ending on June 21.

The theme of the 2014 meeting, "Abound in Hope," is based on Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." (NIV)

Business sessions will be held at the Cobo Center in Downtown Detroit.

The election for the Moderator of the 221st General Assembly will be held the evening of June 14, and all plenary sessions of the assembly will be streamed live on the official General Assembly web site.

A total of 76 overtures were submitted for consideration by the General Assembly but 10 of those items did not have the required concurrence from a second presbytery so they will not be debated by commissioners. There is also a list of 82 other business items to be considered by the commissioners. These come from various entities, committees and commissions of the denomination.

General Assembly web sites

www.layman.org/category/2014-general-assembly/

<http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga221/>

www.pc-biz.org

2014 Moderator Candidates

Three have been endorsed as candidates for moderator of the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

Heath Rada, a member of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board, has been endorsed by his presbytery as a candidate for moderator of the 221st General Assembly.

He was endorsed by the Western North Carolina Presbytery.

On his web site – www.heathrada.org – Rada says that “At this time in our denomina-

tion’s history, I feel called to try to continue my lifelong commitment to help assist its efforts for service and showing the love of Christ to all of God’s children. We should build on our long tradition of caring for others with the help of the Holy Spirit. Within our church family we have different interpretations and understandings of God’s Word, and of the ways we are to follow. Learning from each other even when we disagree can be a gift from God.”

He continues, “My vision is that we incorporate Christ’s encompassing love for all of our sisters and brothers, be open to and learn from one another, and enable our denomination to be a beacon of peace and love in a world torn apart by hatred and anger.”

Before retirement, he was the CEO of the Greater Richmond Chapter of the American Red Cross where he served as coordinator for the work of that organization in Virginia and the District of Columbia.

A native of Richmond, Va., he was also the interim CEO of Red Cross Chapters in San Diego, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Ft. Worth. Rada has served on the local, presbytery and national levels of the Presbyterian Church.

Along with his service on the PMAB, Rada serves on the boards of the Montreat Conference Center and the Presbyterian Homes of North Carolina.

Rada, who lives in Montreat, N.C., has been married to Peggy for 46 years. They have two children and two grandchildren.

He’s a member of Grace Covenant Presbyterian in Asheville, N.C.



The Presbytery of Genesee Valley has endorsed **John Wilkinson** as a candidate for moderator of the 221st General Assembly.

Wilkinson has been the pastor of Third Presbyterian Church in Rochester, N.Y., since 2001. His web site can be found at www.johnwilkinsonpcusa.com.

Wilkinson was an original board member of the Covenant Network (*See related article on page 6.*) and continues to serve in leadership for that organization. He spoke at the organization’s conference in 2002 on the subject of reconciliation, trained people how to use the Authoritative Interpretation of the Fidelity and Chastity clause at the 2007 conference, and also preached at the 2008 national conference.

Currently the moderator of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley, Wilkinson holds degrees from the College of Wooster, McCormick Theological Seminary and Northwestern University. Prior to his call to serve at Third Presbyterian in Rochester, Wilkinson served at St. James Presbyterian Church and Fourth Presbyterian Church, both in Chicago. Wilkinson and his spouse Bonny Claxton have two children.

He commented on the endorsement, saying, “The theme for the Detroit General Assembly is ‘Abound in Hope.’ I have embraced a theme for my own efforts based on that: ‘With an urgency born of this hope ... it is not only an affirmation from the Presbyterian Confession of 1967, but it is a theological promise as well. The Presbyterian family is facing change and conflict. Yet we are called to be urgent – not anxious or fearful – as we face our future. The hope we embrace is not our own, but is a gracious gift from God. As we affirm this gift and rely on the presence of the Holy Spirit, we will live into a Presbyterian future filled with possibility and transformation. I hope that my vision, gifts and experiences might serve the church in this important moment, and I am grateful indeed for my presbytery’s affirmation.”



Teaching Elder **Kelly Allen**, pastor of University Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas, was endorsed as a moderator candidate by Mission Presbytery during its March 1 meeting following a resolution from her church in support of her candidacy. Her web site can be found at <http://kellyformoderator.com>.

Allen has been pastor at University Presbyterian, a congregation of more than 300 members, since 2009. She also served as the pastor for St. Andrew’s United Reformed Church in Gerrard’s Cross, Buckinghamshire, England (2007-2009), after calls at First Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Mo. (1997-2007), and First Presbyterian Church in Ste. Genevieve, Mo. (1992-1997).

She holds degrees from Washington University in St. Louis, Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Ga., and the University of Birmingham in England.

She also served as adjunct faculty instructor at Eden Theological Seminary from 2003-2007. Allen and her husband, John Rezentes, have two children.

In a statement on her web site, Allen wrote, “I am honored to have received Mission Presbytery’s endorsement as a candidate for Moderator of the 221st General Assembly of the PCUSA. Through 22 years of pastoral ministry I have found profound joy in sharing leadership and ministry with congregations I have been privileged to serve. I want to share this experience far and wide. Though I am well aware of the polarization and declining membership within the denomination, I am not despondent about the future. I believe a strong witness to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit can give us a witness beyond our numbers.”

The elected moderator for the General Assembly, scheduled for June 14-21, 2014, in Detroit, Mich., will facilitate the business meetings of the assembly and then will become the voice and face of the denomination for the next two years, traveling, speaking and representing the PCUSA.



To deny persecution is to persecute again:

An interview with an Egyptian Presbyterian missionary

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

The Presbyterian Mission Agency Board (PMAB) issued a surprising comment about an overture from Pittsburgh Presbytery (11-02) which called for the Presbyterian Church (USA) to turn its attention to the plight of Christians suffering persecution due to sectarian violence in Egypt and other parts of the world.

The PMAB's comment about the overture reads:

The suffering of the church in Egypt and other parts of the world is not only "due to sectarian violence and persecution." There are many factors involved, including geopolitical and economic factors. The General Assembly should consider all the factors that result in and contribute to sectarian violence. For example, our mission partners in the Middle East have clearly pointed out that U.S. government policies (and Western attempts to dominate in general) affect them adversely by fueling sectarian tension. Therefore, the role of the U.S. government (often seeking national or special interests rather than principles the U.S. purports to support) should be addressed by the overture.

The overture names only the church in Egypt, and fails to mention the suffering of other Christian populations in the region. For example, following the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq, more than half of the country's Christian population became refugees. Likewise, the plight of Syrian Christians, Palestinian Christians, and others in the Middle East should not be neglected. Additionally, while the overture mentions "Other Parts of the World," it does not consider countries outside of the Middle East, such as North Korea, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Sudan, where Christians suffer from maltreatment no less than in the Middle East.

Use of the word "persecution" mischaracterizes the nature of the maltreatment of Christians in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, and in many cases would be an unhelpful exaggeration. At the same time, the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly maintain ecumenical and interfaith relationships and humanitarian programs that can enable efforts such as those requested by the presbyteries submitting this overture.

"Anyone who denies that there is pressure on Christians and persecution of Christians is denying the truth – but more importantly, denial of the persecution robs those who are persecuted of the spiritual blessing of being persecuted for the sake of Jesus and His kingdom."

Admittedly, the issue is complicated. So, I called an Egyptian Presbyterian serving as a missionary in the United States to help me understand.

His initial reaction to the comment by the PMAB was, "I was born and bred in the persecuted church. It is not an idea or research project for me. It is my life, my family, where I was raised and nurtured in the faith." He expressed his gratitude for "the heroes of the faith who carry the banner of the Cross" even though it costs them dearly. He also expressed his dismay at the comment by the denomination's highest council. "It is very condescending for people to impose their worldview by writing papers."

"I consider persecution of the Church as one of the marks of the Confessing Church ... real persecution of Christians is demonstrated in churches being burned and Christians being killed simply because they are a follower of Jesus Christ," he said.

I asked him to respond to the content of the overture itself.

"That overture sounds very good to me. Part of what may be confusing some is the official position of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, which does not acknowledge that there is an official persecution, and also there is a great hope with positive political changes in Egypt that Christians once again would be acknowledged as true stakeholders in the nation. However, some liberals are using this to say that Egypt is not under an official state of persecution."

"Anyone who denies that there is pressure on Christians and persecution of Christians is denying the truth – but more importantly, denial of the persecution robs those who are persecuted of the spiritual blessing of being persecuted for the sake of Jesus and His kingdom."

Jesus says in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your

reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

"If I am already persecuted for Christ ... and you deny it ... you wound me again."

"Prior to the fall of Mubarak – there were rolling attacks on Christians and churches in Egypt. I remem-

ber the Christians in Alexandria in January 2011 who were gunned down as they exited worship. Is that not persecution? Can you even imagine that? Of course you can't because for you these are intellectual exercises, these are papers you write. For me this is my life, this is my family – and this is persecution. For the PCUSA to say that 'mischaracterizes' the situation or that it is 'an unhelpful exaggeration' is arrogance."

I asked him to tell me what life is like for his Christian family and friends in Egypt today.

"Until recently, before the revolution, Christians were treated as second-class citizens in many practical ways. It has been very difficult for churches to get building permits or the permits needed to do maintenance on buildings and make repairs. Christians are also discriminated against in terms of employment. Your religion is written on your I.D. card – or, you might be discriminated against based on your Christian name which can be easily distinguished from Muslim names."

