

Price tag for Menlo Park to leave PCUSA set at \$8.8 million

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

With a negotiated exit fee of more than \$8.8 million, the congregation of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California voted March 2 on the question of leaving the Presbyterian Church (USA) to affiliate with ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

During a short presentation at the Jan. 26 service, Senior Pastor John Ortberg informed his congregation of “some good news and some daunting news,” concerning their desire to leave the PCUSA. The good news: “We now have a firm date for a congregational vote.” The daunting news, he said, “is the price tag ... \$8,890,000 – that is considerably steeper than what we expected to have to pay.”

A team from Menlo Park and from the Presbytery of San Francisco had been negotiating together to “determine the amount our dismissal will be,” Ortberg told the congregation, and finally decided on the “price tag.”

The session of Menlo Park voted unanimously on June 11, 2013, to recommend that the church seek dismissal from the PCUSA. The vote followed years of questioning, praying, fasting and studying the issue, according to Menlo Park’s MPPC and denominational affiliation web site.

“With a spirit of love in Christ for the PCUSA and the Presbytery of San Francisco, MPPC’s leadership is wholeheartedly recommending this course so that we can pursue God’s calling on the church as best we can,” the web site stated.

Ortberg began his presentation to the congregation by saying that “On the denominational front, a lot of you know that our elders have had a strong sense that to achieve the mission that God has given us, we need to seek dismissal from our current denomination and join a new Presbyterian denomination called ECO.”

He used his time to respond to what he called a “few significant questions.”

Isn’t there a cheaper way?

“No, there’s not,” Ortberg said. A negotiated settlement with the



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PCUSA’s *Zionism Unsettled* blasted as hateful document

The Layman

A study guide produced by the Israel Palestine Mission Network (IPMN), a commissioned group of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that denominational offices say does not reflect PCUSA policy, has created a fire storm of controversy within the PCUSA, with the denomination’s Jewish partners and its Interfaith relations efforts.

The Anti-Defamation League said that *Zionism Unsettled*, the 74-page booklet published by the IPMN, may be the “most anti-Semitic document to come out of a mainline American church in recent memory,” and Rabbi Steve Gutow, the president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, called it “worthy of a hate group, not a prominent American church.”

A press release posted on the PCUSA web site announcing the study guide’s release stated that “*Zionism Unsettled* is aimed to bring about an end to the silence surrounding the impact of Zionism and to encourage open discussions on the topic in church and society,” and included an endorsement by the Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, former PCUSA stated clerk and visiting professor of ecumenical studies and global ministries at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

“I encourage pastors and congregations to take advantage of this new publication,” said Kirkpatrick. “*Zionism Unsettled* provides a valuable opportunity to explore the political ideology of Zionism. Our congregations need to understand not only the humanitarian crisis or the specific policies involved in the Israeli-

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Breaking the legs off the proverbial Presbyterian stool

Commentary by Carmen Fowler LaBerge The Layman

Presbyterianism has historically been described as a system of faith and practice that stands on a “three-legged stool” of theology, worship and discipline. To lose one of the legs means all will ultimately fall. We have watched with grief as the theological and worship practices of the Presbyterian Church (USA) have been undermined and degraded over the years. However, there were many who held out hope that the third leg, governance, which includes ecclesiastical discipline, might yet hold. That leg is now seriously stressed.

Clark Cowden, an ordained PCUSA minister with a litany of service to the local church and higher governing bodies, was the subject of an 18-month synod investigation and is now the vindicated survivor of a four-day ecclesiastical trial that ultimately proved to be a failed attempt to defrock him.

Cowden is the executive presbyter of San Diego Presbytery, former presbytery executive of San Joaquin, member of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board, former member of the PMAB executive committee and former chair of the General Assembly Mission Council’s leadership committee. He is nationally known as a creative thinker and a compassionate conservative whose personal theology aligns with evangelicalism.

As the executive of a well-known conservative presbytery, one might expect Cowden to be an expert in church dismissals. Presbyteries like his have “lost” many churches during the turbulent realignment that has been taking place over the past half-dozen years. But to this point San Diego has only had one church leave the denomination. By all accounts, Cowden has done a good job working to keep churches “in.” So why did some want him “out?”

Allegations

Two years ago a couple of disgruntled presbyters wanted to see him ousted from office and stripped of his ordination. When asked what he had done to offend them, Cowden said, “It was all very political. I pushed the presbytery to be more missional, embracing change and doing things differently. For people who like things the way they were in the ’50s that was too much. Also, for really detail-oriented people I’m too much of a big-idea generalist. I was also not a

person they could control.”

But if control was the hope of those who initiated disciplinary charges against their executive presbyter, things got completely out of control when the case was transferred to the synod where more people had reason not to like Cowden.

Do you remember the Mid-Council Commission? Do you remember the idea of having porous presbyteries, non-geographic presbyteries and other creative ideas proposed to the 2012 General Assembly? Well, Cowden and San Diego Presbytery led the way on non-geographic creative thinking.

Cowden acknowledges those creative options were explored with the hope of keeping churches in the denomination and discovering a way of being a presbytery that is defined by theological orthodoxy, missional creativity and relational health rather than an

outdated notion of only geography. However, other presbyteries saw it as an attempt to “steal” their strongest churches. That loathing had been simmering and the allegations made by traditionalists in his own presbytery gave presbyters in the Synod of Southern California and Hawaii the opportunity to go after him.

In April 2012, allegations were filed against Cowden and he filed a request for vindication. The accusation against Cowden alleged misconduct related to synod and General Assembly grants for a 2008 presbytery new church development project known as Trinity Life. In February 2012, the presbytery voted in its consent agenda to suspend the presbytery’s relationship with Trinity Life, thus prompting the allegations.

Based on advice from the Office of the General Assembly, the presbytery council voted to refer the allegations to the synod, and the synod council accepted them in May of 2012, even though the PCUSA’s Rules of Discipline do not allow referrals to happen that way. The synod in turn formed an investigative committee.

The synod investigative committee conducted an intensive eight-month inquiry into Cowden’s personal and professional conduct. In February 2013 they filed 12 charges against him.

He was accused of submitting applications to the synod and General Assembly without necessary authorization by the presbytery; making those applications under false pretenses; causing the presbytery to breach commitments to the synod and General Assembly for those grants;

violating the Manual of the Presbytery regarding oversight of the project; and making false or disingenuous statements with the intent to mislead the investigative committee.

Members of the prosecuting committee announced that they were seeking the highest level of censure: removal from ordained ministry, and they would not settle for anything less.

Not guilty, on all counts

Following three pre-trial conferences, a trial was held Aug. 16-19, 2013, before the Synod Permanent Judicial Commission (PJC). A vote was taken on each count.

The case included 12 charges alleging 120 specific violations of the constitution or Scripture.

- Two charges were dismissed in Pre-Trial Conferences as not even constituting offenses.
- Three and one-half charges were dismissed and barred by the statute of limitations. These charges dealt with the Synod Grant application. Even though these were dismissed, virtually the same facts were adjudicated in the remaining charges regarding the General Assembly grant.
- In charges 11 and 12, the PJC ruled Cowden not guilty at the conclusion of the prosecution’s case for lack of evidence, even before the defense presented its case. The vote for a failure to present a prima facie case was 4-3.
- In the remaining 4 ½ charges, the PJC voted not guilty 0-7 on all of the main charges. They voted not guilty 1-6 on one subpoint, and 2-5 on other subpoints.

After all was said and done the synod billed the Presbytery of San Diego for all the costs related to investigating, prosecuting and trying its executive. The cost of Cowden’s defense was \$42,000. The presbytery’s insurance policy paid the first \$20,000, and then the presbytery voted to pay the remainder of the costs. The presbytery’s bill from the synod is nearly \$105,000. So those who were concerned about the potential use of presbytery monies for something other than new church development got precisely the opposite of what they were seeking.

But who pays the other toll? How do you account for the human toll paid by Cowden and his family? How do you account for the distraction this caused for an entire presbytery? Who will pay for the time lost, the energy wasted and the missional opportunities missed?

Since this article first appeared on The Layman Online, San Diego Presbytery has modified its dismissal policy and the First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu has entered the dismissal process.



Clark Cowden

Call for fossil fuel divestment likens Presbyterians in the industry to slave owners

Commentary by Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

Scroll down to page 13 of Florida Presbytery's docket for its meeting on Jan. 25, 2014, and you'll read this:

"Remember owning slaves was an economic issue. It did cause economic harm to stop owning slaves. They were the backbone of the southern economy. But, just as owning another human being was morally wrong, profiting from the burning of fossil fuels that are irreversibly harming our planet and neighbors is morally wrong. The risk of eliminating fossil fuel stocks from our portfolios is minimal compared to the harm of not doing so." – Florida Presbytery winter 2014 meeting docket, page 13.

