

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Preparing with hope

Equipping for effective witness at the 220th General Assembly of the PCUSA

The 220th General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) will meet in Pittsburgh, Pa., June 30-July 7.

Some of the plans are set by the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) and the GA moderator, but like the rivers that converge in downtown Pittsburgh to form the mighty Ohio, the business for the assembly arrives down several streams collected over time. By the time the assembly convenes, the business will include:

- Overtures (OVT), most of which originate in the session of a local church, are sent to GA after receiving a majority vote in the presbytery where that church is located. Overtures seeking to amend the constitution by changing the *Book of Order* or *Book of Confessions* were due at the OGA no less than 120 days prior to the assembly. Overtures that do not seek constitutional amendment but have financial implications, like the formation of a task force, committee or commission, must meet a 60-day deadline. All other overtures must be received by the OGA no less than 45 days prior to the assembly.
- Responses to referrals from prior assemblies, GA standing committees, GA special committees and task forces, and from the six agencies of the GA comprise the bulk of the work. All reports were due 120 days prior to the assembly.
- Commissioners to the GA can also raise business in the form of a Commissioner's Resolution (CR). That business is not known until the assembly begins. However, the restrictions on the form and content of CRs is limited by the rules of the assembly.

The process for all the business and the management of the flow is overseen by the OGA. All business items will be divvied up among an anticipated 20 committees who will in turn make recommendations to the assembly as a whole. The final action taken by the assembly is not on the original business, but on the recommendations of the assembly committee to whom the business was referred.

You can find the entire assembly schedule and business at www.pc-biz.org. You can follow our reporting at www.layman.org where we will post breaking news, analysis and commentary as the assembly unfolds.

This study will examine a few of the major streams of business

1. Marriage, ordination standards, Board of Pensions extension



of benefits to same-sex partners of church employees,

2. Engagement with private sector corporations including divestment proposals,
3. Various restructuring proposals.

The assembly will also elect a moderator and stated clerk. It appears that the current Stated Clerk, the Rev. Gradye Parsons, will run unopposed. However, the race for moderator boasts a dynamic field.

The election of moderator takes place on the opening night of GA and can be a significant indicator of the theological leanings of the commissioners. Four teaching elders have been endorsed by their presbyteries to stand for the office of moderator of the GA:

- Robert Austell from Charlotte Presbytery;
- Randy Branson from Palo Duro Presbytery;
- Neal Presa from Elizabeth Presbytery;
- Susan Krummel executive presbyter from Great Rivers Presbytery, headquartered in Peoria, Ill., notably, also the home of Caterpillar, Inc. That is relevant as the GA receives the recommendation of the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) via its Mission Responsibility through Investing committee (MRTI) to divest from Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett-Packard stocks.
- A fifth teaching elder, who failed to receive the endorsement of her presbytery, has self-nominated. Her name is Janet Edwards and she is a self-identified bisexual from Pittsburgh Presbytery and a nationally known advocate for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) movement. As the co-chair of the More Light Presbyterians (MLP), Edwards has been sending documents to clerks of session in congregations around the country since the passage of Amendment 10A in July. The document seeks to influence the nomination, examination and ordination processes in every local PCUSA church.

The theme of the assembly is "Walking, Running, Soaring in Hope" based on Isaiah 40:31 which says:

"But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint." (NIV)

Let us then faithfully prepare with hope to walk by faith and run with perseverance toward and through the 220th GA.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Marriage, ordination and the Board of Pensions: A confluence of concerns

How the Presbyterian Church (USA) defines marriage, explicitly in the constitution and functionally in its life, will be a significant battleground at the 2012 General Assembly. The 2010 GA did not approve an overture that sought to redefine marriage, instead it called the denomination to a two year study. That same GA, however, sent Amendment 10A to the presbyteries which in turn voted to strip the *Book of Order* of the explicit standards of “fidelity and chastity” for ordained officers. Since July 2011, PCUSA churches have been ordaining and installing ruling elders and deacons and presbyteries have been ordaining and installing teaching elders who are single, but not celibate. Many are in partnered same-sex relationships. Changing the definition of marriage in the PCUSA *Book of Order* to allow for same-sex couples is addressed by at least 13 of the overtures before the assembly (Ovt. 009, 010, 016, 020, 028, 040, 048, 055, 056, 065, 066, 071, 072). Some support the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman; many seek to change the language to “two people” or ask the GA to issue an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) allowing pastors the discretion to perform same-sex weddings in states where civil authority allows it.

