

The Layman

RAISING THE STANDARD

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Turning tragedy to triumph

Congregation still serves and worships despite displacement

Nathan Key
The Layman

A devastating tornado that caused substantial damage to Westminster Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg, Miss., has not hampered the congregation's ability to worship and serve the Lord.

Members of Westminster have been sharing facilities with the congregation of a local Methodist church for worship services while insurance adjustments and, ultimately, repairs to their sanctuary take place.

"We were offered an opportunity to worship at Parkway Heights Methodist Church, and we have been doing that for six weeks now," Westminster Pastor Steve Ramp said. "That has worked out beautifully and has been very nice for all of us. We've had some joint services, gotten to know a lot of other people and made some new friends. It has been really meaningful."

Ramp explained that Parkway has an 8:30 a.m. contemporary service on Sundays before leaving the sanctuary for Westminster to have its 9:30 a.m. service. Parkway's members then have their 11 a.m. traditional service. On Wednesdays, the two churches share a meal together before splitting for their evening services.

"The hospitality factor from the Methodists has been so warm and inviting," Ramp said. "We feel like we are partners, and it means a lot to them to be able to help us. They don't just say that, they mean it, and our folks feel very comfortable with them."

"(Parkway members) have a beautiful, spacious facility and have been so cordial. It really has taken a lot of angst out of this situation for us."

That angst was brought on by the tornado that ripped through



Photo By Ryan Moore, Hattiesburg American
Emergency personnel walk past a smashed vehicle outside Westminster Presbyterian Church

In this issue ...

| | |
|---|-------|
| Covenant Network seeks to redefine marriage indirectly | 2 |
| BOP: A story of two economies and an intersection of values | 3 |
| After Easter..... | 4 |
| 'Are we teaching children the Bible?' is a better question | 5 |
| Presbytery seizes control of Virginia church | 11 |
| Presbyteries begin voting on constitutional amendments | 12-13 |
| Churches that have left the PCUSA recently | 14 |

NEXT Church: Say 'Yes' to the unexpected plans of God

By Paula R. Kincaid
The Layman

CHARLOTTE, N.C. – Greeters stood at all of the entrances to the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, N.C., on both days of the two-day NEXT Church conference, giving everyone who entered a brightly colored stole to wear around their neck.

While these stoles, which at times were called ribbons, were solid colors, they were a reminder of the multi-colored stoles, or scarves, worn at other Presbyterian Church (USA) events that signify support for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender lobby. While the lobby has succeeded in opening ordination in the PCUSA to LGBT people, they are now focused on allowing PCUSA pastors to perform same-sex marriages in their churches.

Bearing witness to the connection between the agenda of NEXT Church and the LGBT lobby, those who arrived for the conference early were treated to a



Stoles collected at the NEXT conference.

See CONGREGATION, page 15

See NEXT, page 15

What is marriage?



By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

The executive director of the Manhattan Declaration, Eric Teetsel, told members of the Association for Church Renewal (ACR) that the threat to marriage in America is a threat to society's very foundation. He made his case at ACR's recent meeting in Washington, D.C., March 11.

Teetsel's presentation addressed two questions: What is marriage? Why does it matter?

Acknowledging that all categories of people are marked by divorce, infidelity, sexual confusion, sexual sin and brokenness, Teetsel appealed to his audience that Christians' responsibility throughout these debates, both privately and publicly, is to show love to one another in responsible witness to Jesus Christ.

"The Christian witness on these subjects has not been faithful, which makes the current climate hostile to the message we seek to proclaim," he said.

So, Teetsel began his appeal from a wide place. He quoted Psalm 19:1, and then acknowledged that "All truth is God's, wherever it is found."

Elaborating, he said, "It's true that there is a theme throughout Scripture regarding sexuality and marriage, and that theme features one man and one woman. But to appeal only and always to the Bible in the midst of a culture for whom the Bible holds no authority is futile."

So, Teetsel said, Christians must appeal to the truth of God about marriage that is revealed throughout the social sciences, history and studies that plainly support the advantage that intact, biological two-parent households have on children.

Quoting from the Manhattan Declaration, Teetsel said "Vast human experience confirms that marriage is the original and most important institution for sustaining the health, education and welfare of all persons in a society. Where marriage is honored, and where there is a flourishing marriage culture, everyone benefits – the spouses themselves, their children, the communities and societies in which they live. Where the marriage culture begins to erode, social pathologies of every sort quickly manifest themselves."

Teetsel then turned to comments by President Lyndon Johnson in 1964: "The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force it shapes the attitude, the hopes, the ambitions and the values of the child. And when the family collapses it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale the community itself is crippled. So, unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together – all the rest: schools, and playgrounds, and public assistance, and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation."

Eric Teetsel is the executive director of The Manhattan Declaration (<http://manhattandeclaration.org/>). For more resources on marriage, visit The Layman Online's marriage resource page at www.layman.org/category/marriage-2.

Covenant Network seeks to redefine marriage indirectly

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

Everyone expects to see and contend with efforts at the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly in 2014 to redefine marriage. So, proponents plan to insure their victory by alternate means.

It's political strategy 101: If the opposition is watching the front line, go around to the flank. Apparently advocates of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT)

agenda fear that efforts at an honest, straight-forward redefinition of marriage in the PCUSA Constitution through amending the confessions and Directory for Worship may fail at GA. So, some are advocating plans to try alternative routes.

They advocate "creating a space" which is another way of saying they intend to create a loophole so that officers of the PCUSA could perform same-sex marriages in PCUSA churches.

Pay attention because you won't hear the word marriage in what is proposed.

The amendment to the constitution would read, "Teaching elders, and ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service, shall have the freedom to exercise discretion regarding the conduct of worship as pastoral care except where explicitly proscribed in this constitution."

Would that kind of language pass as an overture at General Assembly and be forwarded to the presbyteries for a vote? Most likely yes. And would it pass in your presbytery and a majority of others? Again the answer is likely yes.

It sounds like it's about pastoral care, but it's really about same-sex marriage. Read the quote in its context and the speech it came from:

"Do not seek to amend W-4.9001 on the definition of marriage. Rather amend W-1.4005a on rights of the pastor as worship leader by adding the following (or similar) provision:

"Teaching elders, and ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service,

shall have the freedom to exercise discretion regarding the conduct of worship as pastoral care except where explicitly proscribed in this Constitution. The exercise of this

freedom may not infringe on the session's responsibility to control the use of church facilities and to authorize the celebration of the sacraments, or the presbytery's responsibility to validate and oversee the ministry of the

Word and sacrament."

"Do you see the words 'same-sex' or even 'marriage' in this overture? No. It is not about that, although it would create a space in most presbyteries to allow same-sex marriages to be performed under the protections it guarantees. There is careful language that I have vetted with some of my colleagues that would overturn existing AIs from 1991 and after. It does preserve the right of a session to refuse to allow its facilities to be used for purposes with which it disagrees, but that is properly their right anyway. It also preserves the rights of presbyteries that want to be obstructive to address the conduct of individual ministers under their jurisdiction, but it would take an enormous investment of time and money to try multiple cases. The overture means that obstruction can only happen on a case-by-case basis or by adopting specific amendments to take away pastoral freedoms, which will be a hard sell in my opinion."

'Marriage equality in the PCUSA' by the Rev. Dr. Daniel M. Saperstein, Covenant Network Regional Conference.

It would seem that the Covenant Network, which was organized for the sole purpose of stripping the "fidelity and chastity" standard historically known as G-6.0106b from the constitution, now has the redefinition of marriage by any means necessary planned for the 2014 PCUSA General Assembly.



Board of Pensions

A story of two economies and an intersection of values

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

PHILADELPHIA, Pa. – The outcomes of the Board of Pensions meeting are relevant to two distinct but related groups: Pension plan members and medical plan members. Pension plan members can be confident that the \$7.476 billion in assets will more than adequately cover the \$5.9 billion in liabilities of the plan. After five years of receiving no experience apportionments, pension plan members will be happy to hear that the board approved a 1 percent experience apportionment for 2012. The medical plan news is a different story.

Due to the significant and growing gap between medical plan expenses (medical claims by covered participants) and revenue (dues paid by churches), some kind of dues increase is coming in 2014 and 2015. Several scenarios are under discussion, and emphasis was placed on the need to listen and respond to constituent concerns. The challenge is to craft a solution that is both financially viable and does not violate the values and feelings of all involved.