Pam McVety, Florida Presbytery's Stewardship of Creation Enabler, is the author of the paper that was included in the presbytery packet in support of an overture calling for the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s divestment from all fossil-fuel related companies.

McVety's pastor, the Rev. Brant Copeland, at First Presbyterian Church, Tallahassee, Fla., is supportive of the cause as well. He posted on his blog that the session of the church unanimously supports the call for the denomination to divest from fossil fuel related investments. Copeland writes, "Ethically, the current crisis is akin to the struggle to abolish slavery in the 19th century. The South's economy depended on slavery. Changing course was traumatic and costly. Still, most would argue today that abolishing slavery was the right thing to do."

The secular media has been reporting for more than a year about the growing call on college and university campuses for institutional divestment from fossil fuel related companies. That youthful energy was evidenced recently in the PCUSA's Twin Cities Presbytery, where the headline read, "Youth convince presbytery to divest from fossil fuel companies."

So, Overture 18 is before the 2014 General Assembly, and it is likely to generate steam.

The PCUSA has a long-established process for resolution with corporations in which Presbyterian agencies hold investments. The General Assembly has a standing committee called Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI).

The denomination's web site says that:

MRTI implements the General Assembly's policies on socially responsible investing (also

called faith-based investing) by engaging corporations in which the church owns stock. This is accomplished through correspondence, dialogues, voting shareholder proxies and recommending similar action to others, and occasionally filing shareholder resolutions.

Priorities are selected each year upon referral from the General Assembly and in consultation with ecumenical partners. The Mission Work Plan of the Presbyterian Mission Agency also guides the work of MRTI. Consistent with its mandate to promote the mission goals of the General Assembly, MRTI adopts an annual Priority Issues Work Plan.

So, the right path for those who are interested in the denomination's assessing its investment in fossil fuel extraction-related companies is to ask the matter to be referred to MRTI. Instead, advocates are seeking "immediate" divestment in terms of any new investment and full divestment from all identified companies within five years.

What do the advocates really want? That is a very good question.

If what they want is to positively impact the environment by reducing carbon emissions, the carbon footprint of the denomination, and the denomination's corporate responsibility for the negative effects of the coal, oil and gas industries on the environment, then you would expect them to be targeting behavior. Instead, they are targeting divestment – and not even divestment from the greatest offenders of carbon sin. The divestment list focuses exclusively on the 100 coal and 100 oil and gas companies who hold the extraction rights for the greatest percentage of reserves still underground.

That makes this an exclusively supply-side attack. The goal is to get companies who own the extraction rights to leave the carbon that's in the ground, in the ground. This approach fails to address the growing global demand side of the equation while threatening to shut down supply.

The ultimate outcome of shutting down oil, gas and coal production globally without first developing alternative fuels for heat, power and travel is predictable: global social chaos and war.

A collaborative approach that would promote peace, unity and purity might include:

1. Referral to MRTI of the concerns raised by the fossil-free advocates;
2. Intentionally seeking out Presbyterians who are directly involved in the industry for input;
3. Including members of the presbyteries whose churches depend upon revenue from investments in fossil fuel companies to work col-

laboratively on a plan for reinvestment in other industries; and

4. A denomination-wide accountability call to diminish fossil-fuel consumption, starting with the General Assembly itself.

For a generation of privileged American students finding a calling that they can get passionate about is important. But youthful exuberance does not necessarily make for good denominational stewardship nor for good and lasting global peace. The PCUSA must take seriously the Scriptures, her theological understanding of both the stewardship of creation and the reality that one day God has said that the Earth will pass away, and the commitments she has made as an institutional fiduciary of member pensions. Climate change and fossil fuels may be beyond the scope of expertise of many of the 2014 General Assembly commissioners, but the push is on for action.

General Assembly issues

Overtures on same-sex marriage submitted to PCUSA General Assembly

Assembly to again debate overtures concerning Israel/Palestine

Overtures call for protection of babies, both born and unborn, and children

Overture seeks to flesh out principles of the Reformed faith in PCUSA constitution

Overture seeks changes for YAADs

Homestead overture calls for consultation before synod reorganization

GA asked to address gun violence

Assembly asked to advocate for political and financial reform

Overture calls for church councils to be obedient to Scripture

Overture seeks immediate end to all capital crime executions

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Price tag set at \$8.8 million

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presbytery is the only means to seek dismissal from the denomination with the church's property intact.

Ortberg said that some wondered if the church could get a lower amount if it filed a lawsuit in civil court.

"That would probably be financially unproductive ... it would definitely be spiritually unproductive," he said. "It would be a bad witness in the community to have that kind of litigation in the Church of Jesus."

"We could say that it's too high a price and stay in the denomination, but," Ortberg said that the session feels that the "process itself, what we have gone through this past week, has simply underscored how important it is for us to be able to enter into the freedom of a value-adding affiliation."

Pastors offer to give up homes

By Nathan Key
The Layman

With a congregational vote regarding dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA) set for March, members of the leadership team of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church (MPPC) indicated a willingness to give up their homes to meet the \$8.89 million price tag sought by the Presbytery of San Francisco to grant a release to ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians.

On Feb. 2, Menlo Park Senior Pastor John Ortberg said that members of the church leadership team have stepped up to do their part, offering to allow the homes they live in to be sold to help offset the finances needed to pay the proposed dismissal settlement.

Ortberg indicated that he and his wife Nancy could move out of the home they live in, owned by the Church of the Pioneers Foundation (COPF), which manages nine homes that provide residences for Menlo Park's pastors and senior staff members and their families. That would allow the Foundation to sell or mortgage the house, or use its value to help pay the price tag needed to receive dismissal.

"We have 10 years of memories in that house; we love it," Ortberg said. "The first time we ever looked at that house ... Nancy looked at it and said, 'I want to live here until I die, and when I die I want to be buried in the back yard.'"

Ortberg told his wife she would not like the idea but asked her to pray about it. Her immediate response to his suggestion was, "Oh, I don't even have to pray about it. ... Of course, let's do it."

Noting that the church has about \$2.5 million in contributions that can be used without tapping reserves, Ortberg said selling the home he and his

On Jan. 24, "knowing the full dollar amount, our elders and ordained staff voted unanimously to move ahead with a vote and recommend to you – our congregation – that we seek dismissal."

The reason is important, he said. "All of this is about a much greater vision. This is not about what we are trying to get away from. This is about what God is calling us to."

Last fall, Ortberg had spoken to the church about wanting to reach the Bay area for Christ. "We want to play our part as God enables us ... We believe we've got to be in a denominational setting that will help us attract great, young, Christ-following leaders."

Ortberg said that the church's negotiating team wanted the church to know that "they are even more convinced at the end of this process than they were at the beginning that we need to seek dismissal."

wife live in could get the congregation more than halfway toward the amount needed.

He added that the Church of the Pioneers Foundation has "voluntarily and quite generously committed to contribute further funds that are needed to help make the agreed-upon payment. And the upshot to all this is that we will be able to make the \$8.89 million payment without going into debt and without cutting any staff."

Noting that he had seen God at work in the process, Ortberg said three members of the leadership team had approached him with a willingness to take similar action to help raise the funds needed.

Teaching Pastor Scotty Scruggs and Campus Pastor Charley Scandlyn both said they would move out of their houses if it would help, and Director of Human Resources and Support Services Grace Griffin offered to work without a salary.

"I told them all we don't have to do that," Ortberg said. "I want to tell you something, for a church to have people on its staff who have that level of commitment to this congregation and its well-being ... I will never forget that day. That's a wonderful gift that God has given to us. I don't know if I've ever seen something like that."

In closing, Ortberg read the final two verses of the third chapter of Ephesians, where Paul wrote, "Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever! Amen."

"God is the God of the immeasurably more," Ortberg said. "We want to be the church that believes our God can do immeasurably more."

Is taking time to listen too much to ask?

Column by Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

The Presbyterian Mission Agency Board just firmly bit one of the hands that was still feeding it.

The message to Presbyterians who lead, manage and operate the Corrections Corporation of America could not have been more clear: “Our request would be that they cease doing the business that they’re doing.”

The statement was made by Bill Somplatsky-Jarman, coordinator of Mission Responsibility Through Investment, which is part of the Compassion, Peace and Justice division of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. He made the statement in the meeting of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board on Feb. 6 in Louisville, Ky.

After agreeing just minutes before that non-Christians are welcome to work at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and agreeing that the PCUSA wants to dialogue with people of other faiths, the PMAB then agreed that speaking with fellow Presbyterians of whose work the denomination disapproves is unnecessary.

