

Court sanctions presbytery for property ‘scheme’

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

Sanctions have been imposed on a Presbyterian Church (USA) presbytery in the amount of \$390,000 after the court “unavoidably” concluded that the presbytery had “in bad faith advanced frivolous arguments in support of a claimed right it knew had no legal or evidentiary support.”

In the matter of *Carrollton Presbyterian Church v. Presbytery of South Louisiana* (PSL), Judge Kay Bates of the 19th Judicial District Court, Parish of East Baton Rouge in Louisiana not only ordered the presbytery to pay the legal expenses accrued by the congregation in defending itself against the presbytery’s claims on its property, she also ordered the release of documents sealed during the trial – 441 emails between the presbytery, lawyers and Mark Tammen, who at the time was the director of Constitutional Services with the PCUSA Office of the General Assembly.



Mark Tammen

The case dates back to March 2008, when Carrollton Presbyterian Church, in Carrollton, La., filed a civil lawsuit against the presbytery seeking a declaratory judgment that it owned its property, free and clear of the presbytery.

The church was in the process of selling its property to its contiguous neighbor, The Stuart Hall School for Boys, when the presbytery tried to block the sale by asserting that the denomination – not the church – owned the property. The court ruled in favor of the local church, as did the Louisiana First Circuit Court of Appeal. Both the Louisiana Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case when the presbytery filed appeals.

Sanctions

In the court’s order, Tammen, who now serves as a presbytery executive in Long Island, N.Y., was described as the denomination’s “foremost in-house legal authority, ... an attorney whose

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EPC and PCUSA stated clerks debate church disaffiliations

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

Several months have passed since Gradye Parsons, stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA), sent a letter to the stated clerk of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), Jeffrey Jeremiah. The angst in the June 27 letter concerning the EPC’s reception of congregations that have disaffiliated from the PCUSA was palpable. The EPC stated clerk responded in a letter dated August 22.

At issue is Parsons’ assertion that the EPC can only receive a congregation that has been formally dismissed by its PCUSA presbytery of membership. Parsons argues that all other exit routes are barred. “A Presbyterian congregation, as I am sure you are aware, cannot dismiss, dissolve, disaffiliate, or transfer itself by its own action. Any vote taken by a PCUSA congregation or session in no way removes the congregation from the jurisdiction of the PCUSA. Neither the congregation nor the session has the authority to make the congregation



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Fourth largest PCUSA church voting on leaving

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

Members of Highland Park Presbyterian Church (HPPC) in Dallas, Texas will vote Oct. 27 on whether it should leave its present denomination and join a new Presbyterian family.

The vote follows a resolution, unanimously approved by the congregation's 49-member session, stating that it "believes God has called HPPC to terminate its voluntary affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (USA), and seek affiliation with ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians."

"We are not walking away from our Presbyterian values; we are preserving them," said Rev. Joe Rightmyer, interim senior pastor of HPPC, in a press release posted on the church's web site.

"This decision by our church leadership was not taken lightly. We have watched as the national denomination has turned away from some of the fundamental values that have been central to our local congregation for the last 90 years. We have reached the point that the changes imposed by the PCUSA have become a distraction that hinders the mission of our church," he continued.

Before the congregational vote, a series of meetings was to be held to inform church members about the session's actions and its reasons for doing so, which include:

- the PCUSA's lack of core theological beliefs;
- disagreement over the authority of Scripture and salvation through Jesus Christ alone;
- and the impact of PCUSA governance policy



Joe Rightmyer

and practices on the life of HPPC, particularly on the selection process for new pastors.

Lawsuit filed

The HPPC session also recently voted to support the action of the church's Board of Trustees in filing a civil lawsuit seeking not only to protect church property from the presbytery, but also asking the court to declare that the church itself owns and controls all of its property, not the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The session sent a letter to the congregation of Highland Park on Sept. 12, stating that it "believes that the trustees made a wise decision in commencing the

court action. The historic opportunity to clear the property of HPPC cannot be allowed to slip away," read the session's letter. "The court action frees the congregation from the distraction of the property and allows it to focus on other critical issues it must consider in deciding its future relationship with the PCUSA."

The letter listed four reasons for the support, including shielding the session and congregation during the discernment process; recent actions of Grace Presbytery; "seizing the opportunity" of the recent Texas Supreme Court Ruling declaring that Texas courts must follow neutral principles of law when deciding church property cases; and trying to "avert disastrous consequence" of the presbytery taking control of the church.

In discussing the Texas Supreme Court's decision, the letter read that, "This ruling appears very favorable to HPPC and presents a historic opportunity to end the longstanding uncertainty

over the right of HPPC to control its property. Clearing up property rights would honor the legacy of our past and provide stability for our future."

The lawsuit was filed Sept. 10 in Dallas County District Court, and a judge granted a temporary restraining order (TRO) that same day.

Grace Presbytery responded on Sept. 19 by having the case moved to federal court. A statement on the presbytery web site stated that "Grace Presbytery is greatly disappointed over HPPC's actions in taking a church dispute into the civil courts, but is confident that based on the evidence and the law, the presbytery will prevail in the federal litigation. Grace Presbytery remains hopeful, however, that reasonable members of the HPPC congregation will want to avoid protracted litigation and instead will come forward to meet and resolve the issues."

The Highland Park session has voted to appoint a negotiating team to work with the presbytery in hope of working out an "amicable" resolution to the lawsuit.

Latest legal moves

A temporary restraining order against the presbytery was extended on Sept. 24 by U.S. District Court Judge Jane J. Boyle, who found that the church had "demonstrated good cause to extend" the restraining order, according to the church's press release.

Boyle also granted the church's request to "expedited consideration" of its request to move the lawsuit back to state court. An Oct. 7 hearing was scheduled.

In the 2011 comparative statistics, Highland Park was listed as the fourth largest church in the denomination with 4,854 members. The court filing estimates the value of the real property owned by the church to be \$30 million.

Texas Supreme Court favors neutral principles

The Layman

On Aug. 30, the Texas Supreme Court released a ruling on an Episcopal Church property case stating that Texas courts must follow neutral principles of law when deciding church property cases.

In *Robert Masterson, et al. v. Diocese of Northwest Texas, et al.*, the opinion read, "We join the majority of states that have considered the matter. We hold that Texas courts should use the neutral principles methodology to determine property interests when religious organizations are involved. Further, to reduce confusion and increase predictability in this area of the law where the issues are difficult to begin with, Texas courts must use only the neutral principles construct."

It continued that the courts have no jurisdiction on ecclesiastical matters, so "as to those questions they must defer to decisions of appropriate ecclesiastical decision makers. But Texas courts are bound to exercise jurisdiction vested in them by the Texas Constitution and cannot delegate their judicial prerogative where jurisdiction exists. Properly exercising jurisdiction requires courts to apply neutral principles of law to non-ecclesiastical issues involving religious entities in the same manner as they apply those principles to other entities and issues. Thus, courts are to apply neutral principles of law to issues such as land titles, trusts, and corporate formation, governance, and dissolution, even when religious entities are involved."



Same-sex marriage advocates outline plans for 2014 GA

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

TUCSON, Ariz. – Advocates for changing the definition of marriage will be hard at work between now and the 221st General Assembly (2014) hoping to push measures through assembly that if approved, will allow same sex marriage in the Presbyterian Church (USA) by June 21, 2014.

More Light Presbyterians (MLP) and the Covenant Network (CN) of Presbyterians announced at the MLP 2013 National Conference held Sept. 27-29, that they have joined forces to try to press the PCUSA to change its stance on marriage to not only allow marriage between couples of the same gender, but to also allow PCUSA pastors to conduct the services on church property.

Following an early summer meeting of MLP and CN representatives, the board of directors for both organizations agreed that an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of the PCUSA constitution and an amendment to the constitution are two things “that this assembly must pass,” said Brian Ellison, executive director of CN.