Medical plan

Although the big decision about dues restructuring will not be made until the June meeting, some decisions were made by the board in relationship to the medical plan. The board approved

- an increase in the co-pay for generic prescription drugs from \$8 to \$10 for monthly prescriptions filled at retail pharmacies and from \$20 to \$25 for three-month supplies received through mail order. This will increase revenues to the medical plan by about \$500,000/year.
- an increase in the minimum effective salary from \$42,000 to \$44,000, and
- the initiation of a health accountability model for medical plan beneficiaries.

Several scenarios are under discussion to close the funding gap between medical expenses and current revenues. But before exploring those options, it's important to understand why some measure to increase revenues is necessary.

The Board of Pensions Medical Plan is a self-insured, employer-provided church plan. "Self-insured" means that the plan must take in dues and other revenues equivalent to the medical claims of covered participants. "Employer-provided" means that those receiving the benefits are not the ones paying for it.



John Hamm, chairman of the board's Healthcare Committee, reported that "34,000 people are getting healthcare benefits provided by the BOP. They are not paying for those benefits, churches are." The board sends bills to 6,700 churches and other employing organizations. Since 1988, those employers have been responsible for 100 percent of the cost of healthcare for plan members, their covered partners and all dependents.

The problem, Hamm said, "is that since 1988 when the plan was designed, healthcare costs have increased dramatically." He said that "the claims covered in 1988 were \$48 million, today it's \$200 million per year. We have 20 percent fewer members than we did then, which means that the cost per member has increased over 500 percent. In the past 25 years there is nothing that has gone up by that measure."

Reviewing the history for the board, Hamm reported that "at the outset (in 1988), churches were paying 8 percent of effective salary for coverage. Now they are paying 21 percent, and that's not enough to cover rising costs. Under the current dues structure, the projected deficit for 2014 will be \$14 million. That number was revised down from the \$28 million shortfall projected in October 2012. And in 2015 expenses are expected to outpace dues by \$40 million. Reserves are insufficient to make up the difference."

Asking the question that comes at the intersection of the math and the values, Hamm asked, "Have we reached a tipping point where the mandated 100 percent/0 percent cost allocation is having aberrant behavior patterns?"

He was referring to the growing reality that churches are replacing called pastors with non-mandated clergy and lay people. Hamm acknowledged that for some churches, mandatory participation in the BOP medical plan is so cost prohibitive that they are foregoing calling ordained clergy.

Hamm suggested that "maybe it's time we breach that 100 percent to 0 percent allocation, with limitations."

In seeking to design a solution, Hamm said

there are two primary objectives:

- to maintain the long-term viability of a pay-as-you-go healthcare plan. This involves cash flow between BOP and churches or employing organizations.
- to provide churches with limited medical dues flexibility (a euphemism for "relief"). This involves the potential for cash flow between churches and medical plan members.

Hamm noted, "We are not backing off of the church having to pay 100 percent of the member benefit, but we think it's time to consider allowing churches the flexibility of discussing with their pastors how to approach dependent coverage. When we made the recommendation called Dues Plus, we did not direct that they be charged, we simply recommended that the session have the discretion to work out what was best for their local church situation."

In reference to the visceral response the proposed Dues Plus recommendation generated from across a broad spectrum of the church, Hamm quipped, "Everyone did not stand up and applaud."

The board acknowledged that the church needed to be heard and also needed an opportunity to more fully understand the reality that under the current dues structure the medical plan is not viable for the long-term.

Hamm stressed, "We have not made a decision and we are not making a recommendation today. We intend to listen at the RBC's (Regional Benefit Consultations) and return to you with a refined pricing model in June."

Whatever is ultimately decided, the board stressed its goals twofold: to maintain the long-term viability of healthcare coverage in an environment where dues do not currently cover expenses and live up to the unique principles of a faith-based healthcare plan that is the standard of all such plans.

A tension exists as the board wants to "take economic impacts out of the call process" to maintain the principle of call neutrality but at the same time is challenged to uphold the plan community nature which Hamm described as "churches with the where-with-all to do so will be expected to cover more than their cost so that others who cannot afford it can be subsidized."

The problem is that there are not nearly enough people at the "high" end of the spectrum to subsidize all the people who participate at the Plan's "low" end of the salary scale.

A decision on the 2014 and 2015 restructuring of dues for the medical plan is expected in June.

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After Easter

For Christians, Easter is the high point. Our sanctuaries are resplendent with lilies, daffodils, tulips and fresh smelling hyacinth. The vestments change from purple to white, and choirs lead congregations in robust renditions of triumphant hymns as the organ hits full crescendo. Every Easter Sunday seems to be sunny, and while I am sure there has been a cloudy one somewhere on record, in my mind's eye I don't remember it that way. The sun just seems to shine brighter on Easter. All of nature seems to sing of rebirth and new beginnings, the pews are full and the people are happy. "He is Risen!" is greeted back with "He is Risen Indeed!"

The Church can celebrate on Easter morning. Our Lord is risen and we believe. He has paid the price for our sin and overcome the bonds of death on our behalf. We reaffirm each other's belief by our presence and joy, acknowledging the truth of the Gospel as a family of faith, united in mind and spirit. He is risen indeed, and so shall we be at the appointed time. Celebration is easy and joyous on Easter morning.

Then comes the hard part, the time after Easter. The post-Easter challenge is to live out the faith. We need to live the resurrection and the atonement reality as authentic believers, and we need to do so in a manner which might welcome others into a closer walk with God. The best way to do so is to rely on the Word of God itself – and as I pondered what comes after Easter I found that turning to the source revealed a simple lesson that has serious implications.

The time after Easter was not easy for the first disciples. They were scorned by the religious institution they sought to reform. They were persecuted by political powers. Families divided. But more sobering than the enmity of a hostile world were the internal challenges of doubts and dissension. One of the things I love about the Bible is that it is brutally honest about people and the human condition. Take those initial disciples right after Easter. They heard He was risen from the dead and doubted until they saw Him. But even then, even after going to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated, they saw Him and worshiped him, "but some were doubtful." (Matt. 28:17). Empowered by the Holy Spirit the disciples moved mountains of doubt and their numbers swelled. But even still, as we see in Romans 10:16, even after hearing the good news, not all believed. It must have been hard on those who held fast to the faith.

This pattern is not unique to the early church. Think of the Israelites after Egypt. Following 400 years of slavery God reveals His grace to His band of people by bringing them through all of the plagues, out of oppression by the strongest civil authority on the known earth, and through a miraculous parting of a sea. But they start to doubt because they cannot see His plan with perfect clarity. Some want to return to the security of oppressive authority; some simply

want to take matters into their own hands and craft their own idols into gods. It must have been hard on those who held fast to the faith.

As I pondered these truths it struck me that God is a God of transitions. He is alive, not static. While He is unchanging, God is also dynamic. However, God's dynamic nature does not mean that He is in transition – quite the

opposite. God is constant and yet always on the move. And those who would be with God must be on the move as well. The goal of discipleship is not to get ahead of God nor lag behind, but walk by faith, step by step with Him. He asked Abram to move. He moved Joseph and Moses. He moved the Israelites through the desert and into the Promised Land. In the person of Jesus, God literally moved into the world and invited people to follow Him. Always on the move. The great commission was the first commandment given to the disciples after Easter and it instructed them to "go forth ..."

Life is dynamic, and the challenge for each of us is to move with God and not apart from Him. There are many churches in transition right now. It is "after Easter" for them. Or, if you prefer an Old Testament analogy, they are "out of Egypt" and either in the wilderness or getting settled in a perceived promised land. It won't all be sweet smelling hyacinths.

So once again, we should turn to the Truth – the Word of God – to see how to best handle the transitions. After Easter, I urge you to study the Epistles to see how the disciples handled transition. They handled it by relying on God and holding fast to the essential fundamental tenets of the faith; by remaining true to the commandments of God and the work of the Christ. The disciples counseled: "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men ... rather than according to Christ." (Col. 2:8). "Therefore, if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." (Col. 3:1-2)

For churches in transition – don't be about the business of leaving, be about the Gospel. Think less about Egypt and more about the walk of faith of the people of a God who is on the move. Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all the rest will be added unto you. And in that way the days after Easter will be true to the one who called you.



Commentary by
Forrest A. Norman III

‘Are we teaching children the Bible?’ is a better question

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

In the March 18, 2013 issue of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, retired PCUSA pastor and adjunct professor of religious studies Earl Johnson Jr. wrote an article directed at church leaders entitled, “Are we teaching children violence?”

“Are we teaching children the Bible?” is the better question.