It seemed lost on most that the afternoon session

had opened with a video highlighting the positive impact of First Presbyterian Church Nashville. The senior minister of that church, Todd Jones, was a commissioner to the General Assembly in 2012. He spoke then to the one-sided view of the denomination in relationship to “for-profit prisons.” He asked that the people involved in the Corrections Corporation of America be involved in the conversation the denomination was having about divesting and proscribing investment in all such companies.

Why would Jones care? Because CCA is based in Nashville and its senior leadership includes Presbyterians. Specifically, several of them are members of First Church. However, efforts for the CCA-related Presbyterians to gain a hearing fell on deaf ears.

Why? Because the mind of the denominational elites was made up on this issue long ago, and they are not interested in hearing any information that runs contrary to their opinions. CCA’s very existence runs afoul of PCUSA’s policy and, therefore, their own denomination is knowingly aligning itself against them.

During discussion of the matter, PMAB member and candidate for moderator of the 2014 General Assembly, Heath Rada, said, “There is some concern that the members of the CCA board are also members

of First Presbyterian Church Nashville.” And that “they do not feel that they have been included in the conversation. This church is one that we want to be sensitive to – they have been exemplary.”

Somplatsky-Jarman responded to Rada, “This dates back to 2003 ... and we had conversations with the people in Nashville at that time.” He said that the denomination did research then as to the practices of CCA and other for-profit prisons, adding, “We do not own stock in CCA and so we cannot engage them as shareholders.”

That statement begs the question, “Could the Presbyterian Church (USA) through its Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) or its Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) committee or through personal relationship not pick up the phone and talk with them as fellow Presbyterians?”

Somplatsky-Jarman said, “Conversation would not change anything because the GA policy is that they should not be in the business that they are in.”

He then stated emphatically, “Our request would be that they cease doing the business that they’re doing.”

Rada responded, “I am not speaking against the principle, but I am concerned that I have

just heard that the minister does not feel they have had opportunity to address this. So I’m concerned about the process and the message that we’re sending even if we agree that we’re not willing to listen.”

The PCUSA staffer who champions the effort to add for-profit prisons to the denomination’s sin list, Chris Iosso, said, “Todd Jones is the pastor. I have spoken with Todd Jones in the past. I do believe the policy as Bill states is very clear: It is for the abolishment of privately owned prisons.”

So, to get this straight, the denominational staffer whose salary is partially paid by the contributions made over the years by First Presbyterian Church Nashville, whose offering plates are partially filled by the very people Iosso is trying to put out of business, could not find time in a decade to talk with his seminary classmate, Jones, about this?

Here’s the question: Is the PCUSA actually committed to hearing from a broad diversity of voices on the matters before it or has she become satisfied to simply ignore those who disagree with the particular agenda being pursued?

The PMAB is interested in talking with people of other faiths but not so interested in talking with Presbyterians whose business practices they perceive to run awry of the denomination’s social witness policy.



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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.

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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.

PMAB IN BRIEF

Divestment

The Presbyterian Mission Agency Board, on the recommendation of the Mission Responsibility Through Investment committee, is recommending to the 221st General Assembly meeting this summer in Detroit that the denomination purge its investment portfolios of Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions stocks, due to what the denomination views as unjust practices by Israel in the Occupied Territory.

Changes to special offerings

The PMAB is recommending to the 221st General Assembly that changes be made to two of the four special offerings received by the denomination – the Peacemaking and Christmas Joy offerings.

The Peacemaking Offering will be changed to the Peace and Global Witness Offering. Marci Glass, a member of the Special Offerings Task Force, said that “adding global witness as a recipient of the offering would invite new congregations to collect the offerings.”

As for the Christmas Joy Offering, Glass said that there is a need to examine the list of schools that receive the funds.

“We need to look at the schools,” she said, since some of them are no longer in existence and some are no longer accredited.

There are no proposed changes to the Pentecost Offering or the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering.

Policy change

An amendment to delete two of the 12 protected categories in the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s Churchwide Plan for Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action failed during the PMAB meeting.

Stating that he believed that it was important for the PCUSA to say that “people need to be Christians to work for the church,” Clark Cowden, a board member from San Diego, Calif., made the motion to remove “creed” and “religious affiliation” from the “list of categories in which we do not discriminate in our hiring practices.”

Cowden’s motion failed, and the PMAB voted to send the revised document to the 221st General Assembly for its approval.

Letter raises Belhar beyond confessional to canonical

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

LOUISVILLE, Ky. – A letter written to accompany the Confession of Belhar declares it to be a “word from God” in the first paragraph, thereby raising the confession to the level of canonical, instead of being what it is – the word of men.

Written by the Special Committee on the Belhar Confession, the 3,131-word accompanying letter, along with the 1,171-word confession, is being recommended for approval by the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

“The Accompanying Letter to the Confession of Belhar from the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (USA)” has been recommended for adoption by the assembly as “a statement reflecting the confession, conviction and rationale of the PCUSA based on the implications of this confession for our life and ministry as a Reformed and Presbyterian community in 21st century North America.”

The assembly also is asked to commend the letter to PCUSA congregations and presbyteries as they consider adding the confession to the denomination’s *Book of Confessions*.

If the confession is approved by the assembly, ratified by two-thirds of the presbyteries, and approved by the 2016 General Assembly, the Belhar Confession will be included in the denomination’s *Book of Confessions*.

This is the second try to get the confession into the *Book of Confessions*.

The 220th General Assembly in 2012 voted to send the Belhar Confession to the presbyteries for ratification, and while it did get a majority of votes, it did not get the required two-thirds approval.

In his recent presentation to the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board, “Why Belhar? Why now?,” Clifton Kirkpatrick, co-moderator of the Special Committee on the Belhar Confession and former stated clerk of the PCUSA, said that “the Belhar Confession is indeed God’s word to the PCUSA for such a time as this.”

He compared the first paragraph of the



Clifton Kirkpatrick

accompanying letter to an executive summary of the entire document. It reads:

The Presbyterian Church (USA) is again facing a critical time in its history. We are rent apart by division and schism, we have yet to confront directly and confess the racism that has been a significant force in our own history, and we have shown a failure of resolve to make courageous stands for justice. We believe that the Confession of Belhar, a profound statement on unity, reconciliation, and justice in the church, comes to us as a word from God for this particular time and place for the PCUSA.

The last sentence of that paragraph elevates the Confession of Belhar to canonical status. The current confessional standard of the PCUSA regards the Bible alone as the Word of God. The accompanying letter espouses a different theology, one that suggests that God’s Word is not fully revealed in the Bible, nor finally revealed in the person of Jesus, but continues in new revelations today.

That theology is necessary to undergird the arguments of those who want the church to progress in its thinking on moral issues. Kirkpatrick is a member of the board of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, a group that advocates for the full inclusion of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people into the life of the PCUSA and also supports same-sex marriage in the denomination.

While the Belhar Confession speaks to the issue of racial justice, the accompanying letter, written by the Special Committee, notably brings human sexuality into the mix.

The letter states that “beyond the issues of race and class, Presbyterians in the United States of America have, from the beginning, been troubled by differing theological world views and practices. We have been willing to divide over and over again ... For the last quarter of the 20th century, the Presbyterian church has argued and divided over human sexuality and how to read its Scriptures in these matters. Once again the reality of diversity has threatened to divide us so that the visible unity of the church now hangs by a slender thread. We believe that the PCUSA needs to be called to the unity taught and proclaimed in the Confession of Belhar.”

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The mind of Christ is to please the Father

How often do you think about what you're thinking about? Is your thinking and the way you're thinking aligned with the way God thinks about those same things? How do you know? If your thinking is conformed to the patterns of the world, are you willing to submit to the active work of the Holy Spirit in transforming your mind according to the Word of God? If you are not willing to have your thinking conformed to the mind of Christ, what does that say about your discipleship?

This study is an invitation to think about how you think.

One of the differences between the believer and the unbeliever is not that they think about different things, but that they think about the same things differently.

Consider happiness. Is happiness the primary pursuit of life? What does it mean to be happy? What is it that makes us happy? How would you finish the sentence, "I would be happy if only ...?" What you fill in that blank is inevitably related to your circumstance.