He then shared about a mutual friend, a pastor of a large Presbyterian Church in Egypt. He asked, "Did you know that man was almost kidnapped about 10 years ago and that he had to run for his life?" I did not know that. "This is a man you know. This is a man we both know. He was persecuted for his faith in Jesus Christ and his life was in grave danger. God uses this man to transform the Church in Egypt in many amazing ways. To deny his persecution for Christ is to deny him his witness."

And as Presbyterians living in freedom and peace in the United States we dare not do that to a brother on the front line of the real battle.

My conversation partner asked not to be identified because he still has family in Egypt and to speak publicly – even in America – about the status of Christians in Egypt, puts his family at risk.

The overture discussed here will be before the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) when it meets in Detroit, June 14-21.

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Per-capita issues will again be considered by the General Assembly

The Layman

It seems that every Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly has to deal with business items related to per capita – the amount of money, per member, that each church pays to the presbytery, synod and GA – and this summer’s assembly is no different.

Item 3-02 from Detroit Presbytery asks for an amendment to the denomination’s constitution that would allow presbyteries to limit their payments of per capita to synods and the General Assembly – and it has the support of seven other presbyteries.

Detroit’s proposed amendment to G-3.0106 reads: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

“Each council above the session shall prepare a budget for its operating expenses, including administrative personnel, and may fund it with a per-capita apportionment among the particular congregations within its bounds. Presbyteries are responsible for raising their own funds and for raising and timely transmission of per-capita funds to their respective synods and the General Assembly. Presbyteries may direct per-capita apportionments to sessions within their bounds, but in no case shall the authority of the session to direct its benevolences be compromised. *Where a presbytery has directed per capita apportionments to sessions, and sessions do not submit their full assessments, the presbytery may remit to the synod and General Assembly only those per capita funds actually received.*”

In an Advisory Opinion issued by the Office of the General Assembly, per capita is described as the annual amount of money a church pays per member to its respective presbytery. The amount is a combined total of funds requested by the church’s presbytery, synod and the General Assembly.

PCUSA congregations have long had the freedom of not paying their per-capita apportionments to the presbytery, synod or General Assembly, because per capita is seen as a benevolence, and according to the denomination’s constitution, the session has the sole authority to determine how a congregation’s benevolences are distributed.

The PCUSA’s highest court – the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission – ruled in *Session of Central Presbyterian Church vs. Presbytery of Long Island* that a church may neither be compelled to pay nor punished for failure to pay any amounts assigned by a per-capita system.

That understanding of per capita has been upheld in subsequent GAPJC decisions and by various General Assemblies.

However, in 2010, the GA voted to require presby-

teries to remit synod and General Assembly per capita “even if the presbytery lacks sufficient funds to pay its own expenses.”

Detroit says in its rationale that increasing numbers of congregations are not paying per capita as a way of protesting actions of the General Assembly.

“For presbyteries, per capita is not a benevolence, it is a required payment that is an increasing burden,” states Detroit’s rationale. “Since presbyteries are required to pay the full apportionment to higher governing bodies from their mission budgets when not received from the churches, the effect is to reduce the amount available for the mission of the presbyteries to their own regions.”

“In 2010, 50 presbyteries did not pay their per-capita apportionment in the amount of some \$950,000. Sixty-seven presbyteries did not pay their full 2011 per-capita payments in the amount of \$1,220,037.50. Records show that 40 of those presbyteries specifically said they are paying only what was received. One presbytery said it just did not have the funds,” the rationale reads.

It continues, “Since 39 percent of presbyteries paid 2011 per capita only what they have received or can afford – up from 29 percent the year before – the effect is that those presbyteries that are loyal to the rules of our polity are penalized. To remove the penalty for faithfulness seems equitable. Moreover, where it is forbidden for presbyteries to require the payment of benevolences from their churches, it also should be forbidden for higher governing bodies to require presbyteries to pay per capita from their benevolences, which is exactly what is done when presbyteries must take from their mission dollars to pay per-capita assessments.”

Asking teaching elders to participate

In item 3-01, the Presbytery of Albany asks the assembly to issue a request to all PCUSA teaching elders – pastors – “to assume the moral responsibility of participating in the administrative costs of this church by paying per capita each year, as other church members do, being assessed by their presbyteries of record.”

The Office of the General Assembly’s statistics shows that there were 21,064 teaching elders in the denomination in 2011.

Albany’s rationale states that presbyteries do not assess per capita for teaching elders who are members of the presbytery in the same manner in which they do church members.

“As a matter of parity, teaching elders should be participating in the burdens of the administrative costs of our self-governing polity,” states the rationale.

PCUSA wants to raise your taxes, though it pays none

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
Special to The Layman

The Presbyterian Church (USA), which pays no federal income taxes or property taxes as a non-profit religious organization, wants to see your taxes raised.

Produced by the denomination's Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy and backed by the Presbyterian Mission Agency, the tax reform proposal entitled "Tax Justice: A Christian Response to a New Gilded Age" would make the U.S. tax system:

- "more progressive, taxing those with greater wealth at higher proportions of their income, wealth, and inheritance;
- "more transparent, which includes both simplicity and accountability for all tax preferences and tax expenditures;
- "more solidarity-focused, which means reducing the use of tax expenditures, shelters and havens, and supporting more adequate international standards to reduce tax competition within and among nations;
- "more sustainable for current and future generations, which means avoiding unproductive financial and ecological indebtedness; and
- "more adequate, effectively addressing broader objectives of economic and social health than efficiency alone, such as meaningful employment, improved family life, and restored public trust. The tax system must be characterized by both efficiency in tax collection and revenue sufficient for the common good."

The recommendation section of the Presbyterian proposal threatens to bite off the very hand that feeds it as it seeks the elimination of all deductions for charitable contributions. "Charitable contributions are only deductible by the approximately 25 percent of taxpayers who itemize deductions. Although tax-exempt charitable organizations (including religious bodies) play a critical role in our country, the non-progressive means by which most tax-exempt organizations are financed means that nonprofits have a great responsibility to provide social benefit, broadly conceived, and to prevent leaders and managers from receiving undue personal gain."

The recommendations target high-income Americans who are also the people who traditionally populate Presbyterian pews. The denomination's proposed tax overhaul includes other tax hikes for its own members:

- "The mortgage interest deduction as currently constructed privileges those who borrow the most; it should be limited to one residence and

capped at a level that has a meaningful relationship to average home costs (i.e. that reflects reasonable housing needs rather than luxury market subsidies);

- "Rules governing tax-exempt 'social welfare organizations' (501(c)(4)s) should exclude or strictly limit the eligibility of donations for partisan political purposes, parties and candidates, and the individual and corporate donors to or through such organizations should be made public due to their influence on the political process.
- "The exclusion of capital gains on home sales privileges high-value property owners who can make maximum use of exclusion.
- "The exclusion of certain foreign-earned income (up to \$95,100 in 2012) and housing benefits privileges income earned out of the country and encourages the movement of United States citizens to foreign jurisdictions.
- "The capping of property taxes for senior citizens privileges many elders while burdening younger citizens of similar income. This tax expenditure does not appear to adhere to the principle of progressivity; means testing is one solution to this, as is raising the cap, depending on jurisdiction.
- "Work to cap deductions for state tax and municipal bond interest exemptions for very high net worth households."

The PCUSA will vote on the proposal at the meeting of the denomination's General Assembly, June 14-21 in Detroit.

The PCUSA's 2012 statistics report 10,262 congregations with 1,849,496 members nationwide, and the denomination is headquartered in Louisville, Ky.



Commentary
by Carmen
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Presbyterian Lay Committee

Raising The Standard Since 1965

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Mission Statement

The mission of the Presbyterian Lay Committee is to inform and equip Christians to share the Biblical faith by proclaiming Jesus Christ alone as:

- The Way of salvation.
- The Truth of God's Word.
- The Life of discipleship.

Objectives

1. To provide reliable information and resources concerning significant issues confronting Presbyterians and the Church Universal, thereby equipping and empowering faithful congregations and leaders to fulfill the Great Commission in the 21st century.
2. To inform and equip Presbyterian congregations and leaders concerning the urgency for greater emphasis on the teaching of the Bible as the authoritative Word of God and regular Bible study and prayer.
3. To inform and equip Presbyterian congregations and leaders concerning the urgency of presenting Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior through preaching, teaching and witnessing, with evangelical zeal, as the primary mission of the Church.
4. To inform and equip individual Christians in Presbyterian denominations to engage the ethical and moral issues in cultural, economic and political affairs as Christ's active disciples.

The PLC is a member – and affirms the respective statements on mission, ethics and accountability – of the Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability and the Evangelical Press Association. It also is a member of the Presbyterian Renewal Network and the Common Ground Christian Network.

VIDEO UPDATES FROM THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Watch Carmen's daily video briefings, posted each evening on www.layman.org for the latest news, analysis and commentary on what's happening at the General Assembly – June 14-21.

Covenant Network supports proposals to allow same-sex marriage in PCUSA

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

In its efforts to have same-sex marriage permitted in the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Covenant Network has announced that it will support Item 10-02, which completely rewrites the definition of marriage found in the denomination's constitution at this summer's General Assembly.