The PCUSA’s constitution includes both the *Book of Order* and the *Book of Confessions*. Since the overtures seek to change the *Book of Order* and not the *Book of Confessions*, a conflict is being set up in the constitution, for the *Book of Confessions* clearly state that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Some sessions and presbyteries have responded to the passage of Amendment 10A by passing resolutions and policies that preserve the “fidelity and chastity” standard for their judicatory. Whether or not those policies will be allowed to stand will be a matter of debate for the assembly.

The 2010 GA “urged” the Board of Pensions to amend the benefits plan to accommodate those living in same-sex domestic partnerships. The board could have simply acknowledged that to do so would be to functionally redefine marriage for the denomination. The board could have pointed to the PCUSA’s own confessions and to the explicit definition of marriage in the *Book of Order* and said, “no.” Instead, the plan has been amended and expanded benefits will begin to be paid on January 1, 2013. Due to the community-based nature of the plan, every church and every other employing organization that pays dues to the Board of Pensions will be paying for benefits that some in the church consider contrary to the revealed will of God. As no accompanying relief of conscience is being provided by the board, the assembly is being asked to create a way for those with theological oppositions to plan provisions for the freedom to opt out.

In addition to the strong cultural trends influencing this matter, the recent ruling of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) in the Jane Spahr case will likely be used to influence commissioners. Spahr is a retired PCUSA minister who performed dozens of same-sex weddings disallowed by the constitution and in unquestioned defiance of earlier rulings by the GAPJC. Spahr was technically “rebuked,” but no actual discipline was applied. The GAPJC’s ruling includes consenting and dissenting opinions that lay the groundwork for action by this GA to redefine marriage or at least create liberty in pastoral discretion

to perform gay marriages.

Study materials related to all these issues have been developed by the Presbyterian Lay Committee and our renewal partners. A compilation of materials is easily accessed on The Presbyterian Coalition’s website at www.presbycoalition.org.

These three concerns (marriage, ordination and benefits coverage) are inter-related. The decision on any one, will affect the others. Functionally, marriage has been redefined. This GA may act to align the *Book of Order* with the practice in place, but it cannot undo what the Board of Pensions has done nor is it likely to reverse course on ordination.

Questions for reflection and conversation:

1. As a Christian, who is the Lord of the body?
2. As a Christian, who is the Lord of our relationships?
3. What does the Bible say about God’s desire for human sexual relationships?
4. What do the confessions say about marriage and the ordering of human life?
5. How will you respond to the action by the Board of Pensions of the PCUSA?
6. How will you engage the commissioners of the 220th GA on issues that are of concern to you?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Getting into the business of other peoples' business: Private sector corporations

Several private sector corporations find themselves at odds with denominational entities and advocacy groups.

Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett-Packard

The General Assembly Mission Council is asking that all PCUSA related entities divest of financial holdings in Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett-Packard. (*see article, page 14*) This item of business comes from the Mission Responsibility Through Investment committee (MRTI). It will be met in Pittsburgh with overtures that oppose divestment and others that not only affirm divestment from these companies, but seek to expand the list. At issue is the question of how products produced by these companies are ultimately used by the nation of Israel in relationship to Palestinian people. Other issues related to Israel/Palestine are also on the assembly's docket including Overtures 24 and 25.

Cigna, Aetna, Humana, WellPoint and UnitedHealthcare

The presbytery where the denomination's headquarters is located, Mid-Kentucky, has overtured the assembly to ask MRTI to initiate the protocol that can lead to divestment of five of the nation's largest healthcare providers. The allegation is made that the practices of these companies do not accord with the denomination's advocacy for universal and equal access to healthcare regardless of a person's ability to pay. The call is not only to consider divesting of financial holdings in these companies but also to encourage individual Presbyterians to not do business with them. It is notable that parts of the PCUSA Medical Plan which is administered by the Board of Pensions, is contractually obligated to some of these companies although Blue Cross/Blue Shield, the denomination's primary coverage provider is not on the list of companies to be scrutinized.