Problems with the pedagogy proposed

Phrases like “avoid teaching Bible stories,” “violence is always wrong,” “Parts ... can simply be left out,” and “how a text should be read,” are indications of a view of Scripture that falls beneath the threshold of respecting the Bible and all its parts as the inspired Word of God. The elevation of “educational theory and psychological development” suggests a bias toward the Enlightenment exaltation of reason over revelation.

The stated goal of teaching – “enabling children to become open-minded peacemakers” – suggests that we will read the Bible through the lens of our own experience instead of reading our experiences through the lens of the Bible. This is a perverted pedagogy on so many levels.

Add to that the recommendation that “if we think we must approach these texts with children,” we just lie to them by telling “them in modified ways” what the Bible does NOT in fact say. It is expressly contrary to the Bible itself for an individual to edit out parts – advocated here as just leaving them out. We are charged to teach the entire Word of God, not just the parts we like.

Now, I understand that we must do so in age appropriate ways and that there are parts of the Bible that we do not include in preschool or early elementary courses of study. But to suggest that you might teach one of those stories but edit what the Bible says to fit your perception of how peace is made offends the most basic of honest hermeneutics.

Children don’t yet know what they don’t yet know

I am also concerned by the suggestion that teachers ask very young children what they think or how they imagine God feels. In order to answer a question about God’s character, we must first have minds that are Reformed according to the Word of God.

Only with an understanding of who God is, revealed in the Bible, can children then learn how to think righ-



Commentary
by Carmen
Fowler LaBerge

teous thoughts. Without that instruction their thinking will become futile.

Bible study is unto spiritual formation and part of that is bringing the thoughts and imaginations of God’s people into alignment with God’s revealed character and will.

We do not conform the Word to what we think or what we imagine, but instead submit ourselves to the active and present power of God’s Holy Spirit to conform us to it.

When the author suggests that children be asked, “What would Jesus teach us to do in situations like that?” he is suggesting that Jesus is not Himself the eternal Word of God, through whom the Word recorded in the Bible was written.

Jesus, as the co-eternal second member of the Trinity, is teaching us through these texts. The Word in flesh cannot be bifurcated from the Word written. It is a false teaching to suggest that the God who speaks in the Old Testament is in any way different or distinct from the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not spring onto the scene when He was born of human flesh. He has always been present and active and speaking and teaching.

Children must be taught the truth, including the violence done in sin

Finally, avoiding all reference to violence as the article suggests, how is one to teach the truths of Holy Week? From the cleansing of the Temple, to the arrest and brutal treatment of Jesus by the Romans and Jews, to the blood-thirsty mob, to the scourging and the crown of thorns that appears on the cover of *The Outlook* where this article appears ... all is violence. And then there’s the ultimate violence of the crucifixion. Surely you are not suggesting that there are not age appropriate ways to teach our children about the reality of salvation that comes through a God who was crucified for the violence we do to Him through the reality of sin every day.

Children need to understand the violence done to God through sin and the solution He offers to them through Himself. In order to teach that, we have to teach the Bible.

The author asks if we’re teaching children violence. The better question might be are we teaching children the Bible?

Read more articles, commentaries, analysis and blogs by Carmen Fowler LaBerge at www.layman.org/category/by-carmen/

Presbyterian Lay Committee

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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 the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Church Universal, thereby equipping and empowering faithful congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations to fulfill the Great Commission in the 21st century.
2. To inform and equip congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations 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 congregations and leaders in the PCUSA and other denominations 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 the PCUSA and other 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.

Meiser's philosophy: Help others and let God lead

By Nathan Key
The Layman

Doug Meiser has a favorite verse of Scripture that parallels his philosophy of helping others and being led by God.

That verse is Romans 8:28, and it reads, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."

"I frequently see things happen, and even though I can't see how they all work together, eventually they do," said Meiser who was one of four new members elected to serve on the Presbyterian Lay Committee's Board of Directors.

That is part of what led him to service with the PLC board, along with that desire to continue helping others, something that has been a part of his life for many years.

Meiser is an executive sales director for Quest Diagnostics, headquartered in Madison, N.J. Quest is the nation's leading provider of diagnostic testing, providing clinical, pathology and genetic testing services to more than half the hospitals and physicians in the United States as well as other parts of the world. He has been with the company for 23 years, filling several sales/marketing positions during his tenure.

"Every day we touch hundreds of thousands of patients and their families through our diagnostic testing; that's a lot of folks waiting on lab tests to come back," Meiser said. "Touching half a million people every day is a special feeling. I feel very blessed that for the many years that I've been here, I have led teams that meet customers' needs. I like to be around and help people. My fulfillment is knowing that we provide the information to help keep employees healthy and safe."

Part of that desire to help others in need comes from his work as a paramedic, volunteering with fire/rescue/EMS agencies for a number of years.

Meiser and his wife Debbie are both from the Pittsburgh, Pa., area. They lived in Raleigh, N.C., Atlanta, Ga., and Pennsylvania prior to locating



Doug Meiser

in Overland Park, Kan. They have two sons, Brian, 24, who lives in Orlando, Fla., and Alex, 18, a high school senior.

During their travels, the Meisers have been associated with various churches, though they have stayed true to their Christian faith as Presbyterians.

"We've attended our fair share of churches," Meiser said, noting that his Presbyterian roots were planted in the early 1980s while attending Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pa. "We drifted away from our faith but then started to attend church on a regular basis while we were in Raleigh, and we sort of pulled back toward our faith roots."

Meiser said he "felt a strong calling to get more involved" while living in Pittsburgh and attending Memorial Park Presbyterian Church. He was involved with the New Wineskins Association of Churches in Pittsburgh and was approached by Presbyterian Lay Committee

President Carmen Fowler LaBerge about possibly serving as a member of the PLC board of directors.

His church in Pittsburgh went through the discernment process and sought dismissal to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Eventually, Meiser and his family moved to

Overland Park and found a church that proved to be a good fit for them – Stanley Presbyterian Church where he serves as an elder.

"We felt pulled and called to become part of that church body," he said. "It was and is a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation today."

When the chance to serve the PLC board was presented, Meiser seized the opportunity, agreeing to become one of its newest members. It's a decision that has brought him plenty of personal satisfaction from what he is able to do, noting that he "felt the tug of the Holy Spirit" telling him he could use the position to benefit others.

"Easily the most satisfying thing I've gotten out of it (the board appointment) is the compas-

Board profile

sion, faith and energy that the board (members) universally bring to their work," he said. "The fellowship and worship together has been incredibly uplifting and fulfilling. Just being around that group of people has made a difference for me. There are a lot of bright, helpful and caring people on the board."

Meiser fully understands that the Presbyterian Church continues to face challenges, and he outlined what he feels some of them are.

"The challenges have been there for hundreds of years for the PCUSA and all preceding bodies and entities," he said. "It seems large, mainstream denominations are struggling with issues around governance and polity. We also face the issues from the pull of Sunday morning soccer and baseball, and secular values that are permeating our doctrines. Because of that, not many people want to worship and fellowship, to pour themselves into a church dealing with influx or struggling with a denomination or presbytery."

He went on to say that a more inclusive church actually has created more fragmentation within the denomination.

"It's become cumbersome to attract new people and continue to replenish the pews as we look to be more inclusive and welcome folks of different groupings," Meiser said. "We keep seeing little growth and entire congregations separating. We try to reverse the decline, but people won't compromise their beliefs to include others."

"We have tried to rewrite the covenants that have been passed down, but that isn't strengthening the church; it's actually weakening it. It's a matter of the Bible being the infallible, ordained Word of God. We squabble over that when it should be abundantly clear, and it makes us look silly."

Meiser also believes that people need to realize the blessings bestowed upon them are directly from God.

"The abundant blessings many of us enjoy and are enriched by that we're sometimes blissfully ignorant of were given to us by God for His glorification," Meiser pointed out. "As we appreciate those riches and blessings, it helps us see why God blessed us in such ways with great ministries and many faithful friends and relationships. Using that effectively and in Christian service not only makes sense but also lets us know why we received them in the first place."

"Our issue is to keep believing and let Christ guide us. That should be our focus."

"We have tried to rewrite the covenants that have been passed down, but that isn't strengthening the church; it's actually weakening it. It's a matter of the Bible being the infallible ordained Word of God. We squabble over that when it should be abundantly clear, and it makes us look silly."

Doug Meiser

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Westminster Confession of Faith – Of Providence

Study written by the Rev. Matthew Everhard
Pastor, Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church

Hold Fast the Faith, by the Rev. Matthew Everhard, is intended to be a guide to help you work through the Westminster Confession of Faith on a transformational level, not merely an intellectual level. In other words, the goal of this book is to help you pray through the Confession in a way that fosters personal transformation and spiritual growth.