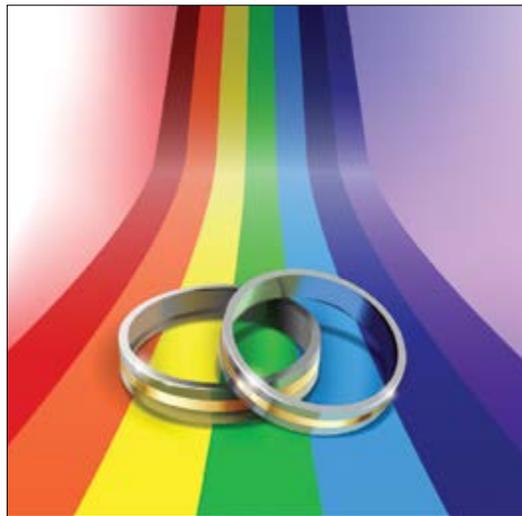
The Covenant Network also plans to support efforts to have the 2014 assembly approve an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of the definition of marriage in the *Book of Order* to "clarify that officiating at a marriage of two women or two men is a legitimate exercise of pastoral discretion, addressing the immediate crisis that ministers risk ecclesiastical discipline for following their conscience in serving the people," according to the organization's web site.

"I see the immediate crisis as having nothing to do with the risk of ecclesiastical discipline or conforming to the desires of particular people," responded Presbyterian Lay Committee President Carmen Fowler LaBerge. "I see the immediate crisis as much greater – with the risk of divine judgment for the failure to conform to God's holy will."

But Covenant Network's goal at the 221st General Assembly is to emphasize "the imperative of opening the PCUSA to the ministry of marriage for all," and to do so, it "is supporting both an AI and the amendment in Overture 21," read an update sent out by Tricia Dykers Koenig, the Covenant Network's national organizer.

Item 10-02

Item 10-02, from the Presbytery of the Cascades, states that the presbytery "stands with those in the PCUSA who believe that the teachings of Jesus call for radical inclusion of all people and that the actions of Jesus, passed down in Scripture, showed unconditional love and equality for all people. We believe that God created each of us with many differences, including sexual preferences, and that those differences are to be celebrated as part of the creative plan of God. Support of marriage equality is consistent with our faith tradition. The covenant of marriage requires love and commitment; qualities that are



in no way gender specific."

The overture would delete the current wording of W-4.900 (where the definition of marriage can be found in the constitution. A comparison of the text of both the current wording and Item 10-02 can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/kyjzy6>).

Sixteen other PCUSA presbyteries have concurred – or agreed – with the overture, including Albany, Baltimore, Boston, Cayuga-Syracuse, Chicago, East Iowa, Genesee Valley, Heartland, Hudson River, National Capital, New York City, San Francisco, Southern New England, Redwoods, Twin Cities and Transylvania.

The Authoritative Interpretation

In his article, "Why an Authoritative Interpretation matters," Brian Ellison, Covenant Network's executive director wrote that, "This summer, we at the Covenant Network are encouraging the 221st General Assembly to make decisions that will deepen and enhance the church's understanding of marriage – clarifying that its blessings are available to all people, including couples of the same gender. One way we hope the assembly does this is through an Authoritative Interpretation – a binding ruling by the church's highest council about what the constitution does and doesn't say."

"Upon approval by the GA, an AI goes into effect immediately; thus it is the most efficient means of protecting pastors who are exercising their discretion according to their conscience," Dykers Koenig wrote in the update.

Editor's note: The Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC), the publisher of The Layman, does not support same-sex marriage. Instead, the PLC "believes with Scripture that God ordained the lifelong marriage of a man and a woman in the very order of creation and that Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, blessed and sanctified this relationship."

Overture calls for 'serious and prayerful study' on marriage issue

The Layman

Stating that it "is not time to decide the church's direction by vote, but to engage in serious and prayerful study aiming to develop a definitive guideline that would not only unify the church, but also promote effective ministry to the changing, confusing world," a presbytery has called for the 221st General Assembly to create a task force to identify common ground and reconcilable differences in respect to same-gender marriage.

In Item 10-07, Eastern Korean Presbytery asks that the task force be made up of at least 12 elders with diverse theological, racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds to make recommendations to the 223rd assembly in 2018.

Among other things, the task force should:

- "identify common ground and reconcilable differences in Biblical understanding and confessional interpretation with respect to same-gender marriage;
- "study the nature, scope and controversies of the same-gender marriage laws legalized in certain states;
- "bring forth practical and futuristic recommendations that would not only strengthen and promote unity within the church, but also solidify ministries and missions with ecumenical partners locally and globally."

"In a short period of time a dramatic shift in our Biblical interpretation and polity application concerning human sexuality has caused confusion, division and resentment, resulting in weakening, rather than strengthening of the ministry and mission of the church," the overture's rationale reads.

The presbytery's rationale also declares that it is "fundamentally critical for us to grasp a clear sense of marriage and family, as they reflect God's character, perfect harmony and unity, the Triune God, and the revelation of the great mystery of Christ's love for the church. Marriage and family are the central human relationships that God has gifted each person to achieve the embodiment of Christ in our daily walk."

Strange Days

A church sues the state for the right to do wrong

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

A Jewish Rabbi, a Baptist, a Unitarian Universalist and a Lutheran walked into a courthouse ... It could be the opening line of a joke, but it's not. It is a description of some of the parties involved in the United Church of Christ's (UCC) lawsuit filed against the State of North Carolina seeking the right of UCC ministers to perform gay weddings. Those weddings are illegal under North Carolina law, but the UCC has determined that the prohibitions in the Bible and the prohibitions of the State should not prevent their ministers from doing what is right in their own eyes.

What's really going on?

While the UCC is the lead plaintiff, as a denomination it has questionable standing. Therefore, they have grouped together the General Synod of the UCC, local UCC pastors (residing in North Carolina) and several homosexual couples (aka "couple plaintiffs") who claim they are being denied the right to exercise their religion by being denied marriage licenses.

The consortium is using a tactic employed by "public interest" activists to try to change the law judicially when legislative means have failed. The case will likely not be resolved at the trial court level, but will be heard at the Federal Court of Appeals for their circuit, and perhaps even the U.S. Supreme Court.

What's the case about?

Count #1 of the lawsuit alleges that the N.C. law is a violation of the U.S. Constitution's "Free Exercise" clause. Congress can make no laws prohibiting the free exercise of religion, to be sure, but that has limitations. A religious group cannot claim that the free exercise of their religion prevents the government from passing a law preventing them from sacrificing children to Moloch. Criminal laws against murder would not be seen to inhibit the free exercise of religion.

But under the free exercise complaint, it is alleged that "... the couple plaintiffs are prohibited from becoming married in the *tradition of their respective faiths*." (italics added).

No religion, not even the UCC, has a "tradition" of homosexual marriage. It may have a fairly recent social agenda aligned in support thereof, but it is absurd to say that homosexual marriage is a tenet of their faith. If the practice is not "a tradition of their respective faiths" then their claims are factually baseless.

Marriage has traditionally been an act regulat-



United Church of Christ clergy, national officers and others at a April 28 press conference.

ed by the government, and religious clergy have not been free to violate state laws or regulations concerning marriage. For example, Hindu clerics have not been allowed to marry persons into polygamous unions despite Hindu acceptance of such practices. Recently, Warren Jeffs of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (FLDS) was arrested for marrying underage girls (both to himself and to adherents of his sect).

State marriage laws have been traditionally upheld because there is a compelling state interest in regulating marriage and defining its limits, including criminalizing marriages deemed harmful, such as polygamy and underage marriages. Recent court decisions have challenged the scope of state regulation, and the case by the UCC is simply another angle of attack against the institution of marriage and the state's traditional recognition of it.

Christians who would argue for same-sex marriage must do so apart from the clear rejection of homosexual practice throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The primary sacred texts of all the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – condemn homosexual practices. The marriage of people of the same gender is a concept foreign to all faith systems, including Christianity, until the last few years.

The role of the robes

The UCC cannot genuinely argue that homosexual marriage is an essential tenet of the Christian faith. And, assuming that traditional legal principles are applied, it cannot be persuasively argued that denying a UCC minister the right to consecrate a homosexual marriage where it is illegal is a violation of the First Amendment.

But will traditional legal principles be applied or will an activist judge in an activist court use this case as an opportunity to change the law to change the land? This is where the robes of the liberal academy and the robes of the activist judiciary and the robes of progressive mainline Protestantism converge.

The UCC represents the robes of progressive mainline Protestantism. They have sidelined the plain meaning of the Scriptures for the continual revelation of God through human experience. Supported in its line of argumentation by ivory tower academics that homosexual practice is normal, the robes will appeal to each other for the state to agree with the church that wrong is right.

What does this do to the truth? What does this do to the state of the law? What does this do to the institution of marriage? What does this do to the church? What does this do to conservative pastors who continue to serve in denominations that actively suppress the truth and exchange the truth about God for lies? We shall see.

Religious liberty and its limitations

States may pass regulations which adversely impact religious practices. For example, there is a famous "peyote" case which permits the state to regulate drugs, and while certain Indian tribes were allowed to use it ceremoniously, persons claiming to have new religious views which would allow them to smoke marijuana were not granted an exception to the law. To be given an exception to the law, the practice needs to be a longstanding religious tenet central to the practice of a particular, recognized "faith." The Christian faith and its constituent churches have held for 2,000 years that marriage is defined as between one man and one woman. That definition is derived from Christianity's central sacred text, the Bible. The attempt of the United Church of Christ to change that definition and to seek to compel the state to allow such deviation from the Christian definition of marriage under the covering of "religious liberty" should be called for the misrepresentation that it is.

