



Key Issues

Coming to the 219th General Assembly *by presbyterians for renewal*

*Sign up to receive
PFR's daily updates
from General Assembly
at www.pfrenewal.org

July 2, 2010

Theoretically, General Assemblies should be the can't-wait highlight of the denominational calendar; Jesus' followers from across the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) coming together to celebrate what God is doing in and through this part of the Body of Christ. How thrilling it should be for mission workers and those who are in ministries of compassion and justice, seminary professors and the "doctors of the Church," young believers, students, elders, and pastors to all bring news of the growth of the Kingdom and the flourishing of the Gospel in their locale and prayerfully discern God's plan leading for the future. What a great week of celebration and joy!

But barring direct and powerful Divine intervention, the 219th General Assembly will be, yet again, a time of disagreement and frustration for people at any given point on the theological spectrum of the PC(USA). Theological liberals will not see enough change, theological conservatives will not find enough orthodoxy. Too much business will be crammed into too little time without room for deep consideration and even less time for prayer. "Lobbyists" and special interest groups will be working every side of every agenda. The pressure will be felt by everyone. Because this is our current reality, our joy must come from beyond the committee meetings and plenary debates and any vain hope of "winning" or "losing" (whatever those words mean within the Body of Christ).

Can the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ever recapture the joy of boldly proclaiming Jesus Christ and celebrating the flourishing of the Gospel? Absolutely! But it will not come by simply repeating tired patterns and rehearsing fruitless debates. For now, we must deal with the reality at hand while we pray and work for a different future.

As a step in the right direction, Presbyterians for Renewal made a bold commitment at the close of the 218th Assembly to a new way of engaging in the conversations surrounding denominational issues. Throughout the past two years, that commitment has shaped our ministry.

- We have invested sacrificially in opportunities to hear first-hand the questions and concerns, and the joy and passion of Presbyterians through dozens of regional gatherings,
- we have created a serious proposal for a non-geographic synod which is coming to this Assembly through the Presbytery of Santa Barbara, and
- while we have paid careful attention to the actions and decisions of presbyteries and congregations, we have invested the lion's share of our resources in actively encouraging ongoing, faithful, missional ministry—mobilizing leaders to help shape and guide the witness of Jesus' followers within the PC(USA).

It truly is amazing to see what is happening across the PC(USA). Hundreds of congregations are making a Christ-honoring difference in the lives of individuals and their communities. The Good News is being proclaimed in words, in acts of grace and compassion, and in counter-cultural life choices. Seminary

students are being nurtured in their faith and are launching out—some into new, out-of-the-box ministries. Members of the national staff who serve and resource the PC(USA) are demonstrating renewed and promising commitments to Jesus Christ and his defined mission.

Now we're on the threshold of another General Assembly, and while most of the issues have not changed, PFR is approaching these issues in a way that continues to honor our commitments. In a recent blog post, Bob Davis wrote, "General Assemblies handle business—they do not solve problems." Bob is exactly right. As we approach the 219th General Assembly, the wisest thing we can do is remember that simple truth.

Below are some of the issues Presbyterians for Renewal considers significant. For each, we have attempted to isolate the "business" (what the Assembly can reasonably be expected to consider) from the "problem" (the larger issues behind each "issue" that will shape the conversation, debate, and vote, but cannot possibly be "solved" between now and the closing gavel on July 10th).

Ordination Standards

The business:

Q: Shall the PC(USA) change our standards for ordination to the offices of Deacon, Elder, or Minister of the Word and Sacrament, in order to make accommodation for those who choose to not repent of practices Scripture and the Confessions call sin?

A: PFR urges the 219th Assembly to say NO.

The Problem:

This debate over ordination standards is no longer about Scripture or our Confessions, or even maintaining our integrity as a member of the historic and global Church. If it were, the issue would have been resolved by now. But we are afraid to speak God's deep truth, even in love, for fear we will accelerate the impending demise of our denominational structures or, worse yet, offend someone. The problem is that we've forgotten God's commission to live a life that is demonstrably different from the culture surrounding us. And it is in that very difference that the only lasting expression of true life, true freedom, and true love may be found. No General Assembly can solve these problems, but this GA can vote to uphold the clear teaching of Scripture as they answer the business before them.

Christian Marriage

The business:

Q: Shall the PC(USA) change our witness to the biblical definition of Christian marriage as a covenantal relationship between one man and one woman in order to make accommodation for those who choose a lifestyle apart from God's covenant?

A: PFR urges the 219th Assembly to say NO.