Following the content of each chapter of the Confession, I have included my own insights into how spiritual formation can begin to occur using the Confession as our measure. It is here, following the reading of each chapter, that the reader is encouraged to spend time in meditation, confession of sin and praise. These meditations and formation exercises are what set this work apart from the many other studies of the Westminster one may find in print. Five principle types of exercises will be included in each chapter, as follows:

Prepare in Prayer

The prayers under the heading “Prepare in Prayer” are just that – short, succinct prayers for the reader to offer to God as you ready your heart and submit your mind for the reading of Scripture and further study.

Reach Back

Sections marked “Reach Back” are small commentaries on the historical or theological content of the Confession. These sections will help the reader to understand the mindset of the Westminster Divines as they went about their work of articulating the Christian faith. Modern believers will be assisted in spanning the gap between the centuries by looking back to the context in which the Confession was written. As we do this, we will often find that the moral standards of the Confession’s writers raise needed critique to today’s ethical laxity.

Search Inward

Exercises labeled “Search Inward” are designed to lead the reader to look deeper into his or her own soul and reflect on one’s own life. This is often precisely the step that we avoid when we study doctrine! When reading the Westminster, we will be surprised at how often it suggests something important in regard to our own situation. Often what we read in the Confession will prompt us to ask questions of ourselves that are uncomfortable. This is good and healthy. “Search Inward” sections will often lead us to repent, give thanks, or even fall onto our faces in the holy presence of the Lord.

Gaze Upward

Sections marked “Gaze Upward” are designed to prompt the reader to burst into spontaneous praise. The Westminster Confession of Faith is an intensely God-centered document. These sections will usually point to passages in the Confession that cause us to give glory to God. Here you will certainly find specific reasons to sing, declare God’s greatness, or stand in awed silence before His holiness. So often we find ourselves encumbered by the sheer weightiness of doctrine, that we fail to allow its power to call us into the assembly of angels, martyrs and saints to exalt His name in praise.

Step Out

Sections called “Step Out” are designed to move the reader to action. It should never be the case that Christian teaching prompts our minds to move, but not our lives. Christian instruction must always be connected to responsive action. No reading of the Confession – or Scripture for that matter – should leave us the same as we were before. Each time we encounter God through the Scriptures, and many times that we encounter Him in the Confession, we are changed and called to receive our life-mission.

One Final Challenge

My challenge to the reader is to “eat” this book in small sections, digesting each chapter of the Westminster in bite-sized portions. As a matter of course, one chapter of the Confession followed by its spiritual formation section will likely be enough for one sitting. Any more, and the mind may be overrun with too many thoughts! In any case, the suggested spiritual formation exercises, if honestly attempted, will lead the believer in such a direction of prayer as will be spiritually edifying to the soul.

Please remember that even though the Westminster Confession has literally dozens of quotations of Scripture within, and allusions to many more, it is no substitute for reading Scripture itself. While the Scriptures are the words of God, the Confession is nonetheless the words of men.

For this reason, each section will be fortified by special readings of Scripture that are designed to parallel the segment of the Confession.

The Confession itself acknowledges its human limitations (WCF 1.10). At the same time, it has served as an inspiration to countless souls, and it is my conviction that it will benefit you too “until Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4:19).



The March/April equipping study is based on *Hold Fast the Faith*, written by the Rev. Matthew Everhard and published by PLC Publications. The book can be purchased through The Layman Online (www.layman.org/bookstore2) or through Amazon.com.

Matthew Everhard is the senior pastor of Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) in Brooksville, Fla. He is a graduate of Ashland Theological Seminary and Malone University, and is also pursuing post-graduate study at Reformed Theological Seminary. Matthew also is deeply interested in missions, having served on the mission fields of Equatorial Guinea (Central West Africa), El Salvador, Mexico, Ukraine, the Cayman Islands, and the Bahamas. His greatest passion and supreme treasure, however, is the Lord Jesus Christ who captured his heart in 1990.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Confession Chapter Five: Of Providence

1. *God, the great Creator of all things, does uphold, direct, dispose and govern all creatures, actions and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy.*
2. *Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, He orders them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.*
3. *God, in His ordinary providence, makes use of means, yet is free to work without, above and against them, at His pleasure.*
4. *The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first Fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God; who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.*
5. *The most wise, righteous and gracious God does oftentimes leave for*

Into the Scriptures
Read Job 1-3
and Romans 1.

a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for various other just and holy ends.

6. *As for those wicked and ungodly men whom God, as a righteous judge, for former sins, does blind and harden; from them He not only withholds His grace, whereby they might have been enlightened in their understandings, and wrought upon their hearts; but sometimes also withdrawals the gifts which they had; and exposes them to such objects as their corruption makes occasion of sin; and withal, gives them over to their own lusts, the temptations of the world, and the power of Satan; whereby it comes to pass that they harden themselves, even under those means which God uses for the softening of others.*
7. *As the providence of God does, in general, reach to all creatures, so, after a most special manner, it takes care of His Church, and disposes all things to the good thereof.*

Prepare in Prayer:

Mighty God, as we read, think and study today, please remind us that without Your providence, having ordered all the events in the past that preceded our lives, we would not have even been born. For this, we give You praise. Amen.

Week One: Reach Back

What do we really mean when we say things like “God is in control” and “It’s in God’s hands?” We often use words like these when a friend is looking for a job, or a single person is anxious to find a spouse, or a child becomes sick. And yet in what ways is God really in control of our lives?

Theologian Wayne Grudem writes that the providence of God means,

“God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that He 1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; 2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and 3) directs them to fulfill His purposes.”¹

Once again in this reading from the Confession, we find that the Divines are pushing the doctrine of the sovereignty of God to its full extension. Here, the writers credit God with being the active Lord over all creation. He is no passive landowner. The Divines are quick to point out that God is not only the giver of divine blessings, but also the withholder of blessings both to test the righteous, and to mete out judgment on the unrighteous (WCF 5.5,6). Admittedly, it is hard to swallow the idea that God would allow His children to suffer, but suffering is never without a perfect purpose (see Philippians 3:10).

Thomas a’Kempis writes, “Prepare yourself to endure many adversities and various kinds of trouble in this difficult life, for that is the way it will be with you wherever you are, and you will find it that way no matter where you hide yourself.”² Each and every one of us will suffer in this life. The difference is to whom or what we cling when the suffering comes.

For reflection:

1. What do you really mean when you say “God is in control” or “It’s in God’s hands?”
2. In what ways is God really in control of your life?
3. How do you prepare yourself “to endure many adversities and various kinds of trouble” in life?
4. To whom do you cling when suffering comes?

¹ Wayne Grudem. *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994) p. 315.

² Thomas a’Kempis. *The Imitation of Christ*. (North Brunswick NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1999) p. 102.

Week Two: Search Inward

The confession is very clear, as is Scripture, that God permits evil to exist for a time, but that He is never the first cause of evil (WCF 5.4). He is not the author of evil and does no malevolence, for this would be contrary to His holy nature. “Let no one say when he is tempted,” writes James, “‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and He Himself tempts no one” (1:13). Do you ever mistakenly blame God or despise Him in your heart for the results of your own sin, the sin of another person, or even the fallen nature of creation itself? Ask God to give your heart a proper balance for understanding that He is in control of all things, and yet does no evil of His own accord.

More than that, does your heart give praise to God for the wonderful things that He does which appear at the time to be difficulties? Often what we perceive as a hindrance is actually God working on our behalf.

For instance, several years ago my son Elijah went to the doctor for a routine check-up. He had had a severe cough and chest cold. After listening to the lungs, our family doctor called for a chest x-ray. To the doctor’s astonishment and ours, a large cyst was discovered in his left, top lung. Though my wife and I wept at the thought of an object the size of a jumbo egg being lodged in our 3-year-old’s lung, we couldn’t help but praise God that the discovery was made. After all, had Elijah not contracted the cold, we would have never known that this cyst was growing inside of him. Having been discovered, the cyst was removed by the careful hand of the surgeon before it caused more problems later in life. After our initial grief, Kelly and I attributed this discovery to God as a serendipity. The providence of God is marvelous, although it is often mysterious.

For reflection:

1. Have you ever mistakenly blamed God for the results of your own sin? Have you asked for forgiveness?
2. Discuss a time when you have praised God for the wonderful things that He has done which appeared at the time to be difficulties.
3. How has the providence of God seemed marvelous and mysterious to you?