As noted earlier, several of the parties to the lawsuit are not from the UCC. The Jewish Rabbi, the Lutheran, the Unitarian Universalist nor the Baptist are part of religious groups that have a "tradition" of homosexual marriage. That means that legally, the complaint is therefore a factual misrepresentation.

The ultimate question is will the truth about the matter even matter if a group of activist judges are hearing it?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

‘Pruning Vines’ Distinguishing between revision and reformation

This equipping study is somewhat different from what you are used to. Herein we are hoping to help you identify false teaching and equip you to engage in meaningful conversation in your church and with others about the “hot” topic of the day. The topic is Christian marriage, and recent developments in the national conversation in the church may surprise you.

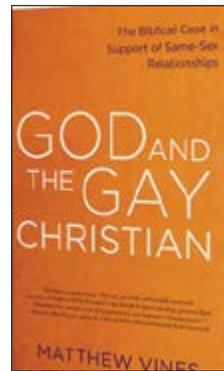
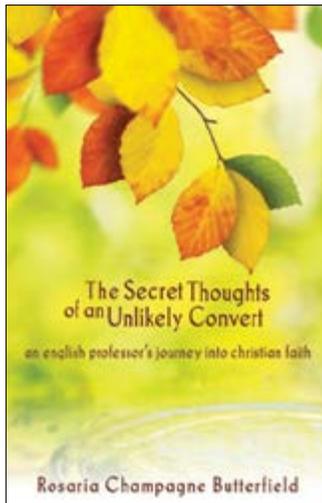
Matthew Vines was raised in a Presbyterian church which has transitioned in recent years from the Presbyterian Church (USA) into the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. He was baptized, confirmed, and has lived a life of advantage and privilege in the context of a home with two professional parents. Matthew Vines also identifies himself as gay – a man who is sexually attracted to men – and he has an interest in being married to a man. But to get there he needs to find a way to radically revise his parents’ and the Church’s understanding of the Bible, sexual ethics and the meaning of marriage. *God and the Gay Christian* is a book, authored by Vines, that attempts that audacious challenge.

But why address this issue in the equipping study of *The Layman*? Because you need to be equipped to identify the errors in his arguments, and you need to be prepared to rightly handle the Word of God. So, this is not about Matthew Vines. This is about you, how you handle the Scriptures, what you believe about God’s nature and character, and how much of your life (thoughts and actions) you are willing to submit to His revealed will.

One line of rationalization that needs to be addressed is Vines’ assertion that the kind of monogamous, consensual, same-sex relationship he desires, one based on “sexual orientation,” “didn’t exist in the ancient world.” So, if it didn’t exist in the ancient world and it didn’t exist at Creation and God didn’t know about it when He inspired Paul to write the letter to the Christians in the church in Rome, then how can it be argued that it is a “good” part of God’s original design for human sexuality? This is where Vines’ interpretation of Genesis falls apart. He cannot have it both ways. Gay sexual orientation cannot be something “unknown” until modernity and yet also a pre-fall reality in God’s perfect created design. No matter how you twist the Scriptures, that does not hold.

There is nothing new about the tendency of mankind to pervert the truth of the Gospel. The Scriptures are filled with such warnings (II Peter 2, Jude 3-4, Titus 1:16, Matthew 7:15-16). Ultimately what is presented by Vines is like unto Paul’s description of “a form of godliness that denies God’s power” (II Timothy 3:5).

As a student of the Bible, Vines certainly knows that Christians are called to be discerning when it comes to taking the counsel of others. There are false teachers in the world. Curiously, Vines chooses to follow the counsel of many who do not acknowledge the inspiration nor the authority of the Scriptures for faith and life. And in his book, he passes their counsel on to others. So, I do not commend Vines’ book to you. I do commend Rosario Champagne Butterfield’s book, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, which faithfully bears witness to the power of the Gospel and the Truth of God’s Word.



Part I: What’s at stake?

At issue is the veracity and reliability of God’s Word

Vines claims to have a high view of the Bible, saying, “I believe all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for my life.” But in his treatment of Romans 1 he argues that the Apostle Paul is ignorant of the kind of committed, monogamous, same-sex coupling in which Vines is interested. In order to follow this logic you must be willing to believe that the Bible is not reliable, that the Author (God Himself) who stands behind its inspiration, did not know, could not anticipate and was not privy to the very predisposition that Vines also argues is God-blessed, innate, natural and immutable.

It is notable that the same chapter of Romans warns against precisely this kind of teaching: that which suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18).

If the Bible cannot be trusted on the subject of sexuality then how can the Bible be trusted on matters related to salvation? If God cannot be trusted to tell us the truth about sex, then how can God be trusted to tell us the truth about life and death and hope and glory? And if God cannot be trusted (the original lie uttered by the Tempter to the very first human beings in Genesis 3), then where does that leave us?

Vines undermines not only the sexual ethic of holiness demanded by God of Christians, he undermines the Christian’s ability to confidently know God and His Will through the Scriptures. Which, friends, includes the ability of the Church to meaningfully proclaim to sinners the good news of salvation and transformation in Jesus Christ.

At issue, then, is the nature of God and the power of the Gospel

If Vines is right – that homosexual orientation is immutable and pre-fall “good” – then it is not sin and therefore not subject to transformation in salvation. And if that is true then the power of the Gospel is limited and can only affect those parts of the self that the individual views as in need of redemption. That is not God’s view of our fallenness nor our need, according to the Scriptures.

II Corinthians 5:16-21 reads: “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave

See PART 1, page 9

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Part I: What's at stake?

continued from page 8

us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Matthew Vines advocates that we view people according to the flesh; but those who are in Christ can do so no longer. Vines would also have us believe that people who are attracted to people of the same sex are so in such a way that is beyond God's ability to redeem. That means that the same-sex attracted person is made new in Christ in everything except this? That is not what the Scriptures teach us and that is not the experience of many others, like Rosario Champagne Butterfield, who have been made fully new in Christ.

So the question is this: Can God make all things new or is God's power limited in this one area?

The immediate response of a gay affirming advocate would be that this is not an area that needs redeeming. This is not sin and therefore stands outside of the scope of Christ's work. Really? How does that statement align with the Reformed tenet of total depravity? None of us has any part of our lives that stands beyond the need for Christ's work – in justification or ongoing sanctification. These are the two components of the Gospel: rescue from the penalty of sin and liberation from the power of sin in our lives. To diminish or alter the terms or reality of either of these is to adulterate the Gospel.

Read and reflect

1. Read Galatians. Note how in Galatians Paul makes the uncompromising statement, "if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!" How do you understand the nature and content of the Gospel and how is the reinterpretation proposed by those who want to legitimize homosexual practice different?
2. Consider that Galatians 1:1-5:12 is a presentation of how we are being rescued from the penalty of sin by the mighty redeeming work of Christ, which is applied by faith. Consider that Gal. 5:13-26 and following is then a description of the power of the Gospel to rescue us from sin's power.
3. Read Romans, chapters 1-8. Consider that Romans 1:16 makes the same argument made in Galatians: "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." Note the orderly presentation of the Gospel. Can you see how Romans 1-3 presents the total brokenness of humanity; chapters 3b-5 present the forgiveness and justification that God provides to free the believer from sin's penalty; and how Romans 6-8 then presents the provision of the Gospel to free the believer from the bondage of sin every day, in every way?

Part II: Rightly handling the Word of God

Presuppositions matter as we approach the Word of God.

The faithful study of Scripture presupposes:

- that I believe in the sovereignty of the God who is the ultimate Author who inspired the writers, and that I willingly subordinate my will and my understanding to His.
- that I approach the Scriptures with appreciative acknowledgement that God did not have to reveal Himself, nor His will, to us through the gift of His Word.
- that I am willing to make a careful study of the historical and cultural context in which the particular texts were written, but that I receive the Scriptures as a whole, telling God's redemptive story throughout every part.
- that I "receive the Word of God for what it really is" (I Thessalonians 2:13), and that I willingly submit to God's active work in my life to conform me to it.

I do not presuppose that I am unchangeable. However, the hermeneutic Vines proposes makes the individual the arbiter of truth, the final authority and the judge. His approach suggests that anything the Bible says which is contrary to the way I see myself or the desires of my heart is either inaccurate, non-applicable or subject to reinterpretation to fit my lifestyle.

Vines brings to the text a preconceived idea and interprets the text in light of that idea. Vines also attempts to set forth history as a means of interpreting Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to interpret history. He does this by affirming as axiomatic the fixed nature of sexual orientation as an absolute. He then places it as the interpretive key through which particular problematic texts are then reinterpreted. This is a blatant violation of the most basic principle of interpretation, which is to exegete a passage to draw out the meaning of the text. This is danger-

ous ground upon which to tread. In Job 40:8 God asks, "will you condemn me that you may be justified?"

A sound Biblical hermeneutic is the vehicle for discerning the truth of God. Historically, it was the return to a valid hermeneutic that freed the Gospel message from distortion and neglect during the Reformation. Each of us must handle the Word of God carefully, honestly, with great reverence and total humility. When we do so we can see both the truth, and the reality of those who actively suppress it.