An AI of the constitution would protect congregations, sessions and pastors, said Ellison, and it is “absolutely essential” for it to be passed at the 2014 General Assembly. Both organizations also agree that an amendment to “enshrine marriage equality in the *Book of Order* is essential,” as part of the denomination’s witness to God’s justice.

Both groups advocate for a full lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer rights and privileges in the PCUSA and society, and also advocate for same-sex marriage in the PCUSA.

Currently, the PCUSA constitution states that marriage is between “one man and one woman,” and its pastors are not allowed to perform same-gender marriages. However, MLP advocates and celebrates through its “Stand for Love” campaign pastors who openly defy the church’s constitution and General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission rulings and perform same-gender marriages now.

Heidi A. Peterson, co-moderator of MLP, along with Ellison, told the approximately 90 people at the conference of the preparations and plans being made to advocate for same-sex marriage at the 221st General Assembly.

She said that MLP and CN worked together on the successful Amendment 10A campaign – when the 2012 General Assembly and a majority of PCUSA presbyteries approved an amendment to the PCUSA constitution that allowed for the ordination of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people to the offices of deacon, elder



and pastor. They hope to build on that success when it comes to same-sex marriage.

The work will be divided, said Ellison, with the CN working to get the AI approved by the GA and the MLP advocating for the amendment.

The Authoritative Interpretation

He described an AI as a “privilege that the GA has. It is one of only two ways that we can agree on what the constitution means to our church.” The other is a ruling of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC), the highest judicial body of the PCUSA.

Once an AI is approved by the General Assembly, it goes into effect immediately. Unlike an amendment to the constitution, it does not need to be ratified by the presbyteries. The 221st GA will meet June 14-21 in Detroit. Therefore, if the assembly does approve the AI, same-sex marriage would be allowed in the PCUSA on the day of the vote, which at the very latest would be the closing day of the assembly – June 21, 2014.

Ellison said there was much talk about AI’s at the last GA. Some thought it was a way to get around a church-wide discussion of same-sex marriage. Others thought it was a “sneaky way for us to get what we want,” he added.

“Every bit of policy in marriage,” he said, “has been the result of an AI – an AI by the GAPJC ... all those cases by the GAPJC have created policy by the PCUSA.” And that policy is all the PCUSA has, since the *Book of Order* doesn’t say a word about same gender marriage, he added.

Ellison said that an AI from the General Assembly would be “immediate, coherent” and would “bring immediate relief to the pastoral crisis we are now facing ... where pastors are dealing with the reality that people in their churches” want to have the same opportunity to marry.

The amendment

“An amendment would actually change our *Book of Order*,” said Peterson, so it doesn’t just require a majority vote of the assembly, but also a majority vote of the PCUSA’s 173 presbyteries.

The starting place, she said, “was a blank sheet of paper. We didn’t look at what was in the book and think about how to change it ... We thought about what is marriage in the Reformed tradition? Is it about gender identity or is marriage in our faith tradition about covenant, abiding love and commitment?”

Peterson said that the previous efforts to change the constitutional language concerning marriage by just changing the words “a man and a woman” to “two people” had not been persuasive.

“We need to bring our church to where we need to be and where we ought to be,” she said.

Ellison added that there are some draft amendments “circulating around the church ... there is language out there that is developing some consensus.”

He told those interested in the draft amendments to contact Tricia Dykers-Koenig of the Covenant Network. “She can offer a glimpse of where things are,” he said.

Peterson told the crowd that this is not the same issue that was approved in 2012. “People who felt our way about 10A may not feel the same way about marriage equality ... the cultural tide is in a whole different place than it was at the last General Assembly ... we can’t know how those two factors will play off of each other.”

During a question and answer session, Ellison and Peterson were asked if the AI and the amendment would go before one General Assembly committee or could the measures be sent to different assembly committees?

Ellison said that it is the job of Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons to assign business to the committees. “He refers as he pleases,” said Ellison. “We have a hard time imagining that the stated clerk would assign those items to different committees,” since no conflicting business can come out of two different committees that would confuse the assembly.

“The very worst outcome is for some of us to pursue an amendment and lose the AI,” he said. Then, if the assembly passes the amendment, and it was voted down in the presbyteries, “we end up with nothing. An AI is essential right now. I would argue an amendment is also essential and we need both right now.”

For more resources on marriage, visit *The Layman Online’s* marriage resource page at www.layman.org/category/marriage-2/

PCUSA voices raised against Syria strike

By Alan F.H. Wisdom
The Layman

In three late August statements, Presbyterian Church (USA) officials and agencies pleaded for the United States to “refrain from military action” against Syria.

As debate raged over a possible U.S. strike in response to the Syrian government’s apparent use of chemical weapons, the PCUSA was listed among the denominations endorsing an August 28 letter to President Obama. “While we unequivocally condemn any use of chemical weapons ...,” the signers said, “military strikes are not the answer.” They counseled the president: “Instead of pursuing military strikes and arming parties to the conflict, we urge your administration to intensify diplomatic efforts to stop the bloodshed.”

On August 30, PCUSA Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons published his own statement asking the President and Congress to consider unspecified “nonviolent forms of intervention.” The denomination’s Office of Public Witness suggested on the same day: “Instead of exacerbating the conflict with military strikes, the United States should seek an international agreement on an arms embargo and back dialogue that alone can end the horrific violence.”

“Limited engagement is never truly limited,” the stated clerk warned. Any U.S. military action against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad would be “likely to escalate the conflict further, and to bring our country directly into another war in the Middle East,” according to Parsons. He insisted that “[n]ow is not the time to feed the violence and instability that has claimed the lives of over 100,000 Syrians, driven 3.4 million Syrians from their country, and displaced an additional 6.8 million Syrians from their homes.”

Parsons “condemn[ed] the use of chemical weapons” as a “violation of international law.” But he maintained that responsibility for addressing any such violation lay with the United Nations Security Council rather than with the United States and its allies. “We do not doubt that justice is needed,” the stated clerk explained, “but question the unilateral and inevitably selective role the United States has too often played, too often leading to greater violence, terrorism, and instability.”

The Office of Public Witness looked to “the United Nations and other governments to contain the violence, restore stability in the region, provide humanitarian assistance, and encourage the building of an inclusive society in Syria that pro-



protects the rights of all its citizens.” The office expressed a quasi-pacifist conviction: “It is only through nonviolent means that we can hope for radical change that leads to a just peace.”

PCUSA officials based their lobbying on a resolution adopted by the denomination’s General Assembly in July 2012. That resolution urged the U.S. government “to support a mediated process of cessation of violence by all perpetrators, including the Assad regime and armed opposition groups; to call for all outside parties to cease all forms of intervention in Syria; to support a strong and necessary role for the United Nations, possibly including observers and peacekeeping forces; and to refrain from military intervention in Syria.”

In subsequent weeks, the denomination publicized statements from Middle Eastern partner churches opposing a Syria strike. Speaking in a September 10 webinar hosted by PCUSA World Mission, the Rev. Dr. Riad Jarjour of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon affirmed “a major consensus among the Christian leaders in Syria and in the region that any military intervention would have a detrimental effect on Christians in Syria and all the people as well in Syria and it will not bring peace.” The Syrian pastor stressed: “Our church-

es in Syria have said very clearly ... that we have to be saved through our own efforts with our Muslim brothers who are with us in Syria.”

The Rev. Adeen Awad, vice moderator of the Syrian synod, warned, “I think that the desire of the American administration, the American president, to wage a strike and just kill thousands and hundreds of thousands of people is not justified at the moment.” He asked, “Why should the U.S. president be the judge for the world – regardless of the United Nations, regardless of the Congress?”