Contrast happiness with a Scriptural view of

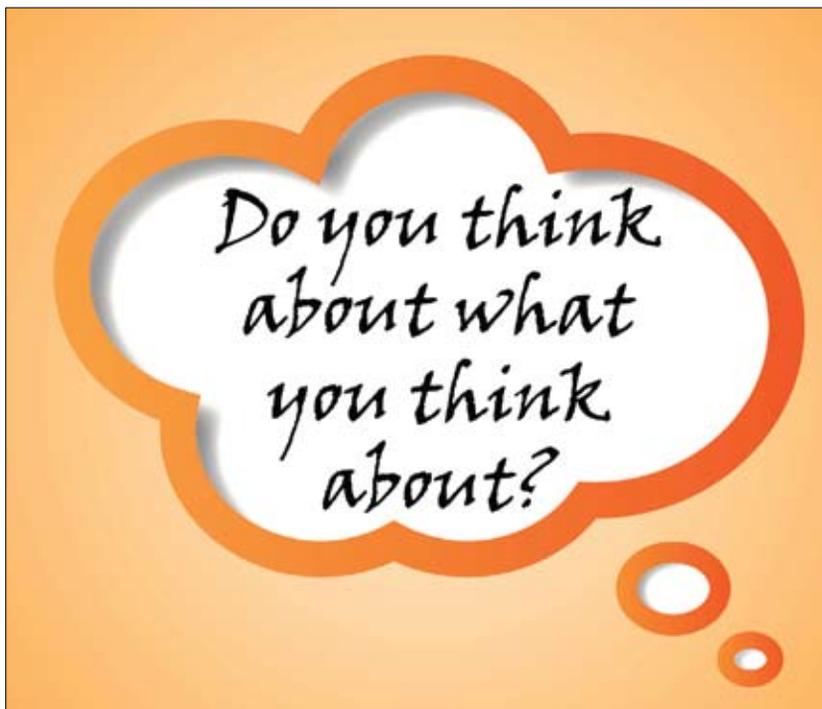
joy. Happiness is based on "good" circumstances and the "good" will of others around us. And although we can affect our circumstances by noble effort, prudence and wisdom, we still do not have absolute control over our circumstances. Nor do we have control over the people around us whose choices deeply affect us. Changes in our health or wealth, tragedy, accidents and the evil intent of others can crush our castles built on the circumstantial shifting sands of happiness.

We receive thousands of prayer requests from readers of *The Layman* each year. Each weekday morning, the staff of the Lay Committee gathers to study God's Word and pray for the concerns of our brothers and sisters in Christ across the country. So we know that our fellow Presbyterians are facing a myriad of challenges that, without faith, would prove overwhelming. Death, divorce, debilitating illness, loss of controls related to aging, frustration and grief related to the state of the nation and the church, as well as siblings, spouses, children, grandchildren, neighbors and friends who reject Christ, are the prayers we are most often asked to address. So, we pray – not at

all happy about the circumstances but in full joy with the knowledge that God loves these people and is working even now to redeem.

Therein lies the contrast between circumstantial happiness and the life of joy. Whatever happens, Jesus is Lord. No matter what, in all circumstances, God is God.

Joy is based on a relationship. This truth is demonstrated in the life of Paul, and his letter to the church at Philippi is centered on the joy found in Jesus Christ. The following four lessons are an invitation to enter into the mind of Christ and think about all things in living relationship to Him, the source of our joyful living.



Jim and Carmen Fowler LaBerge are the authors of the equipping study.

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. Box 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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resources**

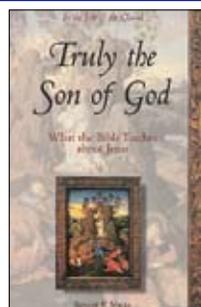
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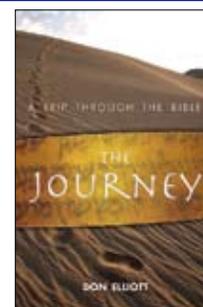
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EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Lesson I: Joy, not under circumstances, but in Christ

We know from Paul's own account of his life that he was flogged five times within one stripe of his life. We know that three times he was beaten with rods, once he was pummeled with stones, three times he was shipwrecked, and he spent a night and a day adrift at sea. He goes on to say in II Corinthians 11 verse 26, "I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from the Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." In sharing his circumstances, Paul is not complaining. In fact, he counts it all joy.

Even as he writes to the church in Philippi, Paul is in prison, again. They knew Paul as a man who was familiar with jail. They also knew that he was a man in and for whom the power of God was at work. Read Acts 16:11-40 to be reminded of Paul's experience with – and ministry in – Philippi.

Those same Philippian Christians wrote to Paul when they learned that he was in prison in Rome. The letter to the Philippians is Paul's response. You might expect him to be "unhappy" and to chronicle the conditions under which he is living but instead he writes to them a letter of joy. Sixteen times in the brief letter Paul uses the word *joy* or *rejoice*.

Paul's thought patterns are strange from a worldly perspective. That's because Paul possesses – and is possessed by – a spiritual mind: the mind of Christ. Clearly Paul's joy is not a product of circumstance but of authentic relationship with the One, holy God. In Him there is joy, no matter the circumstances.

Paul is demonstrating in his own life, and advocating for the Church, a life governed by the mind of Christ. That mind is revealed in Jesus Christ, demonstrated in Paul, and he in turn exhorts the Church to have the same mind.

As Christians we are instructed throughout the New Testament to have the mind of Christ. The most concise articulation of that command comes from Paul in Philippians 2 where he says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Your translation might read "let the same attitude be in you," but the Greek is clear. It says, "Think this way." A life governed by the mind of Christ is secure in the joy of that relationship and not subject to the rising and falling tides of circumstantial happiness.

Reflection:

1. Read Philippians and make specific note of the references to *joy* and *rejoicing*. What are the circumstances in which Paul rejoices? What is the source of his joy?
2. Do you dwell on the circumstances of life and allow the pursuit of happiness to govern your emotions, relationships and outlook? Or, do you dwell in Christ in the midst of all circumstances and allow the joy of that relationship to govern your emotions, relationships and outlook? Do you see the difference? Are you living the difference?

Lesson II: The Revelation of the Mind of Christ

In Jesus we see that the ultimate and moment-by-moment goal of life is to please the Father. This is the mind of Christ and this is the servant's joy.

Jesus' mind was set on One: the Father. In the context of teaching about the Father and His relationship with Him, Jesus says in John 8:29, "I always do what pleases Him." In John 4 after the disciples return from town and find Jesus talking with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus says to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His work." Jesus' mind is like no other. It is singularly focused not on self-gratification but on the Father's glorification. It is God's intention that we think like Jesus. So, do we think like that?

Throughout Jesus' life and ministry we see His mind:

- The mind of Christ is set on the Father, the Father's will and the Father's way.
- The mind of Christ is not divided, but single-minded.
- The mind of Christ is not easily tempted and answers temptation with the Word of God.
- The mind of Christ submits to the Father, "not my will but Thine be done."
- The mind of Christ thinks rightly and righteously.
- The mind of Christ is compassionate, strong, uncompromising and full of grace and truth.

Paul presents the mind of Christ as revealed in Jesus in Philippians 2:5-8. Therein we see that Jesus, although totally free, was also fully surrendered. He did not retain His rights, much less demand them. He gave Himself totally over to the will of God: emptying Himself and humbling Himself in total obedience, even unto death. The intimacy of Jesus' relationship to the Father was so rich that pleasing the Father and living in relationship with the Father was the goal of life.

Reflection:

1. Read Philippians 2:1-11. What does this passage reveal about the mind of Christ?
2. When the Bible says, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus," ask yourself, "Is it?" Is this self-emptying, humble mind that is set continually toward the pursuit of one goal (pleasing the Father) my operating system? Is my every thought captive to Him? Is my thinking conformed to His?
3. If so, rejoice! If not, read and follow the instructions found in Romans 12:1-2. Study the life of Paul and see him as a demonstration of the mind of Christ revealed in Jesus.

Lesson III: The Demonstration of the Mind of Christ

What does the mind of Christ lived out in a regular person look like? One answer is the example of the life of the apostle Paul. He demonstrates the mind of Christ.

Read Philippians 3:4-14. Here we see parallels between the mind of Christ revealed in Philippians 2:5-8 and the life of Paul.

Jesus had reason to exalt Himself. He was, after all, in very nature God. From a worldly mindset Paul also had reason "to put confidence in the flesh." Today's parallel to Paul's litany of superior qualities might be a resume that included being born into the right family, living in the right neighborhood, having the right friends, attending the right schools, having access to power, wealth, prestige and fame. Paul had it all and yet he "counted it all loss for the sake of Christ."

That is not how the world thinks. That is not the way the world keeps score. That's counter-intuitive, counter-cultural and ultimately threatening to a world not set on pleasing God but pleasing self.