For a thorough exposition of the passages Vines specifically deals with in his book, read the free e-book, "God and the Gay Christian: A Response to Matthew Vines" from Al Mohler and his colleagues at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. You can find it at www.sbts.me/ebook.

Part III: Knowing the truth about what God has said

Instead of studying at length the six passages that clearly condemn homosexual acts, I would recommend that you spend your time studying the full scope of what the Bible says positively about the place of sexual relations in the context of the joyful, complimentary marriage between a man and woman.

Read Tim Keller's fantastic book, *The Meaning of Marriage*.

Revisit what the Bible and our confessions say about marriage in the study we ran in this series several years ago. You can find it online at <http://tinyurl.com/8avqt8l>

Visit Theology Matters at www.theologymatters.com for resources on Scripture study and the right handling of the Word of God in relationship to the marriage issue.

Finally, pray. Ardently, submissively, with hope and confidence in the power of God to redeem even this.

Book review

‘How God became Jesus’

Review by Gerrit Dawson
Special to The Layman

Don't you get tired of it: Being thought an ignorant, credulous fundamentalist because you have historically orthodox beliefs? I get fed up with the insinuation that people who believe the Gospel accounts have "checked their brains at the door." The implication is that smart people, sophisticated people, know better about Jesus than those silly creeds.

Yes, some people make their living with this story line: The big, bad church, while it was suppressing women and brave "heretics," decided to declare Jesus a God to be worshiped, even though the "real" Jesus never intended that. This story worked for Dan Brown with his novel *The Da Vinci Code*. It seems to work for Professor Bart Ehrman with his best-selling books asserting scholarly evidence that traditional Christianity has got Jesus all wrong. How should we answer this?

I always loved the scene in the Woody Allen movie when he was in line at a theatre, listening to people behind him argue about the author's intent. "You're wrong," Allen's character says, "And I happen to have the author right here." At this point Allen brings on the writer of the script to show the pompous skeptics their error. I've always wished this could happen in theology, and now it has!

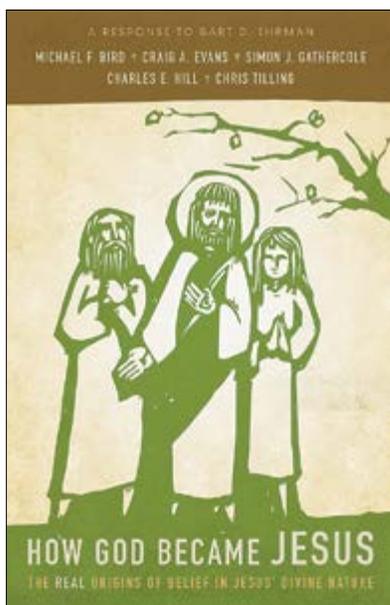
Professor Ehrman has just published *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*. It's one more salvo across the bow of orthodoxy, claiming that real scholars know better. But this time, we have an answer at hand. We have five expert scholars who have joined together to publish *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature*.

Under the guidance of Professor Michael Bird, these scholars have replied to Ehrman, exposing the faults in his reasoning and in his reading of history. They politely but precisely dismantle the liberal assertions and show that scholars using their minds to deal honestly with the evidence know that Jesus' divinity is part of the earliest Christian witness.

I recommend this book as a way both of learning what Ehrman and company are saying, and how to answer. These scholars have given us a tremendous gift. I want to engage my mind fully to know the issues and be able to make a reply. The faith once delivered actually delivers again and again the greatest intellectual satisfaction, sustaining the deepest depths of inquiry and impelling the greatest works of love in reply.

Finally, I was so happy to see that a near miracle has occurred: In our local Barnes and Noble, right next to Ehrman's book on the shelf is the reply: this lovely, accessible, scholarly description of *How God Became Jesus*.

Gerrit Dawson is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge and author of The Blessing Life: A Journey to Unexpected Joy.

Book review

The Prayer Covenant

Review by Rick Kennedy
Special to The Layman

In 1967, the Rev. Jerry Kirk bonded in fellowship with Don Rehberg at a Christian conference at tiny Wilson College in Chambersburg, Pa. The tall and lanky Kirk was a young pastor on fire for Christ. Rehberg, also a devout Christian, was older and a successful comptroller of a large steel manufacturing company.

Though they operated in different earthly worlds, the two spiritual warriors dropped to their knees in a Wilson College dormitory room and committed to pray for each other – every single day for a month.

Their covenant was a simple act of support and accountability for each other with Jesus Christ as the Lord of their lives, but small acts of faith often unleash God's amazing power.

Thus began Kirk's lifelong devotion to forming prayer covenants – a devotion that has guided and fostered his long journey as a beloved minister and Christian activist on a local and international scale. Along the way, he has formed prayer covenants that have touched the lives of thousands of people worldwide – including his wife of 57 years, Patty, and their five grown children, 28 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren.

Now 82 years old, Kirk has detailed these experiences and Scriptural reflections in this new book, *The Prayer Covenant*. Co-written with Biblical scholar and author Stephen Eyre, Kirk has created a practical, inspiring guide for binding people's lives together in prayer as they challenge each other to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ – every single day.

Praised by Christian leaders nationwide, *The Prayer Covenant* is built around a written prayer that Kirk has developed over many years. It is a Biblical playbook for growing in your faith and for allowing God to use you in the lives of others.

Just as the early Church spanned the globe through shared spiritual relationships, Kirk has a similar vision in calling people to 40-day prayer covenants: To be a catalyst for an awakening to Jesus Christ as Lord throughout the United States and the world.

The Prayer Covenant was literally a lifetime in the making, filled with the trials and blessings of an amazing life. It is Kirk's guide for experiencing God's transformative power.

In 2013, Kirk joined with a small group of business leaders to establish The Prayer Covenant as an organization and ministry.

To join in writing the book, *The Prayer Covenant*, Kirk turned to his longtime friend, the Rev. Stephen D. Eyre, an accomplished Christian writer and author of 20 Bible studies and books. Like Kirk, Eyre is a longtime minister and teacher. Today, he is minister for congregational support at Madeira-Silverwood Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Rick Kennedy is a long-time communications leader for GE Aviation, headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio. Rick and his wife, Jane, are active members of Northminster Presbyterian Church in Cincinnati. Kennedy has been associated with Kirk and Eyre through various ministries through the years.



For more information about the Prayer Covenant – the book and the organization – visit the web site at <http://theprayercovenant.org/>

GA to consider cutting number of synods from 16 to eight

By Nathan Key
The Layman

The 221st General Assembly will be considering the Mid Council Commission II report – Item 05-04 – when it meets this summer in Detroit, Mich.

The Mid-Council Commission II (MCC-2) adopted its final report during a three-day meeting in Dallas Jan. 13-15, when it voted to recommend a reconfiguration of the current synod model from 16 to eight.

MCC-II concluded that elimination of synods as ecclesial bodies would not at this time simplify the governance structure of the PCUSA, though it determined that the current denominational structure no longer fits today's church. Examination of the current structure revealed that synod functions could be handled effectively and efficiently by larger bodies, observing that reducing the number of synods would best be accomplished by collaboration between the existing synods and presbyteries rather than as a directive from the General Assembly.

The proposal

The MCC-II report reads (with individual recommendations):

“1. Direct that a new configuration of synod boundaries be established through a collaborative process between the synods and presbyteries resulting in no more than eight larger regional synods, each with an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context, and call. The synods shall report to the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

“2. Inform all synods and presbyteries that designated members of MCC 2 will be available for conversation, clarification, and collaboration during the synods' and presbyteries' two-year process of reconfiguring synods.

“3. Recommend that the 222nd General Assembly (2016) direct its Moderator, in consultation with the Stated Clerk, to appoint an administrative commission for the following purposes:

“a. To assist synods and presbyteries who have been engaged in a substantive plan for reconfiguration but have been unable to resolve particular issues in their process.

“b. To recommend to the 223rd General Assembly (2018) the boundary changes necessary to achieve a total of no more than eight synods, if there remain synods and presbyteries that have been unable or unwilling to engage in a collaborative process of reconfiguration.

“4. In order to ensure that the responsibilities listed in G-3.0502 are fulfilled, establish a “Committee on Mid Councils” and charge it to engage in a process for the ongoing strengthening and nurturing of the mid councils of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), with particular emphasis on collaborating with the synods of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to support clarity as to their ecclesial and missional identity, purpose, structure, and strategies by amending Standing Rule C.1.a. as follows: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

“a. The Stated Clerk shall propose the number and designation of assembly committees to the General Assembly, *which shall include a Committee on Mid Councils*. The Stated Clerk shall present the proposed committee structure to the General Assembly for consideration and ratification at the first assembly meeting at which business is transacted. In making these proposals, the Stated Clerk shall consult with the appropriate General Assembly entity or entities, and may consult with other persons.”

“5. Continue the Mid Council Commission II through the meeting of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) with the following authority:

“a. Pursuant to G-3.0502d, to organize new synods, or divide, unite, or otherwise combine previously existing synods or portions of synods; and

“b. Pursuant to G-3.0502e, to approve the acts of synods to organize, divide, unite, or combine presbyteries or portions of presbyteries.

“6. Accept this report as the commission's answer to the items referred to it by the 220th General Assembly (2012).”

Overtures respond to recommendation

In response to the recommendation to reduce the number of synods, both a presbytery and a synod have sent overtures to the General Assembly addressing their concerns.

