

What Happened With the Assembly

The 219th General Assembly of the PC(USA) concluded the first week of July this year. Actually, it wasn't the 219th assembly because the PC(USA) only came into being in 1983 when the UPCUSA (United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America – also known as the “northern” church) and the PCUS (Presbyterian Church in the United States – also known as the “southern” church) reunited after a split that happened during the Civil War. But now a days, appearance is more important that substance or truth; and so it was with this year's GA.

It started with the election of the most liberal candidate for Moderator winning out of a field of 6 candidates. Elder Cynthia Bolbach made it clear that she fully supports the ordination of gay elders and clergy and same sex marriage. Bolbach is a lawyer and was co-moderator of the committee that presented the nFOG (new Form of Government) which later passed.

Quoting from the official PC(USA) website:

Only Bolbach expressed unqualified support for same-sex marriage. “Who poses the greatest threat – Larry King, who's been married seven times, or a gay couple [friends of hers] in Washington, D.C., who have been together for 62 years and who got married two weeks ago?” Same-sex marriage is legal in the District of Columbia and five states.

Bolbach, who is a lawyer and legal publishing company executive in Washington, acknowledged, “I don't think our denomination is ready for [changing the definition of marriage], but what do pastors do in jurisdictions where same-sex marriage is legal?”

Following that logic, pastors who live in states where prostitution is legal should have a whole new lifestyle choice open to them.

The Assembly itself was fairly predictable. Once again they voted to remove the ordination standard for sexual conduct and recommended replacing it with a vague statement that offers no standard of any kind. Again, quoting the official PC(USA) website:

What did the Assembly do? What has changed?

The 219th General Assembly (2010) proposed a change to the PC(USA) Constitution regarding ordination standards by a vote of 373 - 323 - 4. This action does not change the Constitution. It is a first step in the process. A majority of the 173 presbyteries would have to vote in the affirmative to approve the replacement by July 2011.

What does it mean?

G - 6.0106b is a provision in the PC(USA) Book of Order (Constitution) that provides the following standards for persons ordained as church leaders (deacon, elder or minister). The current version reads:

“Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W - 4.9001), or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self - acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.”

The 219th General Assembly (2010) recommends deleting the above provision and replacing it with the following language:

“Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G - 1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G - 14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W - 4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.”

This will now again go to the Presbyteries for vote. The reason the current standard is in the constitution is because more than 15 years ago, the Permanent Judicial Commission of General Assembly (the highest judicial court in the denomination) ruled that unless the constitution explicitly stated a standard for ordination, the criteria for ordination would be interpreted by each ordaining authority. The General Assembly in 2008 disagreed and by approving the PUP report (Peace, Unity, and Purity report) said that if a person had a “scruple” about some requirement, it was up to the ordaining authority to decide – also known as “local option.” The disagreement between the GAPJC and the 2008 Assembly is still unresolved. The change recommended by this year’s Assembly removes any specific standard, thus leaving it up to anyone’s interpretation.

As mentioned in the quote from Bolbach, the Assembly did not vote to approve the report to redefine marriage. However, it did officially “receive” the report and has recommended it to the denomination over the next two years to “study.” Clearly, they understood that redefining marriage would have been so obviously unbiblical and make it clear that being biblical doesn’t matter to them, that it would split the denomination. Better to let this one “simmer” for a couple more years.

What they did do clearly was to vote overwhelmingly to request of the Board of Pensions (a separate corporation from the denomination) to extend spousal benefits to same-sex couples working for the church. The Board of Pensions estimates that this cost increase would require raising pension (really medical/pension) dues for the entire denomination by 1%. The Board of Pensions has yet to act on this recommendation, however representatives of the Board at General Assembly indicated numerous times that the Board was willing if the Assembly requested it.

The nFOG (new Form of Government) also passed and will be voted on by Presbyteries in the coming year. The change is so sweeping, and the language so vague (consider the change in ordination standards) that it is hard to say what might come of it, other than to note the irony of the name of the committee – FOG.

Membership is down denomination wide. Giving is down denomination wide. General Assembly's budget is down and more layoffs will be occurring, and yet once again the Assembly delegates and the GA leadership "celebrated" the wonderful spirit of how respectfully they all disagreed with one another. No bad news can dampen the spirit of those happy to be in the fog. A wonderful operation doctor – too bad the patient died.

Overall, nothing new to report. The denomination is still headed merrily down the road that leads away from Scripture and its Author. As a result, Windwood will continue to withhold to escrow, any and all giving to higher courts.

Yours in Christ,

Kevin