Paul recognizes the ultimate exchange of his mind for the mind of Christ. He "gets it" that the secret of being content is not all the stuff of the world or the relative happiness we might experience in a fleeting moment. He knows that the joy of being in relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ and living a Spirit-filled and God-directed life is far more rich and worthy than anything the world can give. Add to that the profound reality that the world cannot take it away and you have the kind of joy Paul experiences in every moment of life, no matter the circumstances.

Reading Acts chapters 9-28 as well as Paul's letters to the Christians in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, the region of Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae allows us to know Paul and the mind of Christ governing his life. Paul helps us see what the mind of Christ operating in a regular man looks like. It provides a pattern for us to follow.

Paul actually offers himself as a pattern in Philippians 3:17-4:1. He invites the Philippians to follow his example, to live according to the pattern he has given, to walk this way. In Philippians 4:9 he adds,

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." And that is JOY!

Reflection:

1. Knowing what you know of Paul from Acts and his own letters to the churches, what was on his mind? What characterized his thinking? How did he make decisions? What would a life like Paul's look like today?
2. If Paul possessed, and was possessed by, the mind of Christ then the same mind that was in Paul ought to be operating in each Christian disciple today. So, is the same mind in you that was in Paul?
3. How did Paul offer himself as a pattern for others to follow? How are you doing that for Christians in the spiritual generation coming along after you?



Lesson IV: The Exhortation for the Church to have the Mind of Christ

The Church is the communion and community of redeemed people who live in the knowledge that we are in the presence of God and experiencing real life in Him moment by moment unto eternity – and this is not our own doing, but by grace through faith in Christ alone. This is life viewed and lived from a supernatural perspective. This is life that is not tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine nor by every wave of circumstance; this is life that is anchored in Christ, centered in God's Word, guided by God's Spirit and conformed to God's will.

Paul describes it as a life lived in one Spirit with one mind as one man (Philippians 1:27). It is a life governed by the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:1-11) unto a purpose (Philippians 2:15-16).

In exhorting the Church to have the mind of Christ, Paul lays out six imperatives in Philippians:

- Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel. (1:27)
- Make my joy complete by ... (2:2)
- Have the same mind in yourselves that was in Christ Jesus. (2:5)
- Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. (2:12)
- Do all things without grumbling or disputing. (2:14)
- Rejoice and share your joy with me. (2:18)

Paul says that the result of such a life would be authentic witness in the world. He describes it as "holding out the word of truth." Just as God highly exalted Jesus (Philippians 2:9-11), so too God will exalt the Church (Philippians 2:15-16).

To what purpose? God's purpose (Philippians 2:13).
To what end? Joy (Philippians 2:18).

Reflection:

1. The exhortations to the Church concerning the mind of Christ comprise the bulk of the material presented in the book of Philippians. It is a worthy exercise to read through the book in one sitting, listening for God's instruction to us personally and collectively.
2. Read Philippians 1:27-2:18. What is Paul exhorting the Church to do? Are you doing it, and are "we" as the Church in the world today? What is one specific, tangible commitment you can make to more fully cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work of bringing your mind and life into greater conformity with the mind of Christ?
3. Read Philippians 3:15-4:9. As you walk through these verses, examine your life. Do you take a mature Christian view of things? Is there some point, some cultural idea or moral standard where you "think differently" than God thinks? Is that not a place where your mind is set against the mind of Christ? Are you willing to submit to God in that matter? If not, what does that reveal to you about your relationship with God?
4. Conclude this study by meditating and committing yourself to live out Philippians 4:8-9. And rejoice!

Zionism Unsettled blasted as hateful document

continued from page 1

Palestinian conflict but also to examine the basic framework that lies behind these policies and crises.”

The IPMN states that *Zionism Unsettled* discusses “critical issues fearlessly and with inspiring scope. The booklet and companion DVD draw together compelling and diverse viewpoints from Jews, Muslims and Christians in Israel, Palestine, the U.S. and around the globe. By contrasting mainstream perceptions with important

alternative perspectives frequently ignored in the media, *Zionism Unsettled* is an invaluable guide to deeper understanding.”

In contrast, B’nai B’rith International has said, “Despite the rosy terms in which the church describes the guide, its description is profoundly deceptive. The church conceals the actual nature of the publication – engagement in vile revisionism of not merely Israeli, but Jewish history too – while exploiting fringe perspectives to legitimize polemics contrary to any understanding of genuine interreligious dialogue and peacemaking.”

PCUSA leadership has distanced itself from what it called an “independently produced study guide,” and it reaffirmed the denomination’s “commitment to a peaceful solution to the Israel-



li-Palestine conflict.”

An article posted on the PCUSA web site quoted Linda Valentine, executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency: “Our church has a long history of engaging many points of view when it comes to dialogue on critical issues facing the world around us – it’s who we are, part of our DNA ... There are likely as many differing opinions as there are Presbyterians – and, like many denominations, we don’t always agree.”

In response, Presbyterian blogger Viola Larson wrote that the “PCUSA, supposedly, absolved themselves from any guilt by claiming that they had nothing to do with its writing or its publication. And they also pleaded innocence from behind the cover of the

diversity of the denomination.”

She continued, “It does not matter that the PCUSA has neither written nor published the booklet, *Zionism Unsettled*, they sell the booklet, and the IPMN is a part of their Mission Agency. It will be the members of IPMN and those they work with who will fill up the committee meeting room for Middle East issues and have full right to speak to the commissioners at the 221st General Assembly in June. There will not be another group in the PCUSA who has that right. They not only speak to the denomination, they have power in the denomination to guide commissioners the direction they wish them to vote.”

The study guide, with its views of Zionism, was released in January 2014, six months before

the 2014 General Assembly of the PCUSA. At *The Layman’s* deadline there were seven overtures proposed for the assembly to consider dealing with Middle East issues.

According to JNS.org – an independent, non-profit wire service covering Jewish and Israel news – the guide has been blasted as a “hateful document” that “promotes the eradication of Israel” by targeting the core tenets of Zionism and Christian Zionism.

JNS.org reported that Rabbi Noam Marans, the American Jewish Committee’s (AJC) Director of Intergroup and Interreligious Relations, called the study guide “a devastating distortion of Jewish and Israeli history, aimed at nothing less than eradicating the State of Israel.”

“The study guide is reminiscent of medieval Christian polemics against Judaism, with the authors claiming to know better than the Jewish community how Jews define themselves. This is another example of the ongoing effort to demonize Israel by a cadre of people who want to see the dismantlement of the Jewish state,” he said.

Pittsburgh’s *Post Gazette* reported that Gregg Roman, director of the Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh, called the study guide “a crash course to advocate for an end of the Jewish state.”

He said it reads “as if there were no wars waged against Israel, no campaign of terror by groups including Hamas and Hezbollah and ... ignores the reality that Israelis ... and the American Jewish community support a two-state solution.”

A review of *Zionism Unsettled* is posted at www.layman.org.

Proposed dismissal revision forces pastors out as session moderators

By Nathan Key
The Layman

The Presbytery of the James (POJ) will be learning of a proposed change to its procedure for churches seeking dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA).

According to the packet for the Feb. 15 stated meeting (rescheduled for Saturday, March 1 because of the winter storm), the POJ’s Coordination and Committee Team is recommending that the presbytery approve a revision to the “Procedures for Churches Seeking Dismissal” document.

The most noticeable changes to the document, adopted in February 2010, would require pastors to resign or not serve as moderator of the session if a congregation applies for dismissal from the PCUSA, and the appointment of an Administrative Commission (AC) to consider the applica-

tion for dismissal, taking into full account the PCUSA’s trust clause regarding property rights.

The revisions would be effective for congregations seeking dismissal after Jan. 1, 2014. The C&C Team is seeking approval for the revision as a first reading, with final action to be taken during the June 2014 stated meeting.

Under the section titled Application for Dismissal, section (b) reads: “The pastor(s) shall agree to resign or not to serve as moderator of the session and to refrain from participating in any and all meetings, deliberations and discussions concerning dismissal while the application is pending before the presbytery.”

Citing the *Book of Order*, a footnote to that section indicates that the pastor(s) of a congregation acting in such circumstances who have taken ordination vows to “be governed by our church’s polity ... and abide by its discipline,” W-4.4001

(c), and “to further the peace, unity and purity of the church,” W-4.4001 (e), cannot be faithful to those vows, whether they agree or disagree with members seeking dismissal.

The rationale indicates that the pastor(s) have a conflict of interest with accountability to the presbytery, G-2.0502, and loyalties to the congregation. By agreeing to resign or not to serve as moderator of the session, along with refraining from meetings regarding dismissal, the pastor(s) lessen the likelihood of conflicts.

The recommendation goes on to show that once the application for dismissal is received, the stated clerk will request that the Committee on Ministry appoint a moderator of the session.

