

REPORT ON THE ACTIONS OF THE 221st GENERAL ASSEMBLY

To: The Pastors and Congregations of Northumberland Presbytery

From: William Knudsen, Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk

Subject: Pastoral Letter Reporting on the Actions of the 221st General Assembly

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This pastoral letter is to share information that we hope will help you interpret the actions of the 221st General Assembly to your congregations. I have included resources, thoughts from various Presbyterian related groups and pastoral letters. The actions of this last General Assembly have set our denomination on a new course. For some of you these actions have been long awaited and are very much welcomed. For others these actions are devastating. You are all in my prayers as we try to help interpret these actions to our congregations and as we discern God's will as we vote on the proposed changes to our constitution.

Issues addressed in this Pastoral Letter:

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On behalf of our Presbytery family, I want to thank our commissioners from Northumberland Presbytery for representing our congregations and pastors during this General Assembly. Our Teaching Elder Commissioner was Rev. Glen Hallead the pastor of Wellsboro First Presbyterian Church. Our Ruling Elder Commissioner was Elder Debbie Button the pastor of Tioga United Trinity Presbyterian Church. If you have any specific questions about the process or decisions of the assembly they would be more than happy to talk with you about their experience. They will be making a report our September meeting of Presbytery. We plan on voting on the amendments at our January 2015 meeting of Presbytery at Watsontown Presbyterian Church. Just a quick reminder of Presbyterian polity... the General Assembly is a gathering, which takes place every other year, and it is composed of an equal number of Teaching Elders (ministers) and Ruling Elders representing the 172 presbyteries in our denomination. This year there were about 650 voting commissioners at the meeting.

While the Assembly does have the authority to address a variety of different subjects, it is also a tenet of Presbyterian polity that the General Assembly cannot bind the conscience of an individual. In other words, you can be a good Presbyterian and agree or disagree with the actions of a General Assembly!

Pastoral Letter on Marriage from the Moderator, Stated Clerk, and Executive Director

June 19, 2014

To congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Earlier today, the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a recommendation from its Assembly Committee on Civil Union and Marriage Issues allowing for pastoral discretion to perform "any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform," where legal by state law.

They also approved a recommendation to change language in the Book of Order to indicate that "marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman."

Both decisions came with much thought, discussion, and prayer, and clearly the entire body that is the PC(USA) will be interpreting these actions for some time.

Please know that the same triune God in whom we place our hope, faith, and trust in is still in control, and that the assembly's action today is the result of deep discernment to hear God's voice and discern God's will.

We concur with the feelings expressed by Teaching Elder Commissioner Jeffrey Bridgeman, moderator of the Assembly Committee on Civil Union and Marriage Issues, during his presentation to the assembly.

"The apostle Paul tells us that ours is, in fact, 'the ministry of reconciliation' as 'ambassadors of Christ,' and he died for us so that we might be reconciled, that we might become reconcilers," Bridgeman said.

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In this season of both happiness and sadness over the assembly's decisions, we call on you to remember the overflowing grace and love God gifts us with, and to take seriously our charge to bestow the same grace and love on one another.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,

Ruling Elder Heath K. Rada
Moderator, 221st General Assembly (2014)

The Reverend Gradye Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly

Ruling Elder Linda Bryant Valentine
Executive Director, Presbyterian Mission Agency

Marriage and Civil Unions

Authoritative Interpretation (AI)

What is the actual language of the authoritative interpretation?

"Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God (W-6.3001, W-6.3010) in which a teaching elder's discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. The necessity of ensuring the exercise of freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) in the planning and leadership of worship has deep roots in our Reformed tradition and theology. Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders* have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married (W-4.9002), and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.

"Exercising such discretion and freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage service for any such couple in the place where the community gathers for worship, so long as it is approved by the session; or in such other place as may be suitable for a service of Christian worship. In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The authoritative interpretation of this section by the 203rd General Assembly (1991) (Minutes, 1991, Part I, p. 395, paragraphs 21.124-.128), and the subsequent authoritative

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interpretations of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission relying upon it, are withdrawn and replaced with this authoritative interpretation."

*"As in other places in the Directory for Worship, the use of 'teaching elders' in this paragraph should be understood to include ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service."

What is the actual language of the proposed amendment?

Amend W-4.9000 by striking the current text and replacing it with the following:

"Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people (traditionally a man and a woman) to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.

"In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges.

"If they meet the requirements of the civil jurisdiction in which they intend to marry, a couple may request that a service of Christian marriage be conducted by a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who is authorized, though not required, to act as an agent of the civil jurisdiction in recording the marriage contract. A couple requesting a service of Christian marriage shall receive instruction from the teaching elder, who may agree to the couple's request only if, in the judgment of the teaching elder, the couple demonstrate sufficient understanding of the nature of the marriage covenant and commitment to living their lives together according to its values. In making this decision, the teaching elder may seek the counsel of the session, which has authority to permit or deny the use of church property for a marriage service.