Jarjour reported, “Not only the synod, but most of the churches believe that there was maybe poison gas attack that killed many people ..., but of course no one is sure who has done that and we are not sure that it is the [Assad] regime who has done that.” The PCUSA statements were similarly reluctant to affix blame for the August 21 chemical attack that left more than 1,000 civilians dead.

Jarjour’s remarks reflected a pattern in which webinar speakers deflected criticisms of the

Assad regime and raised concerns about the Islamist rebels. “All groups have been brutal in their fighting and tactics,” noted the Rev. Roula Alkhouri, the Syrian-born pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Batavia, N.Y. “We hear about what the Syrian government has done, but the rebels have also terrorized the people of Syria, attacking churches, moderate Muslim leaders, bombing and hijacking civilian targets. In areas of

their control, they have killed the judges and lawyers and set up their own Muslim courts where clerics would rule over the people.”

Jarjour asserted, “Churches have been living in peace and harmony and they had their freedom under the Assad regime, and they think that they don’t want to lose that, I must say, because they are afraid that what may come [if the rebels win] may be worse.”



The United States on Syria: Evidence of moral schizophrenia

No one with a beating heart denies that the use of chemical weapons is deplorable. No one denies that the death of innocent people at the hands of a despot is appalling. No one denies the legitimacy of the “red line” against such atrocities regardless of who drew it. But the outrage expressed by some over the murder of hundreds of Syrian children in their beds is moral schizophrenia for a nation that has chemically induced the deaths of more than 50 million of its own children – in the womb.

People in this nation and around the globe who acknowledge that human life begins prior to physical birth hear nothing but utter hypocrisy when members of an ardently pro-abortion administration make statements of “moral outrage” about the deaths of hundreds of children. Out of one side of their mouths they declare that every child matters. While out of the other side they legislate, fund and fiercely defend on-demand abortion.

If every child really matters, then every child really matters. Period. But that is not the ethic of America today.

This is a nation who has declared, by her own actions, over the past 40 years that every child does not matter. The only children who matter are the children that fit into our personal financial and social plans. Other children, 50 million of them, matter not – they are subject to chemical annihilation at our hands.

The President told us to watch the videos so that we would not lose sight of the horrifying images of children writhing and dying. He wants us to be haunted and rightly so. But I wonder if he has seen the images and videos of pre-born children being burned alive with saline or literally torn limb from limb as they slept in what should be the safest place on earth, a mother’s womb? Is he not haunted by those images? Are not we?

Assad has killed his thousands but America has killed her millions – and everyone around the world



The outrage expressed by some over the murder of hundreds of Syrian children in their beds is moral schizophrenia for a nation that has chemically induced the deaths of more than 50 million of its own children – in the womb.

knows it. We have no moral authority whatsoever to stand upon when we point at the speck in our brother’s eye, ignoring the plank in our own.

As God instructs us, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye” (Matthew 5:3-5 NIV).

Justice matters to God and justice matters to America. But to be an authentic agent of justice one must deal first with one’s own egregious sins.

It is time that America wake up to her own civil war and her own use of chemical and biological weapons against her most helpless citizens.

Maybe then she would have the kind of credibility necessary to stand as an agent of moral conviction in the world today.

The President declared rightly that, “This is not a world we should accept.” I agree. But the necessary change begins with us.



Commentary
by Carmen
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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 Association for Church Renewal.

NEWS 'ROUND UP'



Nathan Key reported that the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board has referred Stony Point incorporation recommendation for evaluation (www.layman.org/pmab-refers-stony-point-incorporation-recommendation-evaluation/) and also turned down a motion for pay raises (www.layman.org/board-turns-motion-pay-raises/) at its meeting in Louisville, Ky.



Carmen Fowler LaBerge laid out the timeline for business for the 2014 PCUSA General Assembly (www.layman.org/calendaring-toward-detroit-2014-general-assembly-meeting-pcusa/) and the "new math" sessions will need to consider as they put together 2014 budgets. (www.layman.org/back-to-school-the-new-math-for-pcusa-churches/)



Adam Borneman reported on the 'Engage the South' church planting conference (www.layman.org/engage-south-church-planting-conference-held-birmingham/)



The legal database has been updated with rulings from Louisiana and Texas: www.layman.org/plcs-legal-resource-databank/



The updated chart of churches shows that 347 churches realigned their denominational affiliation in recent years. That reflects 146,628 members or an average of 422 members per departing congregation. www.layman.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/churches-seeking-discernment.xls



Nathan Key reported on a new ECO church plant just south of Charlotte, N.C. www.layman.org/planting-a-new-eco-church-in-south-charlotte/

For articles,
visit www.layman.org

Synod PJC rules against New York City Presbytery

By Nathan Key
The Layman

A Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC) from Synod of the Northeast (SNE) ruled that the gracious dismissal policy of the Presbytery of New York City (PNYC) shall be set aside and have no force or effect.

The PJC ruling on a remedial complaint filed in the matter of *Mildred McGee, et. al. vs. Presbytery of New York City* was handed down Sept. 11, 2013.

The PJC upheld five of the seven counts in ruling for the complainant in the matter.

The history

The presbytery began drafting its dismissal policy early in 2012 after the 218th General Assembly (2008) urged presbyteries to do so in response to churches requesting dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA). The PNYC's Board of Trustees commissioned appraisals from the firm Massey-Knakel regarding value of properties for all its congregations.

A draft of the policy and valuations were discussed on April 30, 2012, and a draft dated July 12, 2012 was included in the meeting packet for July 28 though never discussed on the floor. A Nov. 5 version was introduced for first reading at the Dec. 6, 2012, meeting. Following open hearings Dec. 13 and 20, the final version of the policy was approved Jan. 29, 2013, by a 56-49 margin.

Presbytery of New York City's gracious dismissal policy allows sessions to request commencement of the dismissal process following a two-thirds majority vote. Following the request, the stated clerk calls one or more meetings between a Special Resolutions Committee of the presbytery and the session as well as the Board of Trustees during a 120-day period after receiving the request.

If the notice is not withdrawn by the end of that four-month period, a congregational meeting – needing a 50 percent quorum – is called, with dismissal approved if confirmed by a three-fourths majority vote of the congregation.

Financial arrangements include payment of any arrears in per capita, five years of per capita payments on a declining scale and compensation for church property of 10 percent of the assessed value that exceeds \$1 million, with a cap on the compensation of \$2 million.

According to the PJC documentation, there is no presbytery vote on church dismissals. If all conditions are met by the church seeking dismissal, the dismissal automatically takes place.



Ruling Elder Mildred McGee filed a remedial complaint with the stated clerk of SNE Feb. 13, 2013, alleging the presbytery's action in adopting and implementing its gracious dismissal policy, approved Jan. 29, 2013, was irregular as constitutionally required, and requested a stay of enforcement. The stay was granted.

According to the ruling, the following counts were sustained by the PJC:

Count One: "Purporting to confer a unilateral right of a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation to depart from the denomination."

Count Two: "The PNYC gracious dismissal policy does not give full effect to the trust clause."

Count Three: "Enacting/implementing a gracious dismissal policy that provides inadequate mechanisms for reconciliation has a chilling effect upon debate about our theological differences, and allows for dissolution on the basis of unexamined or pretextual theological differences or simple class differences."

Count Four: "Approval and implementation of this policy fails to safeguard the minority and account for schism."

Count Seven: "Allowing dismissed congregations to retain their historical records."

The commission indicated a high level of mistrust and conflict in the life of the Presbytery of New York City and listened to testimony that those drafting the gracious dismissal policy felt it unwise to allow the presbytery to vote on dismissal of congregations for fear that such a vote would present occasion for malice and sabotage.

In regard to testimony, the PJC noted, "... this commission observes with great sadness that (testimonies given) are evidence of the pain and broken relationships that continue to impede the mission and witness of the Presbytery of New York City."