Item 05-01 from the Presbytery of Homestead asks the GA to respond to any plan for comprehensive reorganization of synod or presbytery boundaries by encouraging presbyteries to consult with synods and surrounding presbyteries to determine appropriate functions within synods and whether boundaries of synods of affected presbyteries should be changed to meet the needs of affected congregations.

The rationale for the overture notes that the “needs of presbyteries and congregations vary

greatly” and a “one-size fits-all” mentality may not be appropriate.

The overture continues, “The functions ascribed to synods are necessary to the efficient and effective functioning of the whole system of governance, and if a particular synod's functions are reduced or eliminated, it is the affected presbyteries in that synod that must ‘take up the slack.’ Hence, it is those same presbyteries who should initiate any needed change in their region, not the General Assembly determining one solution for the whole church.”

The measure goes on to point out any decisions regarding the appropriate functions, operation and boundaries of synods would be best left to the affected presbyteries and their synod(s).

Synod of Puerto Rico responds

The Synod of Boriquén (Puerto Rico) has submitted an overture to the assembly, asking that it remain as a synod no matter how many synods ultimately result from the recommendations coming from the Mid-Council Commission II.

“If, as a result upon recommendations of the Mid-Council Commission II to reconfigure synod boundaries and to reduce the number of synods from 16 to eight by the 222nd General Assembly (2016), the Synod of Boriquén and its constituent presbyteries petition the General Assembly to retain the Synod of Boriquén as one of the configured synods,” reads Item 05-02.

It references the rapid transformation of the United States into a culturally diverse society, which influences the growth and future of the church, evidenced by a growing number of Hispanic/Latinos and Spanish-speaking members joining congregations in Puerto Rico.

It also points out that the Synod of Boriquén and its presbyteries (the Presbytery of the Southwest of Puerto Rico, the Presbytery of the Northwest of Puerto Rico and the Presbytery of San Juan) are the only governing bodies within the PCUSA “that fulfill entirely in Spanish the mission given by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19 to ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’”

The rationale also notes that teaching and ruling elders, members and leaders of the Synod of Boriquén have served and continue to serve in different positions at the national Office of the General Assembly, General Assembly committees, commissions and task forces contributing significantly to the mission within the PCUSA.

San Juan Presbytery and Southwest (Puerto Rico) Presbytery have provided concurrences.

GA overtures in brief

Boy Scouts: End discrimination

The Presbytery of New York City wants the 221st General Assembly to tell the Boy Scouts to stop discriminating against lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender people and girls.

In Item 09-08, the presbytery asks the General Assembly to “call upon the Boy Scouts of America to institute policies that welcome children, families and adult leaders into all programs offered by the Boy Scouts of America regardless of gender or sexual orientation;” and to “end all discriminatory policies excluding leaders based solely on sexual orientation and excluding girls based on gender.”

The overture says in its rationale that “despite this change, as well as its goals and commitment to oppose discrimination, the Boy Scouts of America has a longstanding policy and practice of excluding lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender adults from its leadership and also prohibiting girls from membership as scouts.”

Voting/name change for YAADS

In 2008, the 218th General Assembly voted to change the name of Youth Advisory Delegates (YADS) to Young Adult Advisory Delegates (YAADS), and this summer, that name could be changed again.

The Synod of the Covenant has forwarded an overture (Item 03-03) to the assembly, to not only change the name of the YAADS, but to give them the right to vote during plenary sessions.

According to the 2014 General Assembly manual, a YAAD is a person between ages 17-23 who has been appointed by his or her presbytery to attend the assembly.

Currently, YAADS are voting members of the assembly’s committees. During the GA plenary sessions, however, they only have the privilege of speaking to the issues being debated, and advisory voting.

If approved by the General Assembly, this overture would fundamentally change the nature of GA commissioners, elevating non-ordained people to commissioner status.

The synod’s overture would not only allow the young adults to vote during the plenary meetings, it would change their name to Youth Adult Commissioners (YAC).

“If we want to be true to goals of inclusiveness and representation within the larger church, giving the young adults voice and vote would be a

step in that direction. Presently the YAADS do have voice and vote in the committees. This overture would acknowledge those gifts for the assembly meeting as well,” the overture’s rationale claims.

Immediate end to executions

A Presbyterian Church (USA) presbytery is asking this summer’s General Assembly (221st) to call for “an immediate moratorium on all executions in all jurisdictions that impose capital punishment.”

Item 09-04 from the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta also asks for Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons to communicate the call for a moratorium – including the denomination’s opposition to capital punishment – to the United States President, Congress and the governors and legislators of the 34 states with persons on death row.

While giving thanks that 18 states have abolished the death penalty, the overture states that “we believe that one of the greatest tragedies that can occur is the execution of an innocent person by the state, yet we know that this has occurred repeatedly throughout history. Human judgment is always fallible, including the judgments of juries and judges deciding death penalty cases. It has been recognized by numerous authoritative sources that the death penalty has been imposed in a racially discriminatory manner.”

Pastors renouncing jurisdiction

Two presbyteries have submitted overtures to the 221st General Assembly to address issues regarding pastors renouncing the jurisdiction of the denomination.

Both overtures seek to add a sentence to G-2.0509 of the *Book of Order*, but each uses slightly different wording.

They use the same rationale for the overtures: “When a teaching elder renounces the jurisdiction of the church in the midst of formal judicial process, there is no resolution for either party, particularly for the complainant. Because there has been no acquittal or determination of guilt, the teaching elder has, by virtue of renunciation, removed himself/herself from leadership and office within the church. It could be argued that the church remains vulnerable due to lack of information regarding the circumstances and facts uncovered in the investigative process that

might have come to light in the judicial proceeding. Renunciation to stop judicial process should not be an alternative vehicle to continue to work or volunteer in the church when facts and circumstances have not come to light.”

Principles of the Reformed faith

An overture to the 221st General Assembly seeks to clarify what is actually meant by “essentials of the Reformed faith.”

The rationale of Item 06-09, from the Presbytery of Upper Ohio Valley, states that candidates for ordained office in the Presbyterian Church (USA) are asked whether they receive and adopt the “‘essential tenets of the Reformed faith,’ but no comprehensive list of essential tenets can be found in our *Book of Order*.”

The overture fleshes out the principles of the Reformed faith, “refer[s] candidates and councils to them for guidance, require[s] candidates to declare scruples to their councils, and give[s] candidates specific tenets to affirm at the time of their examination for ordination or installation.”

Obedient to Scripture

In the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s *Book of Order*, the questions for ordination and installation of church officers refer to Scripture several times.

Since, “in each case, the Scripture is elevated to an authoritative status” a presbytery has overture the 221st General Assembly to change the denomination’s constitution to require church councils to be “obedient to Scripture and guided by the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

Item 06-01 from East Tennessee Presbytery states that in the constitutional questions, Scripture is elevated to an authoritative status.

“Twice it is called ‘authoritative,’ once it is placed above the confessions, and finally, all things pertaining to the church are ‘subject’ to it.”

The current paragraph in the *Book of Order* “implies that Scripture is merely equal to the confessions and has no binding authority in the life of an ordained person or in a council of the church. The new language clearly recognizes the authority of Scripture and conforms to the language of the constitutional questions in the ordination process.”

GA overtures in brief

End-of-life issues

The Synod of the Covenant is asking the 221st General Assembly to approve the production of a new “pastoral and educational booklet” on end-of-life issues written by Presbyterian ethicists and physicians.

The overture’s rationale states that since past PCUSA resources have been developed, “matters have become even more complex than they were, as scientific and technological developments have increased the capacity to prolong human life and laws have expanded the legal choices for those facing terminal illness.”

“In light of these new possibilities and the moral challenges they entail, Presbyterian witness to the covenantal character of human life in creation, sustenance and redemption needs to be renewed and clarified. Presbyterian ethicists have written significant work since the 1990s, and some would be willing to contribute to a concise consensus statement for the church, identifying theological concerns and Christian values at stake,” the rationale reads.

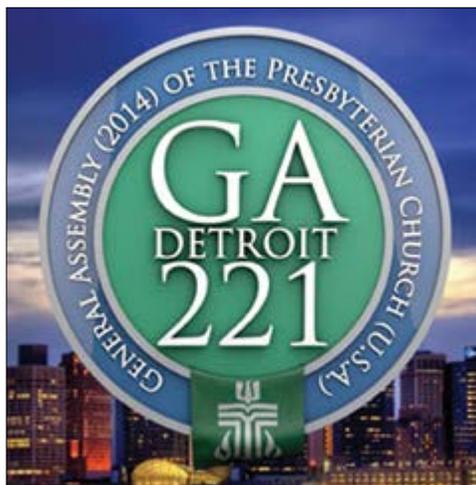
Protect children

An overture concerned with protecting children has been submitted to the 2014 General Assembly by the Presbytery of New York City.

Item 09-03 asks the assembly to encourage use of the Code of Conduct for the protection of children from sexual exploitation. According to the overture, the Code “sets a standard of responsible business practices that effectively deters child sexual exploitation. It is an industry-driven, multi-stakeholder initiative with the mission to provide awareness, tools and support to the tourism industry in order to combat the sexual exploitation of children in contexts related to travel and tourism.”

Protection of babies and children

Stating that the “blood of little children cries out to God and to Christ’s Church for protection and justice,” a presbytery is calling for the



PCUSA to enter into a two-year season of reflection on the plight of unwanted children.