When reached by phone, H. Carson Rhyne Jr., general presbyter and stated clerk for Presbytery of the James, said he “did not have time” to discuss the issue before hanging up abruptly.

Commission recommends reducing the number of PCUSA synods

By Nathan Key
The Layman

Following a tedious review process, the Mid-Council Commission 2 (MCC-2) adopted its final report during a three-day meeting at the American Airlines Training and Conference Center in Dallas Jan. 13-15. The recommendation to reduce the current synod

model from 16 to eight will be presented and addressed during the 221st General Assembly (GA) in Detroit June 14-21.

The MCC-2 panel engaged in robust debate that led to a number of revisions to the original proposal of reconfiguring the number of synods drafted during the Sept. 2013 meeting.

MCC-2 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.

Jane Smith, ruling elder from Riverside Presbytery, noted that the changes made should correlate with the mandate of "reinvigorating presbyteries in missional opportunities with local congregations" given to the panel by the 220th GA rather than merely reducing the number of synods.

"We need to find ways to rethink how our traditional structures can be more accountable to our local congregations," Smith said. "It's not simply downsizing."

Addressing some changes

Throughout two days of discussion, there were a number of revisions made from the original draft proposed four months ago, many of them focusing on the proper language to be used.

For example, in proposing an amendment to action taken if synods and presbyteries are unable to establish boundaries to fulfill the restructuring model, the Rev. Marcia Mount Shoop of New Hope Presbytery suggested the spirit of the recommendation should offer support and collaboration rather than an "if then" punitive measure as suggested in

MCC-2 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.

GA with recommendations for boundary changes.

"This is an issue that has been hanging over our denomination for 30 years," he said, adding that there had to be action taken if boundary changes were not formed during the window of time allowed for such a move. "For us to acknowledge they can refuse to do this makes this recommendation meaningless."

The Rev. Landon Whitsitt, executive and stated clerk for Synod of Mid-America, indicated that a number of synod executives he has spoken with already are giving consideration to the recommendation that will go before GA.

"They're already taking it seriously," he said.

Barbara Gilliland of Pueblo Presbytery addressed the need to clearly convey the message of the recommendations to OGA.

"I feel we need to be very strong in this language," Gilliland said. "The (current four-layer governing) system seems to be broken or not functioning well. We've got to do what's good for all."

The first commission

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 172 presbyteries of the PCUSA) should be eliminated as ecclesial bodies, though they could remain as missional partners.

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.

MCC-2 has had four face-to-face meetings and three others via conference call in formulating its recommendation.

the original draft.

"We need to hold them accountable, but I think we need to strike a more generous tone," she said.

Scioto Valley Presbytery Ruling Elder Jim Wilson offered an amendment to Shoop's recommendation that the panel approved. He said he saw no reason that synods and presbyteries could not come to the 222nd



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Newest Presbyterian denomination experiences growth

By **Nathan Key**
The Layman

In just two years of existence, ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians has experienced substantial growth, already surpassing the 100-congregation membership mark.

ECO, started in January 2012 as a theologically centrist, missionally minded, off-shoot of the Presbyterian Church (USA), added 35 churches in its first year of existence, and more than doubled that number last year. Forty of the congregations that joined ECO did so in the last four months of 2013, allowing the denomination to surpass 100 congregations.

First Presbyterian Church of Tacoma, Wash., was the first congregation to join ECO in May 2012. The acceptance of Bethel Presbyterian Church from Columbus, Ohio, in December 2013 gave the denomination its 100th congregation.

As of Feb. 26, ECO had grown to 114 congregations and 193 pastors in 28 states.

Dr. Dana Allin, ECO's synod executive, noted

that the average membership of churches joining the denomination is 375, resulting in more than 42,000 total members in ECO right now.

The greatest concentration of ECO churches is west of the Mississippi River, primarily in California (18), Washington (10) and Colorado (7), Alaska and Texas (6 each). East of the Mississippi, the states with the most ECO churches are Pennsylvania (17) and Florida (11).

"We've seen quite an increase in applications from California, Texas, Washington and the southeast area of the United States," Allin said, adding that another 120-150 churches are in the process of joining ECO. "There are a lot of churches that plan to join when and if they can. They're just waiting for congregational votes or dismissal by a presbytery."

Even more churches are in a period of discernment to determine God's calling, and there also is the decision of which denomination to join if they choose to sever ties with the PCUSA.

Allin gave several reasons for the influx of churches to ECO, which has resulted in the creation of nine presbyteries, an increase from two when the denomination formed.

"The mandate from the General Assembly to have gracious dismissal policies in place has been taken very seriously by many presbyteries," he said. "They have started working with church-

es that have realized they just don't belong in the PCUSA anymore."

Along with that is a theological diversity that has manifested itself within the PCUSA.

"A lot of us are realizing that even evangelicals need to do things differently," Allin said. "More creativity and flexibility is needed, and there is a desire to return to that connectional nature of what it means to do Presbyterianism – how best to implement ministry and recapture what it means to be Presbyterian."

Allin indicated that the missional entrepreneurial spirit, flexibility in operation and a desire to be the church God has called them to be have been reasons cited

by congregations for their decisions to make ECO their new denominational affiliation.

"They feel this is the denomination that they can best fulfill the mission God has given them," Allin said.

But is ECO merely

a haven for congregations disturbed by the more liberal direction the PCUSA has taken through the years?

"Sometimes we see congregations that simply want to leave the PCUSA," Allin said. "But so many others want to embrace the philosophy of ECO, something they are hungry to be a part of. We see that there is dissatisfaction with being in the PCUSA, and this is an opportunity to change gears, not to get away from something but to move toward something they are excited about. We help them make those steps toward a new reality."

While pleased with the rapid growth of ECO, Allin is looking forward to continued additions of congregations and opportunities, not only to add those from other denominations but also to plant new churches.

"As exciting as it is to see that we have more than a hundred churches, I'll be way more excited when we plant 100 new churches and reach out to people," Allin said. "We're thankful to have over a hundred congregations; it gives us more people to reach out to others and share information about our denomination, but more importantly to share Jesus Christ. We have people who are clamoring for opportunities to be involved in church planting."

ECO creates new presbyteries

Along with the increase in congregations came an increase in the number of ECO presbyteries – from two to nine.

The creation of some of those additional presbyteries has taken place, while others remain in their formative stages.

"Growth of the denomination made this move necessary," said Allin, who indicated that ECO's polity allows the Synod Executive Council to authorize the formation of and give final approval of the new presbyteries to be formed.

When it was established in January 2012, ECO had two presbyteries separated by the Mississippi River: Presbytery of the East and Presbytery of the West. Those presbyteries are being reconfigured to form the nine regional governing bodies, four in the east and five in the west.

The Presbytery of the East will split into the following presbyteries:

- Presbytery of Florida
- Presbytery of the Northeast (Eastern Pennsylvania, Delaware, and states to their east and north)
- Great Lakes Presbytery (Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin)
- East Central Presbytery (Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., remaining southern states east of the Mississippi River, including Louisiana)

The Presbytery of the West will become the following presbyteries:

- Presbytery of the Northwest (Oregon, Washington and Alaska)
- Presbytery of Texas
- Presbytery of Northern California
- Presbytery of Southern California
- Presbytery of the West (all other states west of the Mississippi River, including Minnesota).

Allin anticipates continued growth for the denomination on the horizon, especially with so many churches already engaged in the process of discernment and/or dismissal and others enquiring daily about acceptance by ECO.

"We see opportunities to develop new partnerships and continued growth for ECO," he said. "If we can continue planting churches and see people come to Christ, we'll be on the trajectory we want to be on for the future."

More information on ECO can be found at www.eco-pres.org/



EPC hopes to move from transfer to transformation growth

By Nathan Key
The Layman

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) continued to see its membership increase last year.

During 2013, 89 congregations and approximately 9,000 members joined the EPC. That gave the denomination 507 churches and approximately 140,000 members since it was formed 33 years ago.

The denomination has seen considerable growth in the last six years. Since 2007, the EPC has added 325 congregations, raising its number of churches from 182 to 507. Considering the number of churches that have applied for acceptance into the EPC and others that still may be in the discernment process, it's likely that the denomination will have tripled in size in just seven years at some point in 2014.

"We've been growing rapidly since 2007, and we're very pleased with the way our presbyteries have equipped, examined and received churches and ministers," said Dr. Jeffrey Jeremiah, stated clerk of the EPC, adding that the denomination holds to the Westminster Confession of Faith and has a very high view of the authority of God's Word. "I think we have a clear, positive sense of identity as a family of Presbyterian, Reformed, evangelical churches. I think churches that want to commit to that same DNA are very interested in us."