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BLESSED

Life in Christ is filled with blessings too numerous to count and yet, “count your blessings” is an oft-repeated encouragement. As we approach “Thanksgiving” we enter the season of blessing counting, so it seemed apropos to examine again the nature of blessing with a special emphasis on Biblical beatitudes.

We are all familiar with the beatitudes that appear in the Sermon on the Mount in the fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, but we may be less familiar with the beatitudes sprinkled throughout the Old Testament and the seven beatitudes found in the book of Revelation.

A beatitude is simply the declaration of the condition of blessedness. Stated most succinctly it is one word, “Blessed!” As in Psalm 1:1: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.”

Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology (Edited by Walter A. Elwell, Copyright © 1996) notes that “As the first word in the psalms (1:1), blessed is applied generally to all those within God’s redemptive covenant established with Abraham. The believer praying Psalm 1:1 becomes the beatitude’s subject. His blessedness comes within his relationship to God in which he accomplishes the divine will and keeps himself separate from God’s enemies (1:1-2).

The Torah, God’s written revelation, is his constant occupation (v. 2). Unbelievers are destined to destruction (vv. 4-6), but the “blessed” is promised life with God (v. 3).

In Hebrew the word translated as “blessed” is *asre* and in Greek the word is *makarios*. They are used to declare the blessed condition of people, not God. When referring to God’s blessedness the Greek word is *eulogetos*.

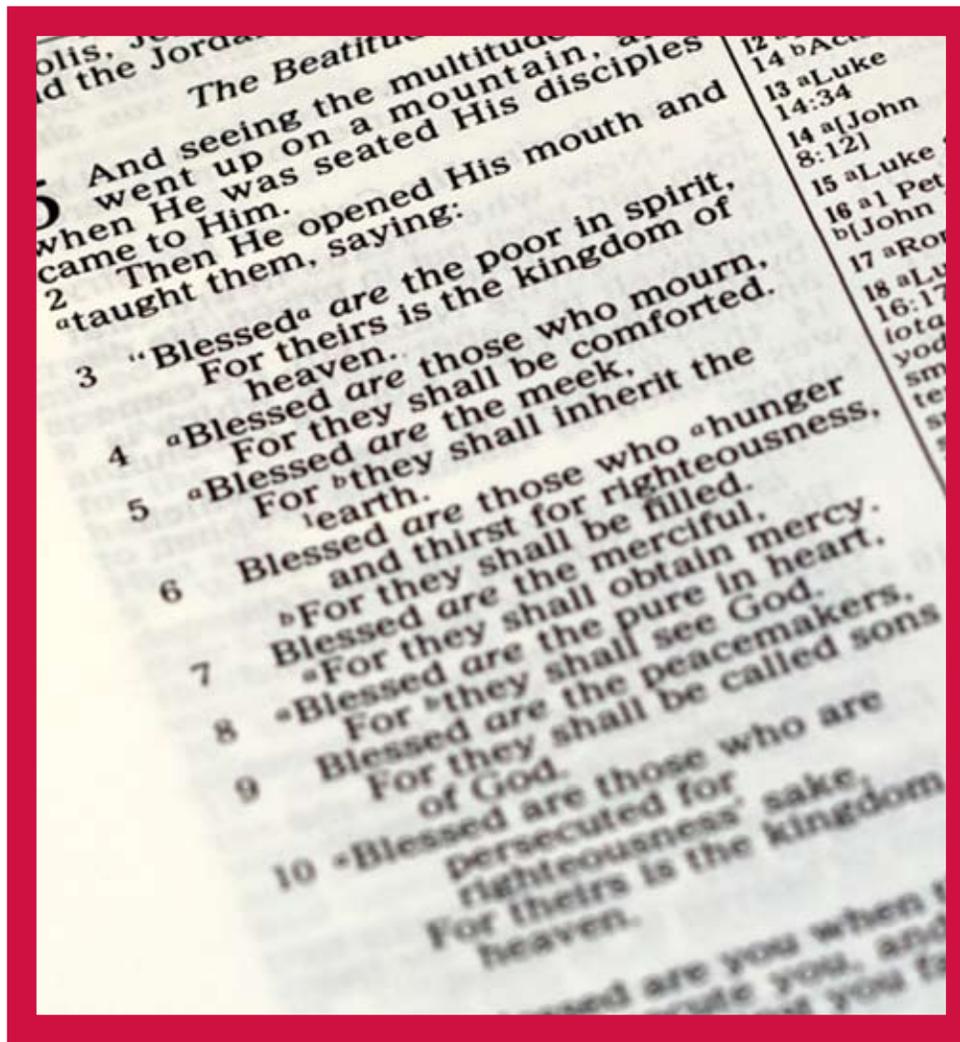
So, in Matthew 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” we identify the “blessed” persons as the “poor in spirit” and we learn that they are “blessed” in that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Too often commentators, preachers and bloggers reduce the concept of blessedness to happiness or fortune or favor. But blessing takes into account the relationship of the one who is blessed to the God who blesses. Wound up in the Biblical concept of blessing is the reality of relationship – it is deeply personal and dependent upon the confession of sin and reception of forgiveness. It includes emotional well-being or happiness because the one who is blessed knows intimately the secret of being content in all circumstances: a personal relationship with the living God.

The people of God are not blessed because they are favored by God above others nor because they are “fortunate” in terms of worldly privilege. They are blessed precisely because they are God’s – by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Blessing is a profound evangelical witness to the world and is to be declared by the people of God of themselves, no matter the relative nature of the circumstances of this life.

As we study the beatitudes of the Bible let us cultivate lives that demonstrate our blessedness to others as a testimony to the One from whom all blessings flow.



The classic New Testament beatitude has three parts: (1) the adjective “blessed;” (2) the identification of the “blessed” person(s) by a descriptive clause or participle; and (3) the condition of their “blessedness.”

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week I: Old Testament beatitudes

Psalm 1 begins, “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.”

The declaration “Blessed!” is spoken over those who “delight in the law of the Lord, and who meditate on His law day and night.” The evidence of the blessing that flows from the status of being blessed is an unwithering life that prospers under the watch-care of the Lord.

Consider the Old Testament beatitudes of the Lord to His people:

- Psalm 2:12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for His wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him.
- Psalm 32:2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.
- Psalm 40:4 Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, who does not look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.
- Psalm 41:1 Blessed is he who has regard for the weak; the LORD delivers him in times of trouble.
- Psalm 65:4 Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

- Psalm 84:4-5 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. (Selah) Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.
- Psalm 106:3 Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right.
- Psalm 112:1 Praise the LORD. Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in His commands.
- Psalm 128:1 Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways.
- Proverbs 8:32 Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways.
- Isaiah 32:20 (in context 32:17-20) The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever. My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest. Though hail flattens the forest and the city is leveled completely, how blessed you will be, sowing your seed by every stream, and letting your cattle and donkeys range free.
- Isaiah 56:2 Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.
- Daniel 12:12 Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end of the 1,335 days.

For reflection

Consider the conditions of those who are declared “blessed” and then consider whether you meet those conditions in your relationship with God.

Week II: Traditional beatitudes from Matthew and Luke’s parallels

The beatitudes appear in Matthew 5:3-10 and find their parallel in Luke 6:20b-26 where Luke lists not only blessings but woes. While it may be tempting to imagine that Jesus is singling out separate groups of people, commentators widely agree that the beatitudes are descriptive of all Christians – and the woes likewise applicable to all those who are not in a relationship with the living God through His Son, the Savior, Jesus Christ. The beatitudes are personal declarations of blessedness upon people whose hearts Jesus knows. As the Son of God, Jesus stands in a unique position to pronounce such blessings.

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Ask yourself “who” is blessed and “how” are they blessed. How does this inform your understanding of God’s eternal divine perspective on temporal realities?