If you have enjoyed this equipping study, consider purchasing *Hold Fast the Faith* by calling 800-368-0110 or by visiting Amazon.com

Week Three: Gaze Upward

So many times, in our childish conceptions of God, we are willing to only credit God for His interventions into human history and our own lives when God brings about pleasurable things. Yet the Scriptures contain a much fuller picture of the sovereignty of God. As the account of Job reveals, God often removes His hand of comfort, even from believers, so that the fullness of their dependence may be revealed in times of duress. And yet, we learn from Job’s experience, that Satan’s power is severely restricted to the permission of God (Job 1:12, 2:6). The evil one may not even blink without God’s permission.

Thus, the Divines hope to point out in the confession that temptation, illness, disease and other secondary causes (or “means,” WCF 5.3) are not unexpected flare-ups of evil contrary to the will of God, but are in fact, quite mysteriously, ordained in the secret counsel of God’s holy and perfect will to bring about God’s divine plan for human history and even our own individual lives. Often, it is these very trials that promote the glory of God in our lives as we endure them. John Piper provocatively writes:

“Suffering with Jesus on the Calvary road of love is not merely the result of magnifying Christ, it is also the means.”¹

For reflection:

1. Discuss a time when God’s intervention has brought about pleasurable things. Contrast those times to a period when you feel that God removed His hand of comfort from you.
2. What Scriptures helped you through times of pleasure and times of suffering?
3. How can you – unlike the friends of Job – help a friend who is suffering?
4. Make an action plan to actually reach out to a suffering person in your community.

¹ John Piper. *Don’t Waste Your Life*. (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2003) p. 61.

Week Four: Step Out

Rejoicing During Trial: In your prayers today, do something quite unnatural to your human inclination by praising God for the greatest struggle that you are engaged in right now. Are you or a loved one ill? Praise God that He has allowed you to suffer for a purpose. Are you struggling with a temptation? Praise God for giving you His Holy Spirit to strengthen you during that time. Are you grappling with the evils of this world such as terrorism, natural disasters, or the death of a loved one? Praise God that, though you do not understand His will, He is still in control of all things. Think back over your life and highlight the times that God has allowed you to go through serious suffering. Note the ways that God has caused you to cling more desperately to Him.

I remember a children’s book that I read as a child. The clouds and the sun were having a competition to see who could more easily cause the man to take off his trench coat. The clouds attempted first. They blew and fussed, attempting to rip the coat right off of the man. They could, they supposed, get right underneath the material and tear off the outer coat. But the harder the winds blew, the more the man clung desperately to it. Shouldn’t trials, temptations and times of suffering work that way too? The more ferocious the storm, the more we cling to our robes of righteousness?

Later the sun made his attempt. In quite an opposite way, the sun’s tactics were subtler. He gently shined on the man’s back. The man hardly knew what was happening. Soon he took off the coat and left it behind. Unfortunately he was more exposed to the sun’s dangers as he began to burn. The sun had won. The man let down his guard.

If you are not in a time of hardship now, be careful here too. Often when we feel secure in our selves, perceiving that we are in no state of danger, we are prone to the pitfalls of sin, the temptations of the flesh, and subtle tendencies toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

Using the words of the confession, extol Him for His “almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness” no matter what type of hardship you are going through.

For reflection:

1. During trials, temptations and times of suffering, do you cling to the Son of righteousness? Make a list of Scripture verses and memorize them to help you cling to the Son.
2. How do you guard against the pitfalls of sin, the temptations of the flesh, and subtle tendencies toward self-reliance and self-sufficiency? Make a list of Scripture verses to help you.
3. Did you have an opportunity to put your Week Three plan into action? Did you reach out to a suffering person in your community? Discuss what happened.

Book review: *Learning to be you*

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

I travel a lot. I'm in and out of airports on a regular basis. That has gained me the privilege over time of moving more quickly through TSA checkpoints because, theoretically, they know who I am. Which is why I was so stunned to be stopped recently at Dulles. I was in the right line. I presented the right documents. But none of that mattered. When my driver's license was passed under the light it made the device blink red instead of green. It didn't matter that my I.D. was valid. It didn't matter that visually the agent could see that the picture on the I.D. matched the person standing before him. All that mattered was my I.D. didn't pass muster with the machine. No amount of protesting on my part, no amount of pleading that I am who it says I am was getting me anywhere. I now travel with two forms of government issued I.D. just to be safe. But the whole experience begs a much more important question: How do you prove your identity in the world today? Who are you? How do you know? And how do others know?

Identity is a struggle for people in general and for Christians living as dual citizens in the Kingdom of heaven and the realities of the world.

Called to live in the world as strangers, aliens and ambassadors; in the world but not of it, living into and out of your identity in Christ is challenging. Add to that struggle the reality that many face by their choice to identify themselves as "southern" or "Ivy League," "Democrat" or "Republican," "LGBT," "pro-life," "pro-choice," "feminist." The ways in which we choose to identify ourselves and the groups with whom we identify tend to warp the larger reality of an identity in Christ, which leaves many people leading lives that are less than God's best.

The bottom line of David Swanson's book, *Learning to be You* is this: We must understand the nature and character of the God who made us, the God who lives in us, because that is the only valid means of discovering who we are. No other quest for finding yourself is going to lead to the truth of who God is and only when we understand who God is can we know who we are.

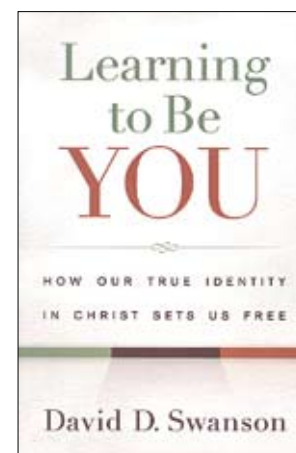
The book is full of meat but it is served up in a way that is very easy to digest. Swanson uses illustrations and stories that are personal but not narrowly specific. That enhances the applicability of *Learning to be You* for pastors, small group leaders and individuals alike.

We all know people who struggle with issues

related to identity. Swanson winsomely contends that until people know the One who created them they cannot know themselves. Identity is the issue of our day and *Learning to be You* is a non-political but acute diagnosis, prescription and life-long experiential learning plan for those who want to know whose they are.

If you know you're living a lesser life than the one of joy and purpose God created you to live, then read *Learning to be You* and discover the character and nature of the God in whose image you were created. Get yourself wrapped up in the reality of God and find your identity liberated from many lesser things.

David Swanson is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Orlando, Fla. *Learning to be You* is available in paperback and e-reader editions. Published by Baker Books.



Open letter to GA moderator and PCUSA stated clerk

I was delighted to read aloud to a session last night, as we were studying the *Book of Order*, the following two paragraphs about our confessions:

F-2.01

The Purpose Of Confessional Statements

*The Presbyterian Church (USA) **states its faith** and bears witness to God's grace in Jesus Christ in the creeds and confessions in The Book of Confessions. In these statements the church declares to its members and to the world who and what it is, **what it believes**, and **what it resolves to do**. These statements identify the church as a community of people **known by its convictions as well as by its actions**. They guide the church in its study and interpretation of the Scriptures; they summarize the essence of Reformed Christian tradition; they direct the church in maintaining sound doctrines; they equip the church for its work of proclamation. They serve to strengthen personal commitment and the life and witness of the community of believers.*

The creeds and confessions of this church arose in response to particular circumstances

*es within the history of God's people. They claim the truth of the Gospel at those points where their authors perceived that truth to be at risk. They are the result of prayer, thought, and experience within a living tradition. They appeal to the universal truth of the Gospel while expressing that truth within the social and cultural assumptions of their time. **They affirm a common faith tradition**, while also from time to time standing in tension with each other. (emphasis added)*

The parts that I have marked in boldface and underline affirm and indicate, of course:

1. That the confessions are a statement of the church's **current faith** (note the present tense), not simply a museum collection of artifacts of what the church used to believe;
2. That the confessions are not only a statement of current faith but also, therefore, govern our **actions**, what we **do** together as a church; and
3. That despite minor variations among the confessions, they continue to affirm a **common faith tradition** in which we continue to stand, which we continue to believe, and by which we continue to agree to be governed.

This is astounding! What this means, of course, is that the advice Paul Hooker gave you on July 6, 2012, in regard to the proposal to redefine marriage, was totally wrong. It is most certainly *not* the case that we are free to revise the *Book of Order* into contradiction with *The Book of Confessions*, since even the *Book of Order* itself acknowledges (1) that the confessions state our current faith, (2) that our confessions declare what we are to do, and (3) that they do so within a coherent faith tradition.