The EPC added a 12th presbytery during the 2013 General Assembly to help facilitate the acceptance of churches to the denomination. Great Plains Presbytery had its inaugural meeting Feb. 21-22 in Tulsa, Okla.

As of Jan. 22, the EPC was represented by churches in 44 states. The greatest concentration of those congregations was in Pennsylvania (52) and North Carolina (46). There are 28 EPC congregations in Tennessee, while California and Ohio have 27 each.

Jeremiah pointed out that the majority of churches joining the denomination in 2013 hailed from western Pennsylvania, North Carolina and the West Coast.

PCUSA still has highest membership

The EPC's growth in membership (churches and individuals) has been rapid in recent years, but the Presbyterian Church (USA) remains the largest Presbyterian denomination in the United States.



Jeffrey Jeremiah

According to information from the PCUSA, at the end of 2012 there were 1,849,496 members in 10,262 congregations. That's a loss of 102,791 members and 204 congregations from the 2011 data. Membership totals for 2013 will be released later this spring.

The denomination's membership has seen a steady decline over the last decade. In 2002, the PCUSA reported 2,451,969 members, so the current membership reflects a net loss of 602,473 members, or about 24.6 percent, over the last 10 years. There were 11,097 congregations in 2002, 835 more than in 2012.

The EPC's beginnings

The EPC, headquartered in Livonia, Mich., formed in 1981 from mainline Presbyterian denominations like the United Presbyterian and Presbyterian Church in the United States after leaders of the new Reformed denomination became distressed by liberalism creeping into the denominations.

The formation of the EPC created a denomination that took heed of the words of Scripture, the theology Westminster Confession of Faith and the evangelical fervor of Presbyterian founders.

It started with 12 churches as part of the denomination, which touts the motto of "In Essentials, Unity; In Non-Essentials, Liberty; In All Things, Charity; Truth in Love."

A good match to meet the mission

Jeremiah pointed out that it is important that prospective congregations and pastors seeking admission to the denomination are a positive match with the EPC.

"If a church and pastor are looking for a denominational home, we want them to feel called by God to be part of the EPC," Jeremiah said, adding that it is not just a safe haven from the ills congregations feel they are confronted with in the PCUSA.

"Churches that choose to depart a denomina-

"Joining the EPC means getting on with it, doing what we're called to do. We're going to mobilize our larger church for the mission our Lord Jesus has for us."

Jeffrey Jeremiah

tion clearly have a reason to depart, but we are concerned in the EPC that they be committed to being part of what we are," he continued. "We recognize some churches struggle with a dismissal process and need some time for rest and healing. But just joining our denomination is not the end of the story. We are not to be perceived as just a place of safety and rest. Joining the EPC means getting on with it, doing what we're called to do. We're going to mobilize our larger church for the mission our Lord Jesus has for us."

Simply put, that's embracing and working toward the missional focus of the Great Commission, moving from transfer

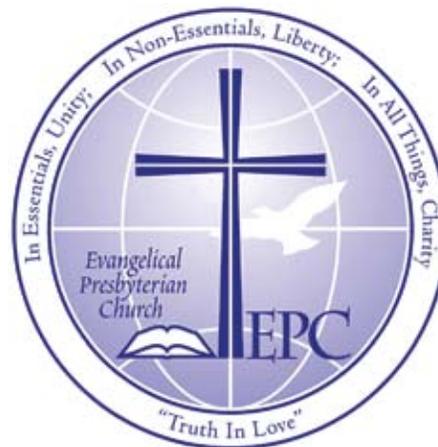
growth to transformation growth within the denomination. That's what Jeremiah sees in the future for the EPC.

"We are working to mobilize for missions – community, country and world," he explained. "The transfer growth is coming to an end. That's growth but not the type we truly seek. We want people who are willing to give their lives as servants of Christ. We're focused on transformation growth, how we can be used by the Lord

to bring about change and redeem lives. "

That being said, Jeremiah does not anticipate the same kind of growth for the denomination this year as it has experienced over the last six, even though there will be churches that join the EPC.

"I'll be surprised if we see as many (additions) in 2014 as we have had the last two years (about 150)," he said. "I get a sense that the distinctness in the EPC may not be as attractive as it has been from 2007-2013. But our mission is about lives transformed by the Holy Spirit. That mission is about kingdom growth. We're mobilizing for missions, moving from that transfer growth to transformation growth."



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, changed its name to Covenant Presbyterian	Prosser, Wash.	150	Central Washington	The church was dismissed at the 8/17/13 presbytery meeting. The agreement called for payment of three years of per capita totaling approximately \$15,000 and a change of name.	ECO
First, changed its name to Ellensburg	Ellensburg, Wash.	260	Central Washington	The presbytery dismissed the church at the end of June, 2013. Ellensburg was required to pay three years of per capita, AC costs and property transfer fees, all totaling approximately \$30,000.	ECO
Albemarle Road	Charlotte, N.C.	154	Charlotte	Church vote for dismissal took place 5/20/13. Of the 154 active members present, 144 (93.5 percent) voted to seek dismissal. The church was dismissed at the 10/22/13 presbytery meeting.	ECO
Banks	Charlotte, N.C.	63	Charlotte	The congregation voted 6/2/13, to seek dismissal from the PCUSA, with 90.5 percent (57 of 63 active voting members) giving approval to leave the denomination. The church was dismissed at the 10/22/13 presbytery meeting.	EPC
Garden Memorial	Charlotte, N.C.	N/A	Charlotte	Congregation voted on 6/2/13 with 100 percent of the quorum present voting to leave the PCUSA. The church was dismissed at the 10/22/13 presbytery meeting.	EPC
Westminster	Charlotte, N.C.	238	Charlotte	The congregational vote for dismissal occurred 6/30/13, and 225 (94.5 percent) of the 238 active members in attendance gave their approval to seek a new denominational affiliation. The church was dismissed at the 10/22/13 presbytery meeting.	ECO
Corona	Denver, Colo.	116	Denver	The church's dismissal was approved at the 9/30/13 presbytery meeting. It must pay \$64,476.27 by 12/1/15.	ECO
Northminster	Peoria, Ill.	600	Great Rivers	Presbytery dismissed the church during its 10/8/13 meeting. The congregation agreed to make a cash payment of \$114,603, within 30 days of the dismissal date. In addition, the church will pay \$115,397 to the presbytery over 10 years in the form of shared mission giving, making the total payment \$230,000.	ECO
Christ	Richmond, Va.	65	James	Congregation was dismissed at the 10/19/13 presbytery meeting. It made a cash payment of \$35,000 to the presbytery.	ECO
Third	Richmond, Va.	1,100	James	Congregation was dismissed at the 10/19/13 presbytery meeting. The settlement payment was \$370,000.	ECO
Englewood	Rocky Mount, N.C.	127	New Hope	Presbytery dismissed the congregation at its 10/26/13 meeting. The church's payment to the presbytery included: \$5,000 grant received from the PCUS in 1965; 2013 per capita of \$1,907; \$7,718 to the mission budget; up to \$500 for dismissal costs; and \$4,000 per year for 10 years to presbytery mission budget.	EPC
Minden	Minden, La.	118	Pines	Presbytery dismissed the congregation at its 10/19/13 meeting. The church was not required to make payment to the presbytery, though the session elected to give a one-time gift of approximately \$2,500 as a token of good faith.	EPC
Church of the Valley	Apple Valley, Calif.	400	Riverside	Presbytery dismissed church at its 11/16/13 meeting. Church made a one-time payment of \$351,865 to the presbytery.	ECO
Community	Ventura, Calif.	400	Santa Barbara	Congregation was dismissed during the 11/12/13 presbytery meeting and paid \$179,000 at the time of dismissal.	ECO
Community	Clewiston, Fla.	45	Tropical Florida	The church was dismissed at the 9/24/13 presbytery meeting. The tithe on the church property came to \$28,000 annually for three years, totaling \$84,000.	EPC
Center Grove	Greenwood, Ind.	203	Whitewater Valley	Congregation was dismissed by the presbytery at its 11/6/13 meeting. The total payment made to the presbytery by the church was \$172,000.	Christian Reformed Church

Tracking global persecution

North Korea tops World Watch List for 12th year

By Nathan Key
The Layman

Open Doors, an international ministry which has been supporting and strengthening persecuted Christians around the world for almost 60 years, once again has compiled its annual World Watch List (WWL) of the 50 worst countries in which to practice Christianity. That list was revealed Wednesday, Jan. 8.

“Often completely unaddressed in the West is the fact that Christians are the largest persecuted minority in the world,” Open Doors USA President/CEO Dr.