The beatitudes are about “internal” attitudes that affect external behaviors; people here on earth who are bound for heaven – Jesus could “see” it in their hearts – by their spirits, by their compassion, by their meekness, by their internal hunger for righteous-

ness, their thirst for the Truth. Jesus could see it in their acts of mercy and the purity of their lives. He could see it in their small acts of kindness to a stranger and he could foresee it the persecution they would surely endure because of Him.

These are intended to be the attitudes by which disciples of Christ live. Not beliefs so much as “be-livings.”

Jesus declares much in these few verses: Who will be a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, what the Spirit will do, what believers will inherit, the filling of those who long for higher righteousness, concepts of mercy, purity and peace, the children of God, and the prediction of the passion for Christ as His followers.

And then Jesus turns from making observations about the crowds and He looks His disciples in the eye: “Blessed are *you* when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.” Yikes! This is not the kind of blessing that we’re looking for! Jesus wants to be very clear with His disciples from the very beginning of His ministry that hanging out with Him, following Him, being associated with Him, is costly. It’s not a question of “whether or not” the disciples of Jesus will be insulted, they will. It’s not a question of “whether or not” the disciples of Jesus will be persecuted, they will. It’s not a question of “whether or not” the disciples of Jesus will be misrepresented and maligned, they will. Still interested?

Then here comes the “counter-intuitive” command: “**Rejoice and be glad**, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

For reflection

Compare Luke 6:20b-26 with Matthew 5. What more do you learn?

Week III: Four additional Gospel beatitudes

In Matthew 13:16 Jesus declares the blessed nature of the disciples in “seeing” what is veiled to others.

He teaches the crowds in parables that many find opaque and yet the disciples are able to discern and understand the eternal Truths Christ is seeking to communicate.

Thus Jesus affirms their blessedness, “But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”

The apostle Paul alludes to the blessing experienced by those who are able to discern spiritual things, those who are blessed to possess the mind of Christ, those for whom the truth is not veiled – and he juxtaposes that beatitude with the reality of the spiritual darkness and futility of thinking of those who are perishing.

Read II Corinthians 4:1-18 and consider the distinction between those who are “blessed” because they believe and those who are “blind” because they do not have the faith by which to see.

Taking this approach allows us to cultivate the affect of “woe” in relationship to our neighbors who are blindly walking down wide paths that lead to destruction – and compels us to use the blessing of knowing Christ to invite them to meet Him and find life.

There are two beatitudes in Matthew 16:17 and Luke 1:48 that are spoken to individuals but have application to all believers.

In Matthew 16:17 Jesus declares Peter blessed: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” The context is Peter’s answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter rightly and righteously responded, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus declares that Peter is blessed because of the reality of God’s revela-

tion to Peter – a knowledge unattainable by human effort. If you believe, as Peter believed, then you too share in this beatitude. If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead you stand blessed! Not by your own effort but because God has revealed to you by faith the saving truth that leads to life.

The encounter between two miraculously pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary, in Luke 1 contains notable blessing language. In verse 45 Elizabeth declares to Mary, “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

Mary then responds in song that declares the generation-to-generation blessing that will flow through her. “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

Why does Elizabeth say Mary is blessed and why does Mary say that henceforth the generations shall call her blessed? Because of her own merit? Hardly.

The beatitudes that are spoken over and of Mary relate to God’s selection of her as the mother of Jesus. In that she is uniquely blessed and by her willing surrender to His will, so are we.

Finally, the resurrected Lord Jesus says to Thomas who needed “physical verifiable scientific proof” – “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29).

For reflection:

What is the gift of God to you in John 20:29? What is the “woe” contained latently in the same verse for those who put their faith in the natural world?

Week IV: The seven beatitudes in Revelation

You may not have thought of the final book of the Bible as a place to turn for declarations of blessing, but there are seven beatitudes in Revelation. They declare the blessing of ultimate victory, in life and death and eternity, for those who put their faith in Christ.

As you read each beatitude below, consider where you are in relationship to the living God who speaks these words. Consider how you “receive” the Word and how you “hear” it. Consider the times and what lies ahead – on earth and in heaven. Consider what the Lord says about tangible realities like “who” are counted among the blessed, “where” they reside, “what” they do, and their “rights” as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

- Revelation 1:3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.
- Revelation 14:13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, “Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”
- Revelation 16:15 “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”
- Revelation 19:9 Then the angel said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ “And he added, “These are the true words of God.”
- Revelation 20:6 Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.
- Revelation 22:7 “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book.”
- Revelation 22:14 “Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”

What more can we say about these things? If God is for us, we are blessed! So He has said in His Word, so let us live!

For reflection

How can you live out the reality of the blessings God has spoken in His Word over your life? How can you live the blessed reality of a child of God in the world today?

For further study

Presbyterian pastor, Gerrit Dawson, has recently written a book entitled *The Blessing Life* which includes a 40-day Scripture and prayer guide. It will not only help you live as a person who is blessed but as an activated agent of God’s blessing in the world today. Order at www.ivpress.com.

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Presbyterians don't pay for people

By Carmen Fowler
LaBerge
The Layman

As Clevelanders awoke on May 6, 2013 – a very normal Monday awaited them. Or, so they thought.

The forecast called for temps in the 60s, typical weather for this time of the year.

But by the time the sun set on Lake Erie that night, the whole world would be looking in on breaking news coming from Cleveland.

It was on May 6, 2013, that three women escaped from the house where they had been held captive for upward of 10 years. The owner of the house, Ariel Castro, kidnapped them between 2002 and 2004 when they were 14, 16 and 20 years old. In addition to the three women, a 6-year-old girl whose entire life had been lived to that point in captivity, became known to the world.

We can take great joy that these women – presumed to be dead – are now reunited with their families. But other than that slice of joy, the horrid details of their captivity are so unpleasant that the story makes you want to turn away.

But no matter how unpleasant, no matter how troubling, no matter how shattering, we must not turn away. This happened while we were so busy that we failed to insure that the lost were sought until found – that those held captive were set free – that the powerless were protected.

This isn't a Grimms' fairy tale, this is a real life story of very real human enslavement, in a house next door to our own. These Cleveland women are not statistics in a file; they are the now-grown daughters of a family down the street. Except that these daughters lost an entire decade as victims of modern-day slavery.

The U.S. State Department recently issued its 2013 report on human trafficking. Secretary of State John Kerry said, "When we think of the scale of modern-day slavery, literally tens of millions who live in exploitation, this whole effort can seem daunting, but it's the right effort. There are countless voiceless people, countless nameless people except to their families or perhaps a phony name by which they are being exploited, who look to us for their freedom."

Here is another recent example from the news:

"Federal agents and police raid more than a dozen convenience stores in New York and Virginia, and arrest owners and managers for allegedly forcing foreign workers to work very long hours, for very little pay in their stores. ... Only about 40,000 victims of human trafficking have been identified in the past year, the report said, based on information obtained



from governments around the world. The estimated number of men, women and children who are trafficked at any one time worldwide may reach as high as 27 million, according to the report." (NBC)

The chief executive of the Polaris Project, a non-governmental organization that works to prevent human traf-

ficking, said in an email to NBC:

"The average American should understand that human trafficking is much larger and more prevalent than most people realize, and they may come across human trafficking in their daily lives. Hundreds of thousands of vulnerable women, men and children right here in the U.S. are lured or forced into commercial sex or to provide labor against their will."

Going forward, I'd like to help increase Presbyterian awareness of and mobilization against human trafficking. We need to regularly highlight the issues, as well as include links to churches like North Avenue in Atlanta (see here: www.napc.org/mission) who are doing something positive on this front.

Presbyterians don't pay for people

Maybe – just maybe – if we talk and pray and take action on something like this, it could have the potential for getting a currently fragmented people coalesced around something that's so big only God could change it.

I can almost hear you saying, "But what can I do?" Start by opening your eyes. Look around. It is happening in your neighborhood. It is happening on your watch. Ask God to open the eyes of your heart and then ask Him to open your eyes to what breaks His. You will begin to see what slave owners want to keep hidden in the shadows. Become informed, even as the information will make you weep. Then get angry and let that righteous anger fuel the fire of activism.