Therefore, the action of the assembly to declare itself free to propose to the presbyteries that the *Book of Order* be revised into contradiction with *The Book of Confessions* violated not only *The Book of Confessions* and Robert's Rules of Order, which was done with impunity, but also, strangely enough, the very *Book of Order* itself (which was purported to be held in higher esteem), because of these two paragraphs. I am sorry I did not remember them then. I hope we shall not make this mistake again.

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Presbytery takes control of Virginia church

By Nathan Key
The Layman

After a Virginia presbytery took over operations of a Mechanicsville church, those who felt led by God to depart the Presbyterian Church (USA) started anew as an Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) mission congregation just a short distance away from their former church facility.

The Church in Restoration had its inaugural service Sunday, Feb. 24 at Oak Knoll Middle School. What was expected to be a crowd of about 400 charter members swelled to more than 600 in attendance. The overflow crowd was so large that additional chairs had to be brought in to provide ample seating.

The whole situation was shaped by the unusual fact that the property was actually titled in the presbytery's name, which gave the local church very little negotiating room, and left the church at the mercy of the presbytery.

The start for the new congregation came as a result of action taken by Presbytery of the James.

An Administrative Commission (AC) of the Richmond-based Presbytery of the James (POJ) dissolved the session of New Hanover Presbyterian Church (NHPC) during a Feb. 10 meeting and has assumed original jurisdiction of the church.

During that meeting, the session of NHPC expressed its unanimous intent to leave the denomination and graciously indicated its desire to help the AC provide for the transition of members wanting to leave the church and pray for those who choose to remain. Because of the session's unwillingness to stay and serve what the AC deemed to be a viable PCUSA congregation, the commission took action and assumed original jurisdiction.

The action by the AC came about 15 months after the session of New Hanover unanimously voted (November 2011) to seek dismissal from the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC).

"I think we felt like this would be the result," said Associate Pastor Billy Craig, who has shared moderator duties for NHPC along with fellow Associate Pastor Jeff Lee in the absence of a full-time pastor. "There were some vocal members of the congregation early on who wanted to stay (in the PCUSA). Our impression was they would do all they could to retain the property and to ensure the location stayed a PCUSA congregation."

While not exactly the way they had planned to leave the PCUSA, those no longer affiliated with



Additional chairs are brought in for the worship service.

NHPC are excited about what the future holds, even if they do not have property or buildings. That future is now coming into view with the formation of a new EPC congregation.

"We're relieved that it is finally over; it's been a pretty rough process," said Kevin Smith, a former elder at NHPC. "We're excited about starting a new church, even if it is somewhere else. We were prepared for this possibility. We're just excited to be moving forward."

He said the two main issues in seeking dismissal were the Bible being the true Word of God, and Jesus being the only way to salvation.

New Hanover, for more than a decade, has expressed concerns about the PCUSA's drift from Biblical standards. It was one of six churches in the Presbytery of the James currently seeking dismissal from the PCUSA.

During a presbytery meeting on Feb. 16, those pastoral relationships between Craig, Lee and the church were dissolved, and the credentials of both pastors were transferred to the EPC.

Administrative Commission

The Administrative Commission formed by the Presbytery of the James determined there was a viable remnant of the congregation to continue operating the church under its PCUSA affiliation, thus dissolving the session and asserting its control. That meant the POJ has the property, and the viable remnant it deemed wanted to remain with the PCUSA, regardless of size, will continue to function at the Chamberlayne Road location as the "true church."

The AC penned a letter that was sent to members of NHPC. The letter makes note that the Commission has worked with the church since December 2012, meeting with the session, individual ministers and members who want to remain with the PCUSA.

In the letter, the AC acknowledges that many members of the church of about 800 have shown a strong desire to seek dismissal. It goes on to show that the AC has determined that a viable PCUSA congregation remains at NHPC.

"We are confident that these devoted members who are willing and interested to continue as New Hanover Presbyterian Church, with the support of the presbytery, and the power of God's spirit, can continue to be a faithful witness to Jesus Christ in the PCUSA in this location for the foreseeable future," it reads.

H. Carson Rhyne Jr., stated clerk and general presbyter for the Presbytery of the James, did not respond to phone calls or emails from *The Layman*.

Starting over

Smith and Craig indicated that those leaving New Hanover will become part of the EPC now that all ties with the POJ and PCUSA are severed. The EPC's Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic has welcomed the Church in Restoration as a mission church of the EPC.

The packed facility on the school campus, dotted with cars parked in the lot and on the lawn areas, was a stark contrast to the sparse attendance at New Hanover on Feb. 24.

The school entered the picture as a temporary home for the church and will house the congregation's meetings for the time being. The church offers a youth program each year called Disciple Now, and the registration numbers were so great this year that an alternate site was needed to accommodate the turnout. With that in mind, officials reserved space at Oak Knoll. Now, they will use the facility for worship services as well.

"God's timing is amazing," Smith said. "We're excited about what God has in store for us. We can put the politics of Presbyterianism behind us and focus on ministry from here on out."

"Even though this has been a hard process, painful in many ways, God has produced fruit through it."

Craig added that God's faithfulness has allowed those left without their church and property to persevere and carry on in His service.

"From the get-go we have been trusting in God's faithfulness and promise," Craig said. "He's never let us down. We're trusting Him to lead and guide, and I have no doubt He will continue to be with us in this process. We continue to see His faithfulness, and we're encouraged by that. We're still praising Him – in the good times and the bad."

Presbyteries begin voting on constitutional amendments

By Carmen Fowler LaBerge
The Layman

The 220th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which met last summer in Pittsburgh, sent 11 proposed amendments to the presbyteries for their up or down vote. That process is now under way and will continue for the next several months. Early results indicate that at least three of the proposed amendments are proving controversial.

- Amendment 12-1 proposes the adoption into the *Book of Confessions* a retranslation of the Heidelberg Catechism. A side-by-side comparison is worthy of examination prior to voting.
- Amendment 12-B proposes adding “repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace” to the list of qualifications for ordained officers.
- Amendment 12-F requires that presbyteries

receive at least one other presbytery’s concurrence in order to send an overture to GA.

Amendment 12-1: Heidelberg

At the 2008 GA, a process was initiated to review proposed corrections to sections of the Heidelberg Catechism. That act resulted in a multi-denominational project involving the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church of North America.

Question 87 has long been the “issue” and remains the target of retranslation efforts. In the current *Book of Confessions* (BOC), Q87 reads:

“Can those who do not turn to God from their ungrateful, impenitent life be saved? A. Certainly not! Scripture says, ‘Surely you know that the unjust will never come into possession of the kingdom of God. Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexu-

al perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God.’”

The answer to this question is a direct quotation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. Those who seek to normalize lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) sexual relations want to eliminate “homosexual perversion” from the list of sins explicitly condemned in the Biblical text.

They note that the original German text of the catechism omitted that phrase. What they don’t say is why. In the 16th century it was considered poor pedagogy to have confirmands consider such unmentionable acts as homosexual perversion. Times have changed. The Word of God has not. That is important to remember in this debate.