In Item 09-02, South Alabama Presbytery has asked the 221st General Assembly to call for the Presbyterian Mission Agency and PCUSA congregations to enter a “season of reflection upon the plight of children unwanted by human society, both born and not-yet born, and to purposefully seek to enter the pure wor-

ship of God by offering aid, comfort and the Gospel to those responsible for the care of our most desperate orphans (including those who survive abortion procedures): parents, siblings, church and community leaders and the medical profession.”

Effective drug policies

A two-year study to discern how to advocate for “effective drug policies grounded in science, compassion and human rights” has been proposed to the 221st General Assembly by San Francisco Presbytery.

Item 09-05’s rationale states that the denomination “has clearly recognized the moral mandate to reexamine our nation’s current approach to substance abuse and drug-related crime with all its consequences. However, we have not yet dealt directly with our policy of prohibition of, and criminalization for, drug use. ... The issues are complex, and serious change pushes us into unknown territory. Therefore, we call for a broad-based, all-church study that explores what is practically possible while holding up that which still needs the light of the Gospel.”

Gun violence

The rationale of an overture on gun violence prevention proposed for consideration by this summer’s General Assembly states that there are “two basic arguments for church involvement in the matter of gun violence: the scale of this ongoing tragedy and the Biblical and theological

bases for engagement by Presbyterians.”

Item 09-07 from the Presbytery of Hudson River asks the assembly to call on the denomination and its agencies to take several steps, including asking churches to “prominently display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto their property,” and lobbying against legislation that is “designed to permit and encourage the carrying of weapons in all areas of life.”

A second overture (Item 09-01, Newark Presbytery) declares that the PCUSA has “not responded strongly enough to the continuing number of killings and repent our failure to demand more of ourselves to ensure that adequate laws are passed to reduce gun violence.”

Political and financial reform

In Item 09-06, the Presbytery of Santa Fe asks the 2014 assembly to direct the denomination’s Office of Public Witness [called the Washington Office in the overture, as that was its former name] to “advocate for financial and political reform. This will include advocating for strategies that address the lack of prosecution of the individuals and financial institutions responsible for the 2008 meltdown of the U.S. economy.”

According to the rationale of the overture, if the “millions of dollars amassed by the individuals and companies involved in the 2008 financial crisis could be recouped, these dollars could be a start toward repaying the national debt.”

The rationale also mentions “published investigative reports and documentation,” without proper citations, that “name the responsible individuals and institutions, but the lack of prosecution allows them to continue holding high, powerful offices and receiving financial gain.”

“The voices of those demonstrating for the need for reform are being ridiculed, ignored and demeaned,” the rationale concludes.

Evangelism: Died for lack of concurrence

Mississippi Presbytery sent Overture 070 asking that PCUSA related seminaries require their M.Div. candidates to complete coursework in evangelism before graduation. The overture failed to receive the support of an additional presbytery and therefore will not be heard by the General Assembly.

Barrage of overtures targets Israel for PCUSA rebuke

continued from page 1

tant” to “maintain the close diplomatic and military relationship between the U.S. and Israeli governments” and “maintain positive relationships between Presbyterians and members of the U.S. Jewish community.” Only 36 percent favored “permanent Israeli withdrawal from all of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem.”

But the bulk of this year’s Middle East initiatives aim to impel such a withdrawal through economic and other pressures.

Backing the divestment drive

Item 04-02, from San Francisco Presbytery, denounces the three companies for “contributing to and profiting from the relentless, five-decade-long, military occupation of the Palestinian territories.” It alleges that “the occupation of Palestine ... destroys lives and cultures.” The overture would address this problem by mandating PCUSA divestment from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions.

Item 04-06, from Mackinac Presbytery, seeks “occupation-free investment in Palestine.” Like the item from San Francisco, the Mackinac overture does not define the “Palestine” whose occupation must end – whether it is limited to the West Bank and Gaza, or whether it includes the territory that is now Israel. The overture affirms both “active investment” and “long-standing denominational procedures of corporate engagement with companies that contribute to or benefit financially from the work of occupation.”

Item 04-07, from the Synod of the Covenant, takes the simplest approach. It asks the Detroit assembly to approve the MRTI recommendation.

Item 04-05, from New Brunswick Presbytery in New Jersey, singles out one of the MRTI-targeted corporations. It also turns to a different means of economic pressure. The overture “call[s] for the boycott of all products manufactured and sold by Hewlett-Packard until the company ceases to profit from all non-peaceful pursuits in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

Escalating rhetoric against ‘apartheid’

Item 04-03, from Grace Presbytery in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, would escalate PCUSA rhetoric against Israel. The overture asks the General Assembly to “[r]espect the human rights of the Israeli people and oppose all forms of anti-Semitism, and deplore the violation of the human rights of the Palestinians by the government of Israel.” It then lists seven types of Israeli abuses against Palestinians, and also condemns “Israeli violence against its neighboring countries.”

There is no concern expressed about violence against Israel by Palestinian and other Arab governments and movements.

The Grace overture would deliver a General Assembly verdict “that the actions of the Israeli government listed above meet and surpass the United Nations’ definition of apartheid.” The implications of this analogy to white-ruled South Africa are clear: The Jewish state is fundamentally illegitimate, and it needs to disappear as did the white minority government in Pretoria.

Grace Presbytery takes pains to insist that “[t]his overture is not anti-Israel” and “[t]his overture is not anti-Semitic.”

Hearing some ‘prophetic voices’

The denomination’s Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) decided that it too needed to take a swipe at Israel. ACSWP’s “Resolution on Equal Rights for All Inhabitants of Israel and Palestine and on Conversations with Prophetic Voices” makes a dozen demands on behalf of Arab citizens of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. Almost all the demands – for example, “freedom of travel and worship [for Israeli Arabs], including legal protections for non-Jewish sites” – are addressed to Israel. Only one – “fair due process for Palestinian inhabitants of the occupied territories who are arrested, convicted, and imprisoned either by the Israeli Defense Force or the Palestinian Authority” – hints that Palestinians may suffer sometimes at the hands of their own leaders.

The ACSWP resolution makes it appear that Israeli Arabs experience severe deprivation of human rights. But independent human rights reports show that Israel offers the region’s broadest range of civil and political and religious rights, including for its non-Jewish citizens. Israeli Arabs are far freer and more prosperous than their kin in neighboring countries.

Two states or one state?

Two other anti-Israel overtures raise larger questions – beyond the immediate debates about BDS tactics. Item 04-01, from San Francisco, requests an ACSWP report to the 2016 assembly on “whether the General Assembly should continue to call for a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine, or take a neutral stance that seeks not to determine for Israelis and Palestinians what the right ‘solution’ should be.”

But it is not “neutral” on the question. It cites several “true facts on the ground” – all reflecting negatively on Israel, all suggesting that a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza would not be viable. “In light of these facts on the ground,”

the overture says, “it seems unrealistic, and perhaps even naïve, for the PCUSA to maintain a policy of calling for a two-state solution when no real possibility of that seems to exist.”

San Francisco dismisses the current approach of “active investment” in the Palestinian economy and demands full liberation from Israeli rule.

If San Francisco rejects the idea of a state for Jews alongside a state for Palestinians, which other “solution” does it favor? The overture gives no direct answer.

Rejecting ‘God’s covenant with Israel’

Item 07-01, from Chicago Presbytery, points toward an equally profound theological shift. For much of its history, most of the Church believed that God had rejected the Jews, that He had no more purpose for them as a people, and that the Church had completely replaced Israel as the channel for God’s self-revelation to the world. After the Holocaust, and even before in some cases, many Christian theologians reread Romans 9-11 and concluded that this traditional “replacement theology” was wrong. For the past two generations, the mainstream in the PCUSA and most other western denominations has affirmed that God continues to be in relationship with the Jewish people.

But the Chicago overture challenges that teaching. It opposes the use of “God’s Covenant with Israel” as a section heading in the new PCUSA hymnal. Quoting a letter from a Palestinian American Presbyterian, the overture argues that “this language is inflammatory, misleading and hurtful.”

Chicago requests that the PCUSA develop educational materials to draw a strict distinction between ancient Israel and modern Israel, lest anyone suppose there might be some connection or continuity between God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and his dealings with modern Jews in Israel.

A lone contrary voice

Only one item of business coming to the assembly takes a different tack. Item 04-04, from New Covenant Presbytery in Houston, would “[r]eject any proposed divestment and economic sanctions against the state of Israel or any application of the PCUSA’s corporate engagement policy toward those ends.” The overture would also state that the assembly “does not endorse boycotts of Israeli or Palestinian products.”

“Boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) efforts that target Israel are fundamentally unjust, do not advance peace, and should not be supported,” New Covenant contends.

PCUSA committee takes another shot at Israel divestment

By Alan F. H. Wisdom
Special to The Layman

It was the closest vote of the 2012 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). By the narrow margin of 333-331, commissioners turned aside a proposal to divest PCUSA holdings in three companies that sell non-lethal products to the Israeli military. Instead they chose an approach that emphasized “active investment” to build up the Palestinian economy.

Now the source of that 2012 divestment proposal, the PCUSA Committee on Mission Responsibility through Investment (MRTI), is bringing an almost identical measure back to the 2014 General Assembly.