In the PCUSA you can connect with efforts at www.pcusa.org/resource/work-human-trafficking-roundtable/

In the EPC you can connect with efforts at www.epc.org/welcome-to-eupdates/epc-women-in-ministry-against-human-trafficking/

Churches related to The Fellowship of Presbyterians and the ECO are also mobilized: <http://mppc.org/serve/trafficking>

Join my "Presbyterians Don't Pay for People" campaign today at www.facebook.com/Presbyterians-DontPayForPeople

Egyptian Christians offer perspective on recent events

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

A webinar sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s World Mission discussed the recent events in Egypt and told why Egyptian Christians are encouraged by what has happened.

Amgad Beblawi, area coordinator for the Middle East, Europe and Central Asia for the Presbyterian Mission Agency, gave a little background to the events of the past year.

Beblawi said that after the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Mohammad Morsi was elected as president in June 2012, "he failed to fulfill his campaign promises." Morsi appointed only members of the Muslim Brotherhood to top positions in the country, his tactics included intimidating his opponents, and he "oversaw the adoption of a controversial constitution, one that would virtually turn Egypt into an Islamic state."

Many Egyptians opposed the new constitution "with hundreds of thousands of demonstrators on the streets," said Beblawi, but the president not only showed no flexibility, he also gave himself "additional powers to ensure the judiciary system would not be able to derail his agenda.

"That is when Egyptians felt they had to oust Morsi, who they had just elected democratically," he said. More than 22 million signed petitions calling for the end of the Morsi regime.

On the one-year anniversary of Morsi's inauguration – June 30 – demonstrations took place across Egypt, said Beblawi, adding that the number of demonstrators was estimated at between 4- to 15-million. Following three days of continuous demonstrations, the Army overthrew Morsi.

"This was perceived by people outside Egypt as a coup," he said. "Inside Egypt it was not considered as such. Most people supported this move by the Army, and felt, in fact, that the Army was responding to their demands."

Beblawi said that approximately 5 to 10 percent of Egypt's population continued to back Morsi after the overthrow and they staged sit-ins, which turned into protest camps in the middle of Cairo. Not only did the camps cause problems with traffic and sanitation, it "became clear that the Morsi supporters were stockpiling weapons in their camps," he said.

When mediation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the government failed, security forces



PHOTO BY LOCAL CAIRO PHOTOGRAPHER

A member of the Muslim Brotherhood spray paints the door of the Saint Fatima Church near Tahrir Square. He spray-paints "Islameya," which means "Islamic" and is short for masr Islameya. In this context, on that door, it's "Egypt is Islamic."

began on Aug. 14 to clear out the camps. Fighting between the protestors and security forces resulted in 900 deaths. Islamic militants reacted by destroying several government buildings, approximately 80 churches and Christian businesses, two Bible Society shops and a few Christian schools, said Beblawi.

Egyptian Christians encouraged

Ramez Atallah, the general director of The Bible Society of Egypt, also spoke during the webinar.

When Morsi was elected, said Atallah, "the worst fears of Egyptian Christians were realized ... When June 30 came and people went out in the streets by the millions ... We realized in a surprising way as Christians, that we were in the vast majority of Egyptians who did not want radical political Islam in Egypt and that most Muslims in Egypt wanted the kind of country that we would be comfortable with."

"Since June 30, Egyptian Christians have been extremely encouraged. They feel loved, cared for and supported by a majority of Muslims in their country, and they feel hope for their future," he said.

"In general, Christians in Egypt very much support the present government and are extremely disappointed that people in the West are getting a very selected, media-censored view of what is happening in Egypt," said Atallah.

When asked how the church in Egypt has responded to challenges during the past two

years, Atallah said he would prefer to focus on the past two weeks, "because something very remarkable happened in the last two weeks – 80 churches, orphanages, schools, two Bible Society books shops and so on were viciously attacked by Muslim rebel supporters."

"When that happened our worst fear was that Christians – whose property had been destroyed, whose churches had been burned to the ground, whose Bibles had been burned in the streets – would react violently," he said.

The Evangelical, Orthodox and Catholic denominational representatives all told their people that "We as Christians do not respond violently. We will love those who hate us, and we will we respond as Jesus would want us to respond."

Atallah said that he has not heard any retaliation by the Christians.

"The testimony of Christians in Egypt is remarkable because of the restraint ... We are proud and thankful and praise the Lord for the reaction of Christians to the vicious attacks of the past weeks."

Atallah said that there is a need today for American Christians to be in Egypt "to interpret to the church in an unbiased way what is really happening on the ground. I've been interviewed by just about every channel and radio station I can, and it's a very difficult task because they don't believe what I say. It is completely opposite of what is shown: The fact that we, as Christians, are delighted by what's happening. We feel it is a new era in Egypt."

Atallah said that Americans in Egypt can also help the Egyptians understand that the "American church does not represent necessarily what we see as the politics of America, which frustrate Egyptians today ... There is an anti-American government in Egypt that has not been there in the last 30 years."

Atallah ended his remarks by saying that Egyptians are "grateful for the stability of Egypt under the present situation ... Pray for us. Believe that God's work is way beyond the news you are seeing ... I think the answer is in prayer, not in politics obviously.

"Please, please, let's not be anti-Muslim. There are many wonderful Muslims ... and we are delighted in Egypt to find out that the majority of Muslims are peace-loving people who want to work alongside Christians."

Churches that have left the PCUSA recently

To access articles on each of the churches on the list below, visit www.layman.org and type the church's name in the "search box."

For a complete list of churches, visit www.layman.org/discern/faqs-and-urgent-issues

(EPC: Evangelical Presbyterian Church; ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians)