See PRESBYTERIES, page 13

| AMENDMENT | ORIGIN | AFFECTS | OVERVIEW | VOTE AS OF 4/3/13* |
|---|-------------------|--|---|--|
| 12-1 Heidelberg Catechism | Special Committee | Book of Confessions | New translation of Heidelberg Catechism; includes Scripture references from 1563 version as footnotes | 65-5 |
| 12-A. Business Proper to Congregational Meetings | Plains & Peaks | G-1.0503 | Allows for a “joint congregational witness,” reinstating the possibility for union/federated churches | 90-3 |
| 12-B. Gifts & Qualifications | San Jose | G-2.0104a | Adds “This includes repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace” to the list of qualifications for ordained church officers | 40-51 |
| 12-C. Presbytery Registers | OGA | G-3.0104 G-3.0305 | Changes wording from a specific list of required rolls to “maintain any required registers” | 92-1 |
| 12-D. Shared Synod Permanent Judicial Commission | Special Committee | G-3.0109a, G-3.0109b, G-3.0404, D-5.0101, D-5.0106, D-5.0203, D-5.0206, D-6.0101 D-6.0202a | Set of nine amendments that seek to provide the opportunity for two or more synods sharing common boundaries to form a shared PJC | D.1, 90-3; D.2, 88-3; D.3, 88-3; D.4, 88-3; D.5, 88-3; D.6, 88-3 D.7, 88-3; D.8, 87-4; D.9, 87-4 |
| 12-E. Enrolling Ruling Elders as Members of Presbytery | St. Andrew | G-3.0301 | Allows ruling elders to be enrolled as voting members of presbytery, ensuring that Commissioned Ruling Elders and Certified Christian Educators receive full voice and vote | 91-2 |
| 12-F. Concurrences for Overtures | Special Committee | G-3.0302d | Requires presbyteries to receive at least one concurrence in order to send overtures to GA | 54-38 |
| 12-G. Service of Ordination, Installation, or Commissioning | New Castle | W-4.4002 | Encourages presbyteries to schedule services of ordination/installation/commissioning at times when a greater percentage of presbytery members can attend | 88-5 |
| 12-H. Jurisdiction in Judicial Process | COGA | D-3.0101b | Reinstates the category of TEs “laboring outside the bounds” of their presbytery of membership; clarifies that the presbytery where the work is being done has jurisdiction | 93-1 |
| 12-I. Administrative Leave | Baltimore | D-10.0106 | Allows the PJC to recommend administrative leave in any case involving alleged sexual abuse toward any person | 89-5 |
| 12-J. Investigating Committee Responsibilities | Detroit | D-10.0202 | Allows Investigating Committees to determine whether a statement of alleged offense constitutes an offense as defined by the Book of Discipline; if not, the IC can end its inquiry without investigation | 92-2 |

* Approval of Heidelberg requires 116 affirmative votes; all other amendments require 87 affirmative votes.

Presbyteries begin voting on constitutional amendments

continued from page 12

In the document, “Frequently Asked Questions About Correcting the Heidelberg Catechism in the Book of Confessions” More Light Presbyterians states that the Heidelberg Catechism is important because “the inaccurate 1967 translation of the answer to Question 87 is the only reference to homosexuality in the whole *Book of Confessions*.”

The proposed retranslation drops the Scriptural reference to “homosexual perversion” and instead offers a paraphrase. As a way of assuaging criticism, Scriptural references are added in footnotes. The problem is that footnotes are not an official part of the catechism proper.

Questions you might ask during a presbytery debate of the matter:

- Are retranslations or restorations designed to return all confessions to their original texts also planned? The Westminster Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms have been adapted and revised several times since their original writing. What motivates the desire to retranslate the Heidelberg when other confessions in the BOC are not the original texts?
- Why the concern over a return to the literal, original language of this particular confession and yet a departure from the original meaning of the texts of the Scriptures?
- If the intent is to conform to the original German in the most literal form, why has inclusive human language and inclusive God language been introduced to reflect modern preferences?

The answer to Q. 108 in the current BOC reads, “That all unchastity is condemned by God, and that we should therefore detest it from the heart and live chaste and disciplined lives either in holy wedlock or in single life.” The new translation reads, “That God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage.” The “holy state of marriage” is the issue of current debate within the culture and the church. So, the debate on the floor of your presbytery is about more than the original meaning of a German word. The problem lies in the reality that today the concepts of “chastity” and “marriage” have been radically defined.

Amending the *Book of Confessions* requires a 2/3 vote and so 116 of the 173 presbyteries must vote in the affirmative for amendment 12-1 to be ratified.

Amendment 12-B:

Qualifications for ordained officers

There are times when a GA feels the need to throw the evangelicals a bone. This is one of those times. Having “lost” in the prior voting cycle on Amendment 10A (which removed the “fidelity and chastity” requirement from the qualifications for ordained officers) and at an assembly where the clear majority favored LGBT causes, evangelicals pressed for some strengthening of the language in the new G-2.0104a.

The proposed amendment reads: Shall G-2.0104a of the *Book of Order* be amended as follows: [Text to be added is shown as *italic*.]

“a. To those called to exercise special functions in the church – deacons, ruling elders, and teaching elders – God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world. *This includes repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace.* They must have the approval of God’s people and the concurring judgment of a council of the church.”

The Advisory Committee on the Constitution weighed in heavily with a damning assessment of the proposal:

“The phrase ‘repentance of sin’ is reminiscent of the phrase ‘repent of any self-acknowledged practice the confessions call sin’ that was removed from the Book of Order by action of the assembly and presbyteries in 2010-2011. ... The insertion of the phrase ‘repentance of sin’ will not have the effect of restoring the recently removed prohibition.”

So, you can expect to hear arguments against this amendment in your presbytery as “a vestige of the failed legalistic tactics of exclusionists.”

Questions you might ask during a presbytery debate of the matter:

- The quote “we urge you to use diligently the means of grace to the end that you may be more obedient to our Lord Jesus Christ” comes directly from our *Book of Discipline*, D-12.0102. Would it not be helpful for all officers being ordained for the first time and those being installed on subsequent occasions to have some bridges like this between the currently bifurcated parts of the *Book of*

Order?

- What do we have against repentance of sin? Is that not a core concept to the Christian faith? And what do we have against the diligent use of the means of grace as we seek to serve as officers of Christ’s Church?
- The Scriptures and the confessions appeal consistently to the need for repentance from sin and our need to make diligent use of the means of grace. Would this amendment not strengthen our corporate witness to the moment-by-moment refinement in our lives by God’s Spirit at work within us?

Amendment 12-F: Concurrences required for future overtures

There is little doubt that this particular amendment is going to be rightly defeated by an overwhelming majority of presbyteries.

Virtually “everyone” on all sides is against it. If passed, all future business that a presbytery wanted to send to the GA would have to win the concurrence of at least one other presbytery.

The Committee to Review Biennial Assemblies’ original proposal was that overtures would need the concurrence of 10 percent of the presbyteries before GA consideration! It is not difficult to see how that would stifle the minority voice from ever being heard and how it would limit the potential business discussed at a GA.

The Biennial Review committee substantiated its position by arguing that “Overtures from presbyteries represent a significant source of assembly business. At the 219th GA (2010), 124 overtures were received from presbyteries; only 25 percent of these overtures had concurrences from other presbyteries.”

Recognizing that there would be push back, the committee continued, “The intent of this recommendation is not to control the business of the General Assembly; it is to help focus the business coming to any meeting of the General Assembly. Requiring the concurrence of at least 10 percent of presbyteries with any overture – and that commissioners’ resolutions require signatures from at least 10 percent of the presbyteries – will indicate that the significance of, and interest in, a particular issue have been tested across the church.”

That rationale did not find favor with the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy nor the General Assembly Committee on Representation. Their concerns are outlined in the Amendment booklet (www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/amendments_220_part2.pdf) produced by the Office of the General Assembly.

Churches that have left the PCUSA recently

For a complete list of churches, visit www.layman.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/churches-seeking-discernment-updated-3-21-2013.xls