David Curry said. “Countries on the WWL, such as North Korea, Saudi Arabia and throughout the Middle East and North Africa are targeting Christians; imprisoning, punishing and even in some cases murdering people who choose to express privately or publicly their Christian faith. The 2014 WWL is a wake-up call to Americans to become more aware of these atrocities and restrictions on religious freedom.”

North Korea at top again

Nowhere is the persecution of Christians more prevalent and severe than in the Communist nation of North Korea.

For the 12th straight year, North Korea remained the world’s most restrictive nation to practice Christianity, according to the Open Doors 2014 World Watch List.

“There’s quite a gap between North Korea and other countries on the list,” said Paul Estabrooks, international senior communications specialist for Open Doors.

Christians in North Korea live under one of the most oppressive regimes in the world, dealing with governmental corruption, natural disasters, disease and hunger. People are forced to worship their leaders rather than having the freedom to worship any other gods. Despite such persecution, there has been a growth rate in Christian believers of 6 percent a year.

As a result, those choosing to follow the Christian faith must keep hidden their decision, leading to many “underground churches.” Being caught with a Bible can lead to execution or a lifelong prison sentence. Some 50,000-70,000



believers are held in concentration camps and prisons, forced to do hard labor, under the dictatorship of Kim Jong-un, who celebrated his 31st birthday on the day of the WWL release.

However, Estabrooks indicated there could be a glimmer of hope for Christians in North Korea. A United Nations Commission of Inquiry has been investigating crimes against humanity in the Communist country and is expected to release its findings in March. There is speculation the report

will declare that Kim Jong-un’s regime is guilty of such crimes, which should lead to some form of action against North Korea. Revelation of such crimes might even lead to a reduction in support of Kim Jong-un supporters who may not know of such atrocities committed against their fellow citizens.

A look at the rankings

Somalia was ranked second on the list, up from fifth in 2013, and Syria was third, jumping eight spots from the previous year.

Dominated by Muslim extremists with no true central government, Somalia instead is ruled by a quagmire of warlords and militia-backed clans fighting for power.

“It’s very difficult for anyone to be a Christian there and stay alive,” Estabrooks said. “It’s no place for Christians at all, and they are told that.”

The rise in the rankings for Syria comes as no surprise given the nearly three-year civil war that continues to rage in the country, forcing thousands from their homes. The Christian community in Syria has faced threats not only from the government there but also the foreign-supported jihadi groups.

Iraq held the No. 4 position for a second straight year, followed by Afghanistan (third in 2013), Saudi Arabia (second in 2013), Maldives, Pakistan, Iran and Yemen.

“It’s not surprising that the top 10 after North Korea are all Muslim nations,” Estabrooks said. “A significant change is that Somalia moved to No. 2 and is the first sub-Saharan country to rank that high on the list.”

Three newcomers joined the list for 2014. They were the war-torn Central African Republic (16th), Sri Lanka (29th) and Bangladesh (48th). Estabrooks observed that Christians are on the brunt of the killing end of violence in CAR, and the heavy concentrations of Buddhists in Sri Lanka and Muslims in Bangladesh pose issues for Christians in those countries

A country making a significant jump in the rankings was Colombia, climbing from No. 46 in 2013 to No. 25 in the latest list. Estabrooks attributed that to violence against Christians in rural areas opposed to the illegal drug trade as well as being caught in the crossfire of battles between the government and guerrilla militia groups.

Standing for the faithful

Estabrooks said Christians in these oppressed nations merely desire prayer and encouragement as they continue to stand for their faith.

“They honestly believe God honors prayer and is in control,” he said. “They ask that we pray for their lives to improve but pray with them that the church will grow in their countries, that they would stand strong against their pressures and the Lord would be honored in the situations they face.”

“We need to let them know that we are praying for them and they are not forgotten. When believers are isolated, attacked and feel alone, that is a great weapon used by Satan. But when they are aware that others are praying for them, that’s a big boost.”

The main force driving persecution of Christians in 36 of the 50 countries is Islamic extremism. The most violent region was found in Africa from Senegal in the west to Sudan in the east, where approximately 20 percent of the world’s Christians are in perilous proximity to about 14 percent of all global Muslims.

The organization also released data showing that 2,123 Christians were martyred in 2013, up from 1,201 a year earlier.

Syria had the most martyrs with 1,213, followed by Nigeria with 612, Pakistan (88) and Egypt (83).

“It will go on until the Lord comes again,” Estabrooks said of Christian persecution. “There are times when some believers give their lives for their faith.”

The Open Doors World Watch List is the only annual survey of religious liberty conditions of Christians around the world. To view the complete list, go to www.worldwatchlist.us/.



PLC plays role in formation of new ecumenical group

The Layman

As God realigns His people in several North American denominations, the ripple effect on working relationships within and across denominations is significant.

The Presbyterian Lay Committee has been an integral part of The Association for Church Renewal since its formation in the mid 1970s. Through a succession that started with Bob Campbell and included Parker T. Williamson, the PLC has provided leadership to the ACR board and its efforts to bring cooperative renewal in the Presbyterian, Lutheran, United Church of Christ, Episcopal and Methodist churches.

Except for the United Methodists, each of the denominations represented in the ACR have experienced significant realignment in recent years. In addition to the diaspora of Presbyterians into the PCA, EPC and ECO, former UCC churches now align with the Evangelical Association of Reformed, Congregational and Christian Churches, former ELCA churches now comprise the North American Lutheran Church, and former Episcopal churches are now Anglican.

Acknowledging that for everything there is a time and a season, the ACR has become the Common Ground Christian Network and the PLC's President, Carmen Fowler LaBerge, is its chairperson.

Common Ground Christian Network is a group of denominations, organizations, congregations and individuals who believe that 21st century Christians need to stand together for the cause of Christ.

Their organizing documents state that, "We come from different denominational and theological traditions, but these distinctives are respected and appreciated, not a cause for division among us. The common ground upon which we stand is the affirmation of classical orthodox Christianity."

The common cause that inspires CGCN's joint action includes:

1. To re-engage the culture with a winsome defense of the Christian faith in a pluralistic society, persuading a skeptical culture that Christian moral influence can be beneficial in the social order, transforming the world through the presence of Christ in and through Christians
 2. To proclaim the Gospel of Christ's redemption of humanity through the cross and resurrection through relational, person-to-person witness, establishing worshiping communities of faith and discipleship, and reaching into communities in hands-on mission and service
 3. To facilitate the social witness of our members on issues of common concern by providing resources, sharing best practices, and engaging in theological and ethical study, with the goal of transforming society to
 - Uphold the dignity of each human person as created in God's image
 - Address the needs and expand the opportunities of the poor
 - Protect human life and encourage its flourishing at all stages
 - Strengthen the marriage of a man and woman and the bonds between parents and children as the necessary building blocks of society
 - Defend the free exercise of religion in North America and around the world
 4. To foster cooperation, mutual support and resourcing of one another in the pursuit of this common cause through shared theological education, training, mission programs and collaborative ministries.
- The group formalized its organizational life at a meeting in Charlotte, N.C., on Feb. 17, 2014.

Dear Friend,

The Layman is sending a team of reporters to the PCUSA General Assembly meeting in Detroit this summer. We need your prayerful and financial support of our presence there.

It remains our goal to keep you informed about the work of your General Assembly in order that you might be more fully equipped to participate in conversations and lead change in your congregation and presbytery.

The work before this assembly will include:

- Marriage and its proposed redefinition from "man and woman" to "two people"
- Divestment from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions and a call to boycott same
- Categorical divestment from for-profit prisons and fossil fuel companies who own extraction rights to carbon deposits
- Recommendations for reforms of the U.S. tax code designed to redistribute wealth
- Recommendations to restrict gun ownership and the use of drones by the U.S. military
- Recommendation to include *The Confession of Belhar* in the Book of Confessions
- Proposed new Directory for Worship and recommendations on the re-organization of synods

As the deadline for new business approaches we will keep you informed of the docket and our hopes for how commissioners will respond to specific items of business at www.layman.org. The next issue of The Layman will be our "Pre-GA" issue. It will include a "voter guide" designed for your use in advocating with commissioners from your presbytery in preparation for their participation at G.A.

We will report every night of the assembly via streaming video to keep you informed as news breaks. And following the assembly we'll send out a post-GA issue of The Layman. To do all of this we need your prayerful and financial support. Thank you in advance for your generous gift.

Standing firm,

Carmen

Please consider donating to *The Layman* by clicking the donate button on the web site – www.layman.org – or by calling 800-368-0110. Checks may be sent to *The Layman*, PO Box 2210, Lenoir N.C. 28645