Corrections Corporation of America

The 219th GA responded to a call of concern for convicted criminals incarcerated in the United States. That led to the hiring of a General Assembly staff person to advocate for the Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA) and the formation of another denominational advocacy group called the Presbyterian Criminal Justice Network (PCJN). Although corporate engagement is ordinarily the purview of MRTI, the PCJN took it upon itself to take unilateral action in calling on the governors in 48 states to reject a particular U.S. private-prison corporation. The Corrections Corporation of America (www.cca.com) has been in the cross-hairs of the PCUSA for nearly a decade. CCA finds itself under judgment by a self-appointed denominational network for engaging in a business that the PCJN considers "morally wrong from a faith perspective." The GA will have the opportunity to hold PHEWA accountable through the regular reporting of GA agencies and related entities, but it may take a Commissioner's Resolution to keep the PCJN from continuing down its current vigilante path.

The economy

Overtures 50, 51, 54 and 58 all deal with economic issues and the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) is

due to submit a report with recommendations to the GA that is expected to take aim at financial and banking institutions. It is expected that report will also lend further denominational support to the occupy movement in which the PCUSA's Washington Office of Public Witness has participated.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Have you read the Social Witness Compilation and the Social Creed approved by the PCUSA? (Both can be found at <http://gamc.pcusa.org/ministries/acswp>)
2. Do you know what the social witness policies of the denomination actually say?
3. Have you examined them in light of the Biblical and doctrinal teachings of the Church? What are the arguments you would use to support your position?
4. How will you engage the commissioners to the 220th GA on the issues that matter to you in this area?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Restructuring proposals

Overtures 26, 33, 34, 35, 41, 43, 44, 47, 60, 69, 73, 74, 75, and 82 are proposed constitutional amendments that seek to adjust the PCUSA's current structures. Presbytery overlay and non-geographic presbytery proposals, flexible governance, the reorganization of synods and other models are included. Some of the overtures complement and supplement the work of the Mid Council Commission formed by action of the 219th GA. (*see article, page 2*) Some of the overtures seek to amend the PCUSA constitution to make provision for the plans of The Fellowship of Presbyterians and allowances for congregations seeking to leave the PCUSA and align with other Reformed bodies.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. What is the relationship between your local church and the presbytery?
2. How would your presbytery be impacted by the implementation of the MCC's recommendations?
3. What synod are you in and what are the functions your synod provides beyond that which would be preserved by the model proposed by the MCC?
4. What churches in your presbytery are considering dismissal from the PCUSA?
5. Does your presbytery have a gracious dismissal policy and how gracious is it?
6. How can you be a friend to our colleagues in ministry in the midst of the transitions taking place in the PCUSA?

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler LaBerge is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. 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. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

and lots more...

With more than 80 overtures and dozens of reports with recommendations from GA agencies, standing committees, special committees and task forces, space does not permit a thorough preview here. News, analysis and commentary is posted each week day at The Layman Online, www.layman.org, and all of those articles cannot be re-printed in the paper itself. With 100,000 print subscribers we know that some of you are missing the stories we post online and we invite you to consider enrolling in our weekly e-mail service which gives you a digest of the week's news. There you can read about the proposed radical restructuring of PCUSA synods; overtures that seek to provide conservatives with relief of conscience on everything from participation in the BOP to ordination standards to the property trust clause; and proposed per capita increases year over year as the denomination's membership continues to decline but expenses continue to rise at that national level.

What can you do?

1. Pray for the General Assembly commissioners, for the binding of the enemy, for genuine revival and a return to faithfulness to the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures and enfolded in the person and work of Jesus.
2. Communicate with the commissioners who have been elected to the GA from your presbytery and beyond. Ask your pastor and the members of your session how your church is engaged in the work of the assembly and how they plan to respond to the assembly's actions. Remain informed by checking The Layman Online throughout the assembly for updates and information.
3. Participate with us in standing firm. If you are in a position to support the Presbyterian Lay Committee's efforts financially, please do so. If you're going to be in Pittsburgh for the General Assembly, visit our booth or join our coverage team by sending reports of what you see and hear at GA to laymanletters@layman.org.