| CHURCH | CITY, STATE | MEMBERS | PRESBYTERY | DETAILS | JOINED |
|--------------|---------------------|---------|-------------------|--|--------|
| Bethel | Cornelius, N.C. | 620 | Charlotte | At the 9/30/12 meeting, a total of 388 active members voted, with 369 (95 percent) voting in favor of a motion to seek dismissal from the PCUSA and join the ECO. Presbytery dismissed congregation to ECO. | ECO |
| Huntersville | Huntersville, N.C. | 656 | Charlotte | Presbytery dismissed congregation on 2/16/13. Under the terms agreed to, HPC will pay the presbytery \$21,600 for five years. That amount was reached by taking an average of the church's giving from 2007-2011. | ECO |
| Ridgecrest | Locust, N.C. | 28 | Charlotte | Presbytery voted to dismiss on 2/16/13. Initially, there was a plan to pay the presbytery \$10,000 over a five-year period, but that was reduced to \$5,000 over five years because of the congregation's small membership total. | EPC |
| Siler | Wesley Chapel, N.C. | 454 | Charlotte | A quorum of the congregation voted on 9/20/12 to seek dismissal, with 99 percent of those voting (348-3, with one abstention) in favor of leaving the denomination. The congregation presented a financial gift to the presbytery when it was dismissed in fall of 2012. | EPC |
| Guinston | Airville, Pa. | 55 | Donegal | In October 2012, congregation voted 84-0 to seek dismissal from the PCUSA. Presbytery dismissed congregation on 3/16/13. The church was required to pay \$9,390 to the presbytery. It also gave a \$1,000 gift to Columbia Presbyterian Church's summer feeding program as well as a \$1,000 donation to Camp Donegal in memory of Elder Donald Ruff. In addition, the church pledged support over the next five years to PCUSA missionaries Greg and Chris Callison (Iraq) and John and Gwen Haspels (Ethiopia), giving \$900 to both for each of the next five years to total \$9,000. | EPC |
| First | Florence, S.C. | 800 | New Harmony | Presbytery voted in early December 2012 to dismiss congregation effective 1/1/13. Under the dismissal terms, the church will pay a total of \$110,000 for shared mission support to the presbytery over the next two years and bring its per-capita contribution up to date – a payment of approximately \$25,000. | ECO |
| Sharon | Hartwell, Ga. | 32 | Northeast Georgia | Congregation dismissed by presbytery on 2/23/13. Presbytery meeting documents showed that the church agreed to pay \$3,500 to the presbytery in consideration of the trust clause in the dismissal policy. | ECO |
| First | Mora, Minn. | 94 | Northern Waters | Church was dismissed on 2/16/13 but not before paying out \$150,000 and meeting other terms established by an Administrative Commission (AC). | EPC |
| Mountain | Sunbury, Pa. | 86 | Northumberland | Congregation was dismissed on 1/19/13 by the presbytery. Dismissal terms included that MPC pay three years of per capita, totaling \$7,900, in advance of its departure | ECO |
| First | Sibley, Iowa | 420 | Prospect Hill | Congregation was dismissed 2/23/13. Under the terms of dismissal, the church will donate \$20,000 to the Presbyterian Camp Okoboji, which also includes a partial property assessment, and it will pay 2013 per capita in the amount of \$6,822.99 | ECO |
| Mebane | Mebane, N.C. | 195 | Salem | On 10/21/12, 84 percent of active voting membership voted in favor of dismissal. Presbytery dismissed congregation on 2/12/13. The church will retain the rights to all its property and pay \$21,000 to presbytery to fulfill terms of dismissal. | EPC |
| East Brook | New Castle, Pa. | 98 | Shenango | Congregation dismissed by presbytery on 2/26/13. East Brook agreed to pay a descending apportionment of per capita for three years that comes to about \$8,000-10,000 as well as pledging mission funds to the presbytery for at least the next three years. | ECO |
| Leesburg | Volant, Pa. | 186 | Shenango | Congregation dismissed during the 2/26/13 presbytery meeting with all its property and no financial requirement for departure. Leesburg paid the presbytery a little more than three years worth of per capita, a total that came to about \$15,000 and was a figure determined by the church | ECO |
| Stockton | Stockton, Ala. | 75 | South Alabama | Church was dismissed during a 2/23/13 presbytery meeting and admitted to the EPC on 2/26/13. Under terms of dismissal, Stockton has to continue to be a viable congregation in the Reformed tradition and was required to pay off the remaining debt on a loan from the presbytery that was used to remodel a manse – approximately \$24,000. | EPC |

Congregation still worshipping

continued from page 1

Hattiesburg Feb. 10. The Westminster sanctuary that had stood for more than five decades was battered and beaten by the powerful EF3 tornado packing winds of 145 mph that ripped through the south-central Mississippi town around 5:20 p.m. (CST).

Left along the tornado's path were downed trees, power lines, smashed cars, and heavily damaged homes and buildings. The twister caused damage that probably will reach into millions of dollars for the church, ripping the roof off the sanctuary, blowing out windows and leaving gaping holes in the walls of the structure. Three other buildings on the grounds – including one that housed the offices of the Mississippi Presbytery – also were destroyed by the storm.

Ramp said there was good news regarding the damage to the Westminster property. Two different structural engineers examined the sanctuary and adjoining structures, and both determined that the structural integrity had not been compromised. Therefore, repairs rather than reconstruction are in order.

"We were told the structure had been deemed repairable," Ramp said, noting that the foundations, sanctuary and first floor of the facility were in pretty good shape. "It will be a massive remodeling project, but it can be repaired."

Ramp said the steel rafters were twisted and tangled, the woodwork was ripped apart, all the windows were blown out, and the roof was blown off the structure. All of that will have to be addressed, in addition to any other repairs.

Three buildings adjacent to the sanctuary were destroyed, and the church already has received payment in the amount of \$400,000 for them from the insurance company. However, adjusters still are crunching the numbers for the sanctuary and adjoining wings of the church to determine the damage. Though no dollar amount has been given yet, Ramp anticipates the damage assessment will be substantial in light of the damage caused by the tornado.

He said a meeting has been held with church members to apprise them of the situation and what will take place.

"We've told them we are going to make the repairs and be stronger than ever," Ramp said. "We're hoping that within a month we'll be ready to start repairs. It would be awesome if we could do that, but we don't know. We're probably looking at a year, maybe more, before we can move back in. That's still an unknown right now."

"It's been really heartwarming to see all support we've been given," Ramp said. "We've gotten so much response from churches here and across the country. The EPC, PCA, PCUSA, Methodists, Baptists – it's just been outstanding to see so many help with their contributions and work at the church."

Ramp said he attended a Rotary meeting not long ago and was handed a check for \$1,000 to assist with the repairs. A church in Tuscaloosa, Ala., suffered a similar situation at Easter two



Photo By Ryan Moore, Hattiesburg American
Westminster sustained heavy damage as a tornado ripped through the area Feb. 10.

years ago. Because of that common experience, the Tuscaloosa congregation sent \$5,000 to aid the relief effort.

"It really does say that denominational lines and issues that exist mean very little when things like this happen," Ramp said. "When it comes right down to it we see people in great need and our hearts go out to them, very generously and very willingly. We're all in this together, and that's how it should be. The world is watching, and this makes a strong statement for the very Body of Christ to operate in a unified way. It's very encouraging to see that."

To contribute to the church's relief fund, make checks payable to Westminster Presbyterian Church Relief Fund and send them to Bancorp-South, Attn. Debbie Hudson, 124 Hardy St., Hattiesburg, MS 39401.

NEXT: Say 'Yes' to the unexpected plans of God

continued from page 1

free screening of *Love Free or Die: How the Bishop of New Hampshire is changing the world*, a documentary on Gene Robinson, a former priest who after leaving his wife and two children to live with his homosexual partner, was consecrated as a bishop in the Episcopal Church USA.

Jessica Tate, director of NEXT Church, was the preacher at the opening worship service held March 4. Her sermon included texts from Luke – the story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

"The story is so familiar," said Tate. "Anyone who stops and thinks about it will tell you it is unbelievable. ... How did we get to this strange and awe-filled moment? Someone had to say yes to the unexpected plans of God."

Tate continued, "I wonder how she did it – how

Mary found it within herself to agree to become the mother of God?"

Mary had a lot to lose, Tate said. She did not know the end of the story, but "somehow Mary found the gritty faith to enter the uncertainty ... to allow for the unexpectedness of God and to allow salvation to be born."

Tate said that "we know the end of the story and how it will change the world. It teaches us how to inhabit this space of radical availability to God, and in that space, salvation is more than an idea, it becomes an experience. It becomes God with us."

She spoke of how churches prepare for worship services, but she wondered if, "we prepare God right out of our plan and our lives. If we set out to do just what we can control."

"Where is the space for God to show up and

surprise us? Where is the space for the good news of salvation?" she asked.

Tate said that controlling behavior is a symptom of fear, and she listed several fears in the world today, including financial, gun violence, cancer battles and dementia.

Trying to control fear, Tate said "we hoard, we calculate where we can risk without exposing our underbellies. ... Maybe that is why angels always start by saying, 'Do not be afraid,' because we are perpetually afraid."

The unknown also binds people, said Tate. "We can pull off a potluck lunch after service ... but inviting people to worship, reaching out, changing our way of being church so that we go out to be an exhibition of the Kingdom to the world, we don't know how to do that, and we close ourselves off."

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The screenshot displays the redesigned Layman Online website. At the top, a navigation bar includes links for Home, About the PLC, Content, Layman Print Edition, Bookstore, Donation, and RSS. The main header features the site's logo, "The Layman online", the date "Wednesday, April 3rd, 2013", and a "FAQs" link. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with links: READ, GIVE, DISCERN, DISCUSS, CONTACT, EQUIP, WATCH, PRAY, BELIEVE, and SUBSCRIBE. The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, a large image of a dog holding a newspaper is accompanied by the text "Read The Layman (print edition)". Below this is a section titled "PRESBYTERIAN NEWS AND ANALYSIS" featuring a list of articles with thumbnail images and titles such as "Fremont Presbyterian's schism divides congregation, but they still share sacred spaces" and "Lutherans, Presbyterian congregations find new life as one". On the right side, there is a search bar, a "DONATE TO THE PLC" button, and a social media feed showing posts from other users, including one about "Siber leaves PCUSA for EPC".

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