"The marriage service shall be conducted in a manner appropriate to this covenant and to the forms of Reformed worship, under the direction of the teaching elder and the supervision of the session (W- 1.4004-.4006). In a service of marriage, the couple marry each other by exchanging mutual promises. The teaching elder witnesses the couple's promises and pronounces God's blessing upon their union. The community of faith pledges to support the couple in upholding their promises; prayers may be offered for the couple, for the communities that support them, and for all who seek to live in faithfulness.

"A service of worship recognizing a civil marriage and confirming it in the community of faith may be appropriate when requested by the couple. The service will be similar to the

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marriage service except that the statements made shall reflect the fact that the couple is already married to one another according to the laws of the civil jurisdiction.

"Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder's or the session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God."

FAQs on Same-Gender Marriage

(Detroit-June 19, 2014)-The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today approved a measure giving pastors the discretion to perform same-gender marriages in states where it is legal. It offers the same discretion for churches with regard to the use of church property. The measure takes effect upon the conclusion of the General Assembly on Saturday, June 21, 2014. A proposed amendment to change the Constitution to include same-gender marriages in the church's Constitution passed the General Assembly but must be ratified by a majority of the church's 172 regional presbyteries. Presbyteries have one year to vote on the proposed amendment. If a majority ratifies the amendment, it would take effect June 21, 2015.

1. *Are congregations and/or pastors required to participate in/host such weddings?* "In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit." No pastor is compelled to perform a service of marriage nor a session compelled to use church property for a service of marriage.
2. *Can a pastor in a state where it is not permitted perform a wedding in a state where it is?* The teaching elder has freedom of conscience. Beyond that, it would depend on whether the teaching elder is authorized under civil law to perform a wedding in the state where the wedding is to take place.
3. *Will sessions have the authority to permit (or not) same-gender marriage services in the church?* Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of sessions in the way church property is used.
4. *If a pastor is willing to preside at the marriage of a same-gender couple, can the session prohibit the pastor from doing so?* No. The session cannot compel the pastor nor can the pastor compel the session. The pastor has the freedom of his or her own conscience and the session has the responsibility for providing for worship and making decisions about the use of church property.
5. *Can the session make a categorical prohibition of same-gender weddings in its building?* Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of the session with regard to the use of the church building.
6. *What process did the General Assembly use to make this happen?* The General Assembly made an authoritative interpretation of the Constitution and proposed an amendment to the Constitution.

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7. *What is an authoritative interpretation (AI)?* An AI is an interpretation of the Constitution by the General Assembly or the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. It is binding on all councils.
8. *What is permitted according to the AI at the adjournment of the assembly?* Pastors may conduct a marriage service for same-gender couples and may do so where the community gathers for worship with the permission of the session. "In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit."
9. *What is an amendment to the Constitution?* An amendment to the Constitution is determined by the General Assembly, but must be confirmed by a majority of the presbyteries. All councils are under the authority of the Constitution.
10. *What if the presbyteries refuse to vote on the amendment?* A majority of the presbyteries must vote for the amendment in order for it to become part of the Constitution. A non-vote has the effect of a "no" vote.
11. *If the presbyteries do not approve changes to the Constitution, what is the effect on the authoritative interpretation ("AI")?* The AI remains in place until it is superseded by another.
12. *What is the timeline?* The same-gender marriage measure (the AI) takes effect upon the conclusion of the General Assembly on Saturday, June 21, 2014. The proposed amendment must be ratified by a majority of the church's 172 presbyteries, which have one year to vote. If ratified, the amendment would take effect on June 21, 2015. *What shall we tell the media?* Please see the official press release, or refer calls to PC(USA) offices.

Divestment

The information included in this section is an effort to help our congregations understand how the Divestment decision was reached at GA this year. This is background information and the exact wording of the decision that was reached. We continue to move forward with a sensitivity to our Presbyterian Jewish relationships and with a commitment to reconciliation and understanding.

Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI)

[Click here to view the MRTI report.](#)

GA Text Approving Divestment

The PC(USA) has a long standing commitment to peace in Israel and Palestine. We recognize the complexity of the issues, the decades-long struggle, the pain suffered and inflicted by policies and practices of both the Israeli government and Palestinian entities. We further acknowledge and confess our own complicity in both the historic and current suffering of Israeli and Palestinian. Yearning for justice and reconciliation, the 221st General Assembly (2014) recommends the following:

1. Reaffirm Israel's right to exist as a sovereign nation within secure and internationally recognized borders in accordance with the United Nations resolutions.
2. Declare its commitment to a negotiated two-state solution (two states for two peoples) in which a secure and universally recognized State of Israel lives alongside a free, viable, and secure state for the Palestinian people.
3. Instruct the Presbyterian Foundation and the Board of Pensions of the PC(U.S.A.), to divest from Caterpillar, Inc., Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions, in accord with our church's decades-long socially responsible investment (SRI) history, and not to reinvest in these companies until the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee of the PC(USA) is fully satisfied that product sales and services by these companies are no longer in conflict with our church investment policy. This action on divestment is not to be construed or represented by any organization of the PC(USA) as divestment from the State of Israel, or an alignment with or endorsement of the global BDS (Boycott, Divest and Sanctions) movement.
4. Reaffirm PC(USA)'s commitment to interfaith dialog and partnerships with the American Jewish, Muslim friends and Palestinian Christians and call for all presbyteries and congregations within the PC(USA) to include interfaith dialogue and relationship-building as part of their own engagement in working for a just peace.

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5. Call for all foreign aid given by the U.S. government—including aid to Israel and the Palestinian Authority—to be comprehensively and transparently accounted to the American people and held to the same standards of compliance with all applicable laws.
6. Call for church advocacy for foreign-aid accountability to be directed toward its universal adherence rather than targeted for selective application to some recipients and not others.
7. Encourage Presbyterians to travel to the Holy Land, and give broad support to the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities throughout the Middle East.
8. Affirm the importance of economic measures and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians that support and advance a negotiated two-state solution. Urge all church institutions to give careful consideration to possible investments in Israel-Palestine that advance peace and improve the lives of Palestinians and Israelis.

Positive Investment Overview Presbyterian Foundation



[Click to watch the video.](#)

FAQ on Divestment Talking Points-Short Version

The 221st General Assembly (2014) voted by a narrow margin to divest from three U.S. companies- Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola Solutions-whose products are used to further the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The assembly's vote was 310-303.

- These non-peaceful activities are inconsistent with the church's socially responsible investment policy.
 - Caterpillar provides bulldozers used in the destruction of Palestinian homes and for clearing land of fruit and olive tree groves.
 - Hewlett Packard provides electronic systems at checkpoints, logistics and communications systems to support the naval blockade of the Gaza Strip, as well as business relationships with illegal settlements in the West Bank.
 - Motorola Solutions provides military communications and surveillance systems in illegal Israeli settlements.
- The church's committee on socially responsible investing has been engaged with these companies for more than a decade urging change in these corporate activities with no results.
- This action is not divestment from Israel; the church has other significant investments in Israel.
- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is explicit in:
 - Affirming the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign nation within secure and internationally recognized borders.
 - Advocating for the right of Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace, free from threats or acts of force.
 - Declaring that this action does not indicate alignment with the overall global Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement.
- Regarding Zionism Unsettled, the assembly declared that the publication does not represent the views of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).
- In the past year, the church has made positive investments in economic development in Palestine.
- The measure also reaffirms the PC(USA)'s commitment to interfaith dialogue and partnerships with the American Jewish and Muslim friends, and with Palestinian Christians.

[Click here](#) to view the full FAQs on the Middle East and Divestment.

A Letter from the Outreach Foundation

Dear friends in Christ,

During this week when some of you are discouraged about the PC(USA), I want to remind you that God continues to use Presbyterians to turn the world upside down.

In the last 55 years the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, our Presbyterian partner which also includes Lutheran synods, has grown from 50,000 believers to 6.4 million believers. They continue to reach out to share the Gospel with their neighbors, and now the EECMY is sending missionaries to other countries.

In 1852, American missionary Rev. Royal Wilder began sharing the Gospel at Kolhapur, India, a city in the southern part of Maharashtra State in western India. The first baptism took place in 1857. Wilder was a Presbyterian, and his work became part of the American Presbyterian Mission in 1870. Now independent, in the past 15 years the Kolhapur Christian Council has grown from 43 churches to 66 churches and 140 house fellowships. Today, they believe that God has called them to plant a church in each of the 1300 villages of the Kolhapur District by the year 2020! This Sunday, in the face of extraordinary pressure and new violence, the Presbyterian congregations in Basrah, Baghdad and Kirkuk, Iraq will gather for worship. They are bearing faithful, winsome witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Through their relationships with friends, radio ministries, and children's ministries that bless the children of Muslim neighbors, these Presbyterians are sharing and showing the love of Jesus.

There are more Presbyterians in Ghana today than in Scotland, more in Kenya than in the United States, more in the East Indian state of Mizoram than in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas and California combined. And these brothers and sisters are disclosing God's glory and grace in ways that are changing lives and transforming communities. God is at work in amazing ways through Presbyterians near and far who know that the only thing to do with good news is to share it and that the Gospel is the best news of all. Know that you and your congregations are in my prayers.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. (2 Thes 2.16-17)

Rob Weingartner
Executive Director of the Outreach Foundation