MRTI this year, as in 2012, recommends that “Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions be placed on the General Assembly Divestment List until such time as they have ceased profiting from non-peaceful pursuits in Israel-Palestine.”

‘Non-peaceful pursuits’

Caterpillar “sells heavy equipment used in the Occupied Palestinian Territories for the construction of illegal Israeli settlements, roads solely used by illegal Israeli settlers, and the construction of the Separation Barrier extending across the 1967 ‘Green Line’ into East Jerusalem and the West Bank,” according to MRTI. Caterpillar equipment is also used to demolish Palestinian

buildings that Israel believes to be illegal or implicated in terrorism.

MRTI reports that Hewlett-Packard “sells hardware to the Israeli Navy, and as a contractor manages all Information Technology.” Such technology is used in “the ongoing naval blockade of the Gaza Strip,” as Israeli ships interdict vessels suspected of bringing arms to the Islamist Hamas movement that rules Gaza. Hewlett-Packard also supplies biometric identification systems that are used at Israeli security checkpoints inside the West Bank.

Motorola Solutions “provided ruggedized cell phones” and “an integrated communications system” to the Israeli army, according to MRTI. It also sells “wide-area surveillance systems” to protect Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

MRTI’s report to the General Assembly recounts a decade of “corporate engagement” with the three companies. In letters and meetings and through shareholder resolutions, the PCUSA committee has repeatedly urged the three to stop selling to the Israeli military.

Companies can’t control customers

Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions have consistently brushed aside these church entreaties. In communications with MRTI, they have noted that they sell their products to governments and militaries around the world, and they cannot control how customers

use those products.

The same equipment that is used to patrol the West Bank is also used to guard against terrorist incursions across the pre-1967 borders of Israel. It would not be possible for the companies to decree that their bulldozers, cell phones and biometric scanners could be used in certain settings but not in others.

The committee is asking 2014 commissioners to conclude that “[t]his process of engagement has, in the case of three companies, produced no substantive change and, in the judgment of this assembly, is likely not to do so in the future.” Therefore, it is again recommending divestment as “the final step ... where engagement is not resulting in any change.”

Why Israel alone?

MRTI is not proposing divestment from companies that supply military equipment to other U.S. allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Pakistan. Human rights groups generally assess those governments as far more repressive than Israel’s.

Yet MRTI has pursued its “corporate engagement” and divestment strategy solely against companies that sell to the Jewish state.

Is this targeting of Israel – and Israel alone – fair? Is it conducive to Middle East peacemaking? The 2012 General Assembly, by the slenderest majority, answered “no.” The 2014 commissioners will reconsider the question.

Ousting the moderator of the GA Middle East Committee

Commentary by Viola Larson
Special to The Layman

It cannot be stated with any more forceful terms than Presbyterians For Middle East Peace have stated it. Until now the Presbyterian Church (USA) has not been known for its ideological purges, but when Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons, and Moderator of the General Assembly Neil Presa recently ousted the Rev. Al Butzer from his week-old position as moderator of the 221st General Assembly committee on the Middle East, because of pressure from the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement, denominational leadership slipped into a new and dangerous arena.

Much of the Jewish community and many Presbyterians have questioned the bias of the leadership of the PCUSA when it comes to Israel and the Jewish people, and they can be certain now that, yes, many in leadership are prejudiced.

Presbyterians for Middle East Peace distribut-

ed a press release titled “After Pressure from BDS leaders, GA Middle East Committee Moderator Is Removed.” Go there to read about the inane reasons for ousting Butzer from his position.

One of the disgusting contrasts in this matter is that just a few months ago the PCUSA leadership during a controversy over a horrific publication, *Zionism Unsettled* by the Presbyterian Israel/Palestine Mission Network, refused to speak against the booklet because, they wrote, the denomination is a diverse denomination with many different views. But apparently not diverse enough to allow a well-respected Presbyterian pastor the right to moderate a GA committee because he manages to have friendships with both Jews and Palestinians. Horrors, what if he doesn’t agree with the BDS movement or the Presbyterian leadership!

And will this rebuild trust within those Presbyterians who have begun to believe they simply

can’t trust their own denomination? Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the midst of a church struggle wrote, “Trust will always be one of the greatest, rarest and happiest blessings of our life in community, though it can emerge only on the dark background of a necessary mistrust. We have learned never to trust a scoundrel an inch, but to give ourselves to the trustworthy without reserve.”

In the midst of some dark times I believe we have some lessons to learn – at this point I no longer believe we can trust Presbyterian polity on any issue – power has become too important to too many in leadership. But at the same time we know the strength and trustworthiness of God and the trustworthiness of friends. A friend once wrote to me, “We had a first light snow last night, spring is coming.” And so it is.

Viola Larson is a writer from California who blogs at <http://naminghisgrace.blogspot.com/>

Beware of the reverter clause in the dismissal process

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

The pastor on the phone asked, “What do you know about something called a ‘reversionary clause’? We’re voting on Sunday and the presbytery response team just told us we have to add this language to our deed upon dismissal. I’m not a lawyer, but the whole thing sounds fishy to me.” It sounded fishy to me too, so I asked some real lawyers for their opinion.

First a disclaimer: Every jurisdiction is different and you should always get the counsel of an attorney licensed to practice law in your particular state. All the insights offered here are in the “amicus” spirit of a friend. The comments here are of a general nature and should not be construed to constitute specific nor direct legal advice.

The first question to ask is, “What problem is the introduction of a reverter clause trying to solve?”

The second question to ask is, “Who decides what is and what isn’t ‘Reformed?’”

As churches are trying to depart peaceably, presbyteries are seeking to leave one string attached.

What we’re talking about is a legal document that asserts the presbytery’s reversionary interest in the assets of a departing congregation. It’s a power play that creates a lifetime of potential work for attorneys and a decade of waiting for the other shoe to drop for churches that are already paying substantial tolls to get out of the PCUSA.

In legalese, a “reverter” is defined by Black’s Law Dictionary as “that species of reversionary interest which exists when the grant is so limited that it may possibly terminate.”

What’s wrong with a presbytery attaching that string to the assets of a departing church?

One attorney answered, “Why would you give them something to which they have no legal right? Why would you give them a reversionary interest to which they are not legally entitled?”

The denomination asserts a trust over all church property, but the majority of states that have recent rulings on the matter have opted to apply neutral principles of law to church property disputes. That means that those disputes are adjudicated like all other property disputes, under neutral principles of law. The other method used by some states is the hierarchical deference method which “defers” to the trust claim of the “hierarchical church” body.

Legally binding yourself to the denomination you are departing

Throughout the sample deed proposed by

PCUSA presbyteries to departing churches is the recurrent phrase “as described in the Presbyterian Church (USA) constitution.” This language legally binds “your” Presbyterian Church to the PCUSA for the duration of the 10-year reversionary period.

Why would a church that has discerned God’s leading out of the PCUSA agree to allow its future to be bound to the constitution of the denomination from which it is departing? We all know that the constitution of the PCUSA is subject to change every biennial General Assembly cycle. That means that the current language of the PCUSA constitution could be very different by the end of the proposed 10-year reversionary period.

Furthermore, the proposed language allows the PCUSA – and the PCUSA alone – to define “Reformed denomination.”

What constitutes a “Reformed denomination?”

Most of the deeds we’ve seen that are produced by presbyteries and presented to churches in the dismissal process include language that permits the presbytery to make its own unilateral determination that a church no longer in the PCUSA has subsequently left a “Reformed denomination.”

One deed proposed to a departing congregation says that “title to this property shall automatically vest in the presbytery” Worse, it states that “Either event of termination of use or membership referred to in the preceding sentence for purposes of such automatic grant shall be deemed conclusively to have occurred by a declaration to that effect in writing signed by the Presbyterian Church (USA), A Corporation, or its successors in interest, and approved by the presbytery ...”

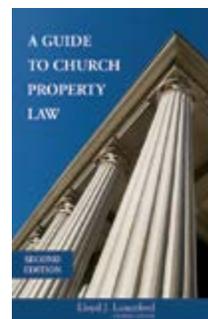
This means that the presbytery, in its own discretion, and without notice to the local church, can declare that the particular church is no longer “in a Reformed denomination.” While the intent is clearly to include denominations like the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians in that status at the current time, there is no guarantee that opinion would hold long-term.

Even if in a subsequent paragraph the deed expressly states that the receiving denomination is in the Reformed tradition as of the date of the contract, if the presbytery deems it no longer so, it can make that assertion unilaterally and title shall automatically vest in the presbytery. This would invite a lawsuit, to be sure, but the deed effectively gives the presbytery the sole discretion to make that determination. Secular courts will not be able to render a decision as to wheth-

er or not the ECO is “Reformed,” and the presbytery will find itself enriched with the local church’s property.

This may be corrected, at least in part, by adding a statement in the deed that states “before any action is taken by the presbytery as a result of a perceived default, it is to contact the church and request a response as to why the church is not in default, give the church an opportunity to cure any actual default within 60 days of such notice (or such longer time as the parties may provide), and if the parties are not in agreement as to the occurrence of a default which pertains to the status of the church as a member of a Reformed body, the parties shall proceed to arbitration. Any such arbitration shall be conducted with one arbitrator being appointed by the Presbytery, one by (name of local church), and the two arbitrators either agreeing upon a third, or requesting one be appointed from the Federal court arbitration panel.”

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