CHURCH NAME	CITY, STATE	MEMBERS	PRESBYTERY	DETAILS	JOINED
First named changed to Community	Omak, Wash.	125	Central Washington	On 1/13/13, a straw poll yielded an 85-3 vote in favor of departing the PCUSA. On 6/11/13, the session accepted terms of dismissal which included changing the name of the church as well as financial compensation to the presbytery in the amount of \$11,884.62 in addition to reimbursement of travel costs for the Discernment Team and Administrative Commission members up to a maximum amount of \$3,000.	EPC
Altan	Monroe, N.C.	69	Charlotte	Congregation was dismissed during the 5/21/13 stated meeting of presbytery. Since the congregational vote yielded a result of more than 90 percent in favor of departure, Altan was dismissed with property intact.	EPC
Eastminster	Marietta, Ga.	577	Cherokee	Session voted unanimously to seek dismissal from PCUSA. Congregation was dismissed at the 5/28/13 presbytery meeting. Church will contribute \$25,000 per year to shared Christian missions in the region for each of the next three years. As of 7/15/13 church officially joined ECO.	ECO
First	Waukegan, Ill.	170	Chicago	Church voted by 90% of voting members to be dismissed from PCUSA and affiliate with EPC. Presbytery dismissed the church at its 6/18/13 meeting. Congregation must pay \$128,759 dismissal fee.	EPC
First	Fitzgerald, Ga.	55	Flint River	Session's recommendation to seek dismissal was accepted unanimously by approximately 40 members who cast ballots during a congregational vote in August 2012. Congregation released from presbytery in late April 2013. Church pledged financial support to presbytery in the amount of \$5,500.	ECO
Church of the Redeemer	Snellville, Ga.	573	Greater Atlanta	On 9/9/12, the session announced to the congregation its unanimous decision to seek dismissal from the PCUSA and join ECO. The congregation was dismissed to ECO on 5/2/13. Church will pay \$67,000 to the presbytery and will contribute \$68,640 over the next four years to PCUSA-related missions.	ECO
The Village	Incline Village, Nev.		Nevada	Congregation was dismissed from PCUSA on 9/18/13. More than 98% of the members voting expressed a desire to be dismissed. Church provided the presbytery with a gift of \$62,000 for mission and ministry and received clear title to the church facilities.	ECO
Concord	Sumter, S.C.	118	New Harmony	Congregation dismissed February 2013 to EPC. The church will pay \$6,000 which is 2012 Basic Mission Support, pay pro-rated \$1,000 for 2013 Basic Mission Support, and pay \$1,399.56 for 2013 per capita	EPC
Darlington	Darlington, S.C.	407	New Harmony	Church voted in January 2012 to disaffiliate. Presbytery voted 5/14/13 to approve the terms of dismissal, which recognized its disaffiliation vote and 4/1/12 acceptance into the EPC. The church paid \$35,825 within 45 days of the presbytery's approval of the agreement and will make payments of \$28,058.33 by Dec. 31, 2013; \$28,058.33 by Dec. 21, 2014; and \$28,058.34 by Dec. 31, 2015. The total payment is \$120,000.	EPC
Northminster	Bakersfield, Calif.	140	San Joaquin	Congregation was dismissed at 5/18/13 presbytery meeting. The settlement reached with the presbytery allowed the congregation to pay approximately \$10,500 in exchange for the property.	ECO
Sierra Vista	Oakhurst, Calif.	342	San Joaquin	Congregation was dismissed at 5/18/13 presbytery meeting. It was required to pay back withheld per capita in the amount of \$9,200, along with payment for 2013 totaling \$12,000 gave a final amount of \$21,200.	ECO
Faith United	Brandon, S.D.	270	South Dakota	Congregation dismissed at 5/17/13 presbytery meeting. The dismissal became effective on 6/27/13. The church paid \$225,000 to secure its property. A total of \$75,000 was paid at the time of closing (June 27), with an additional \$75,000 to be paid on or before the first anniversary of the closing date, and another \$75,000 to be paid on or before the second anniversary of the closing date. The church also paid 2013 per capita in the amount of \$6,254.92 and provided original church records to the presbytery.	EPC

Commission recommends reducing the number of synods

By Nathan Key
The Layman

A reduction in the current 16 synods will be presented to the 221st General Assembly in Detroit next summer.

During a three-day meeting, the Mid-Council Commission 2 chose a “larger but fewer synods” model to be recommended at the next GA meeting, slated for June 14-21, 2014.

The MCC-2 voted unanimously Sept. 10 to choose the fewer synods option developed by a sub-committee over two other proposals that had been drafted for consideration.

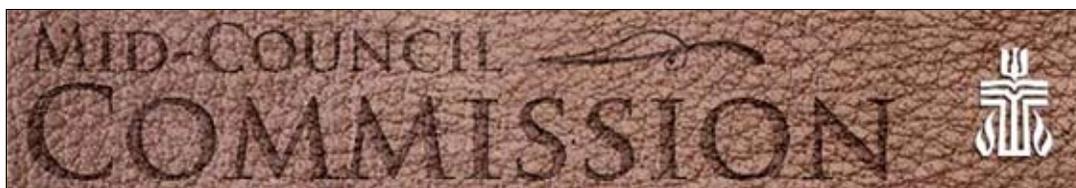
Under the fewer synods option, the MCC-2 will recommend that the 221st GA:

a) Direct that the number of synods be reduced to no more than eight.

b) Direct 221st General Assembly moderator, in consultation with the stated clerk, to appoint a team to assist synods and presbyteries in seeking to determine the most prudent boundary changes to accomplish the reduction of synods.

c) Recommend that if the synods and presbyteries are unsuccessful in reaching agreement, that the 222nd GA direct its moderator, along with the stated clerk, to appoint an Administrative Commission with the authority to recommend to the following assembly the boundary changes necessary to reduce the synods, which would push implementation to sometime beyond the 2018 assembly.

The process has already be going on for years.



The second 15-member MCC was commissioned by the 220th GA to determine the future of synods in the Presbyterian Church (USA), following up on work conducted by the first commission appointed by the 219th GA (2010) on the future of synods.

This is not the first time there has been a call for changes in the structure of synods.

The MCC-1 recommended to the 220th GA in 2012 that synods (currently 16 that oversee the 173 presbyteries of the PCUSA) should be eliminated as ecclesial bodies, though they could remain as missional partners, said Jill Hudson, coordinator of mid-councils for the Office of the General Assembly (OGA).

The recommendations of the first MCC were voted down by the GA, which formed a second panel to further discuss, refine and bring to the next GA meeting recommendations that consider the composition and organization of mid-councils (synods and presbyteries) in ways that reinvigorate their capacity to support missional congregations and advance the ecclesial nature and character of those presbyteries, within the unity of the church.

The decision to recommend fewer but larger synods came after a full day of discussion. In providing rationale for such a recommendation, the report from the sub-committee indicated that eliminating synods as ecclesial bodies at the present time would add complexity to the governance structure of the PCUSA rather than simplifying it, noting that even though the national denomination is much smaller than it once was, it remains too large to eliminate any intermediate level of accountability between the General Assembly and the presbyteries.

The report also indicated the need for a reduced number of synods and a streamlining of their roles and functions, pointing out that it is poor stewardship of human and financial resources of the denomination at this time to continue with such a large number.

The MCC-2 will have another meeting Jan. 13-15, 2014, in Dallas as it works to finalize the full recommendation, which has to be completed by Feb. 14, 2014, for presentation to the 221st General Assembly.

No discussion of issues related to presbyteries shrinking below viable standards was mentioned.

Mid-Council Commission assessment critical of PMA, OGA

By Nathan Key
The Layman

A report on the effectiveness and relationship of the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) and Office of the General Assembly (OGA) expressed concern that neither agency is equipped to help mid-council bodies address their most acute needs and sometimes serve as a distraction from such tasks.

A sub-committee of the Mid-Council Commission 2 (MCC-2) presented the assessment during the 15-member panel's meeting at the American Airlines Training and Conference Center in Dallas on Sept. 9.

In presenting the report to the entire panel on behalf of the MCC-2 sub-committee, the Rev. Eileen Lindner of Palisades Presbytery explained the methodology used to examine the nature of relationships of both national entities to presbyteries and synods, including a partnership with Michael Kruse as a PMA liaison.

Synod and presbytery personnel from across the country (of varying sizes and locations) were asked open-ended questions in telephone interviews. The proposed questions and strategies were discussed with Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons and PMA Executive Director Linda Valentine prior to implementation of the sampling of the mid-council bodies.

The findings about both agencies revealed them to be “distant” and “out of touch” with the realities faced by presbyteries and synods, though both mid-councils noted they receive services from PMA and OGA and are appreciative of them. The perception was that the national agencies take a general rather than specific view of issues of concern to presbyteries and synods.

The report also revealed that PMA takes initiatives within presbyteries/synods without consultation, and the OGA, especially as represented by the clerk, is perceived as failing to take into account the consequences of public pronounce-

ments which are seen as detrimental to the relationship of local Presbyterians to interfaith partners and to neighbors who differ with General Assembly level Presbyterian perspectives.

Findings showed that PMA staff members were seen as having highly-developed knowledge and resources for ministry along with a readiness to share with mid-councils. Conversely, PMA was described to be, at times, inclined to be competitive with regard to financial and human resources within presbyteries.

OGA staff members were viewed as highly-skilled, particularly in matters related to governance and judicial issues. However, there is a perception that the OGA is seen as a source of tedious institutional maintenance requirements and/or tends to focus on matters of little consequence to struggling congregations.

Additionally, controversial stances and statements of the OGA are seen to serve as a source of embarrassment or conflict with others.

EPC medical plan premiums reduced for many in 2014

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) announced on Aug. 21, 2013, that premium rates for all participants in the 2014 Medical Plan will either decrease or be equal to current rates. The Committee on Administration (COA), which was granted commission authority by the General Assembly in June to make changes to the medical benefits plan, approved the Board of Benefits proposal to set premium rates based on participant's age.

The premium structure for 2014 will be:

- For those less than 40 years old, rates will be 50 percent less than 2013;
- for those 40-54, rates will be 25 percent lower, and
- for those 55+, rates will be unchanged for 2014.

According to Phil VanValkenburg, chief operating officer of the EPC, the self-insured church medical plan of the EPC is currently funded beyond the necessary reserves required by the denomination. The overall health of plan participants translates into reserves that the COA determined would best be passed along in savings to



plan members.

VanValkenburg said that currently the EPC plan has “Three coverage levels, from comprehensive to core benefits,” and that those plans “are priced the same for all ages of participants, with modest regional rate variations.”

So the big change is that premiums will now be based on the age of participants. VanValkenburg acknowledged the need to take an initial step down what will be a long road for self-insured plans that will necessarily find itself competing with the Affordable Care Act's state and federal exchanges.

Although participation in the EPC medical benefits plan is technically mandatory, VanValk-

enburg acknowledged that “actual enrollment is far less than universal. Generally, pastors are more likely than non-ordained staff to be enrolled.”

He also acknowledged that each session makes the final determination about the stewardship of funds in each church. The COA is facing the reality that many sessions will evaluate the cost of coverage under the EPC plan and public exchanges. The question that cannot be answered at this point is whether or not sessions will make decisions purely on dollars and cents or if they will consider the moral value of a

plan that protects their Christian conscience.

Enrollment in the EPC medical plan is open from Nov. 1-20, 2013, to all eligible employees of EPC churches. The new rates will be effective Nov. 1 for all current participants. Coverage and rates for new participants will be effective on Jan. 1, 2014.

More detailed information is available on the www.epc.org site, or contact VanValkenburg at phil.vanvalkenburg@epc.org.

Established in 1981, the EPC is based in Livonia, Mich. and consists of 478 congregations with an eagerness to plant churches across the United States and a world mission priority of sending missionaries to unreached people.

Stated clerks debate church disaffiliations

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‘independent’ as the congregation or the EPC may suggest. We do not recognize the action so the congregation and/or the EPC as releasing a PCUSA congregation from the requirements and obligations of our *Book of Order*. If the EPC takes action to receive a non-dismissed PCUSA congregation, such action is not recognized by us as a dismissal and the presbytery of membership will continue to fulfill its responsibility through its related processes, ecclesial and/or secular, through to completion.”

Jeremiah's response points out that the PCUSA and EPC have – and are therefore governed by – different constitutions.

Flatly denying the primary issue raised by Parsons, Jeremiah's letter says, “our constitution recognizes multiple ways for churches to come to

the EPC, including independency. We do not make an evaluation of churches based on the way they come to us. We respect their calling by Christ as a community of faith, no matter the manner of their arrival. You appear to object to this constitutionally approved practice. To accede to your position we would have to change our constitution. We see no reason to do this.”

Jeremiah's letter goes on to address the widely disparate experiences of congregations seeking to realign from PCUSA presbyteries to the EPC. He notes that although some presbyteries take seriously the action of the 2008 General Assembly calling for gracious dismissal, many presbyteries make denominational realignment almost impossible. Jeremiah notes that the route of disaffiliation is seen “as the only option” for some.

Since the migration of PCUSA churches to the EPC began in earnest in 2007, 25-30 churches

have been received by the EPC from “independent” status. But not all of those disaffiliated. Some churches were “dissolved” by their PCUSA presbytery and then reconstituted themselves and joined the EPC as independent congregations.

The vast majority of churches received by the EPC over those years have been dismissed by their PCUSA presbyteries. *The Layman* strives to keep an updated accounting of the migration at www.layman.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/churches-seeking-discernment.xls

As Parsons' original volley in this exchange was copied to leadership of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC), the only official ecumenical group of which both the PCUSA and EPC are members, Jeremiah's letter also was copied to them.

The proverbial ball is now back in Parsons' court.

Court sanctions presbytery for church property ‘scheme’

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responsibilities include giving advisory opinions to PCUSA clergy and legal counsel for synods and presbyteries concerning the meaning and application of the PCUSA constitution, the *Book of Order*.”

Tammen “bluntly informed” the presbytery that he saw “no way for the PSL to prevail,” read the court order, and it also stated that even the presbytery’s own corporate representatives, during depositions, acknowledged that “Carrollton continued to have the right to sell the property at issue without PSL permission.”

Despite Tammen’s words, the presbytery opposed the church, wrote Bates, and used as its central argument that the 1979 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Jones v. Wolf*, “allows the PCUSA to impose a trust on local church property by amending the denominational constitution without the consent of the titleholder of record and without complying with either general principles of trust law or with the specifics of Louisiana trust law.”

However, she wrote, “Wolf unequivocally states that when applying neutral principles of law to resolve church property disputes, courts are to ascertain the mutual intentions of the parties and that the neutral principles of law method ‘relies exclusively on objective, well established concepts of trust and property law familiar to lawyers and judges’ ... PSL’s core argument is thus directly contradicted by the very case on which it has relied ...”

Bates called the presbytery’s interpretation of Wolf “nonsensical,” and said that the presbytery erected a “‘Stalingrad-type’ defense intended to financially force capitulation or to make victory by the small, 20-member Carrollton church as costly as possible.”

South Louisiana Presbytery spent more than \$500,000 opposing Carrollton’s sale of its property – valued at less than \$1 million.

“As a result of the PSL’s unreasonable intransigence Carrollton was forced to needlessly spend \$336,000 in fees and expenses in pursuing recognition and enforcement of its property right,” read the order.

In her order, Bates stated that a “plan” or a “scheme” had been hatched by the presbytery’s New

Orleans counsel to “circumvent the facts and the substantive law,” after Tammen had informed the PSL that it could not win the case on merit. “The court is not speculating. The participants to this scheme astonishingly acknowledged all of this in their own words,” wrote Bates.

She wrote that the “scheme could be traced through a number of emails the PSL was compelled by court order to produce.”

“In the present case, a conspiracy clearly existed. The PSL asserted on several occasions that it acted at all times in concert with the synod administrative commission and others in a ‘coordinated litigation effort.’ The PSL and synod representatives were heavily conspiring with, among others, Mark Tammen, the PCUSA’s Director of Constitutional Services in the Office of the General Assembly at the denomination’s Louisville, Kentucky headquarters,” read the order.

“The court regrettably but unavoidably concludes that the PSL has in bad faith

advanced frivolous arguments in support of a claimed right it knew had no legal or evidentiary support. The PSL repeatedly ignored or misrepresented the facts and the law and has interposed meritless pleadings, defenses and arguments to obfuscate, delay and needlessly increase the cost of litigation in an effort to financially bleed the small Carrollton church into submission,” it read.

The court order also rescinded a protective order on 441 emails that presbytery representatives exchanged with the Synod of the Sun, the Office of the General Assembly and five attorneys from a New York-based firm that has represented the General Assembly in church property cases.

The court order said the emails demonstrated “with clarity” a conspiracy not only to defy the court’s temporary restraining order but also revealed that the violation of the order was “simply a means to facilitate a wider scheme or plan. The PSL has funded the opposition to Carrollton and authorized its attorneys to act throughout on its behalf.”

Of the 441 PSL emails that the presbytery was compelled to submit to the court, “Tammen was a sender or recipient on approximately 398 of them.”

Attempts by *The Layman* to secure comments from the PSL were unsuccessful.

“The court regrettably but unavoidably concludes that the PSL has in bad faith advanced frivolous arguments in support of a claimed right it knew had no legal or evidentiary support. The PSL repeatedly ignored or misrepresented the facts ... in an effort to financially bleed the small Carrollton church into submission.”



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