The Problem:

Most of us would like to believe we still live in Christendom—where the Church and the State hold hands in the blessing of human contracts and behaviors. But cultures are rapidly changing around us. The influence of the Church of Jesus Christ and its teachings on the laws and practices of the secular

world is diminishing quickly in the USA and virtually non-existent elsewhere in the western world. The problem is Presbyterians don't deal well with being marginalized. If the laws and permissions of the culture disagree with us, we assume we must be wrong or at least out of touch. Yes, it is pastorally difficult to tell people their current life choices are beyond God's plan and covenant as it is revealed in Scripture. That's one reason Jesus' promise (Matthew 28) to remain with us while we do the hard work of ministry is so potent. But blurring or obscuring the clear teaching of God's Word in order to keep in step with secular laws and changing personal morals only confuses our witness and causes innumerable problems for the future. No Assembly can solve these problems. This Assembly has the opportunity to move in the right direction. The report coming from the Special Task Force on Marriage and Civil Unions is less than helpful—less because of what it says and more because of what it does not say. PFR encourages the Assembly to read carefully and to adopt the Minority Report. In addition, PFR urges the Assembly not to approve those overtures which propose changing the definition of marriage or would permit the celebration of “marriages” contrary to the definition of marriage as found in the Director for Worship (W-4.9001).

A New Form of Government

The business:

- Q: Shall the PC(USA) revise our current Form of Government following the recommendation of the Form of Government Task Force?
- A: PFR urges the Assembly to carefully consider whether the Task Force proposal addresses the challenges we face.

The Problem:

God's world is rapidly changing, but the structures of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that are intended to advance God's mission are not. Very few people believe our current Form of Government (the “G” section of the Book of Order) is the best way to govern our part of the Body of Christ. Our current Book of Order has been enlarged and remodeled so many times that it now administers a system which can be slow, cumbersome, and in many ways obstructive to the life and mission of a Church infused with the life and joy and potential of the Holy Spirit. At the heart of the proposed revision is the desire to create a more “missional” polity – a polity that responds to the clear needs of God's people in the changing context of God's world. But there are important questions to be answered. Does the proposed new Form of Government create such a structure? Would adopting the proposed new Form of Government accomplish its stated aim of creating a demonstrably different culture within the PC(USA)? Is there a sufficient level of trust among Presbyterians to allow this process to proceed to its logical conclusion? PFR is not certain enough of the answers to these questions to endorse the proposed revision, but we urge the Office of the General Assembly and all appropriate standing committees to keep the questions in front of us.

Non-Geographic Realignment

The business:

- Q: Is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) willing to expand the current definition of middle governing bodies to allow congregations who wish to maintain more rigorous standards for their life and witness the opportunity to affiliate with one another within our denominational structure?

A: PFR urges the Assembly to allow for the creation of a new non-geographic synod and provide flexibility in presbytery membership.

The Problem:

The PC(USA)'s compromise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has reached an unprecedented level. The PC(USA)'s corporate confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and commitment to our Reformed confessions have weakened to the point that we can no longer assume a common framework of conversation across the denomination. In order for congregations whose understanding of Scripture and the Confessions demands more rigorous standards of faith to remain within the PC(USA), provision must be made for them to maintain their integrity. The new synod proposal from Santa Barbara Presbytery and the proposal for flexible presbytery membership from Beaver-Butler Presbytery provide two different forms of inclusiveness. Overlooking these sincere attempts to maintain some form of continuing unity, or disallowing or ignoring these proposals altogether will not maintain the *status quo*. Such action (or inaction) will only exacerbate the problems and intensify the challenges within an unsustainable situation. The adoption of one or both of these initiatives would go a long way to help rebuild the Body of Christ within the PC(USA).

The Belhar Confession

The business:

Q: Should the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) advance the process of incorporating the Belhar Confession into our Book of Confessions?

A: PFR urges the 219th General Assembly to say NO.

The issue is not the structure, intent, or validity of the Belhar Confession for the context in which it was written (South Africa, 1986), nor should there be an argument over the focus of this work: unity, reconciliation, and justice. The question is whether this document should be given confessional status? Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Theological Seminary, has written, "While [the Belhar Confession] spoke forthrightly against the injustices of apartheid, it did not explicitly appeal to biblical authority. That it can now be seen by some of its drafters as capable of being extended to the full inclusion of active gays and lesbians in ministry says something about the weaknesses of Belhar—not as an important prophetic declaration in its original context, but as a statement that can stand on its own as a normative confession." Presbyterians for Renewal agrees.

Issues Related to the Middle East

The 219th General Assembly is being asked to consider a number of items of business relating to the Middle East, specifically Israel and Palestine, and the roll of the United States government in ongoing conflicts. These issues are some of the most complex and potentially some of the most controversial items coming to this Assembly. There is no question that Jesus' followers should be deeply concerned about peace and justice throughout God's world. There is no question that the Church should be an agent of prayer and, whenever possible, reconciliation. There is significant question, however, if the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a gathering 600+ political novices who will come together for a few short days in the Upper Midwest, can (or even should be asked to) speak any helpful word into a complex and protracted conflict among cultures we do not begin to understand. A saying

from a generation ago counsels, “It is better to remain silent and allow people to assume you know nothing than to speak and remove all doubt.” Presbyterians for Renewal urges the Assembly to commit the PC(USA) to ongoing, committed prayer for a just peace in the Middle East, period.

Life After the 219th General Assembly

During the Assembly, PFR will be keeping you informed with real-time reports and analysis on our website www.pfrenewal.org. In the hours and days following adjournment, we will be preparing materials to help you understand what the Assembly has done and how it might impact you, your congregation, and the ministry to which God has called you.

Will there be “moments” in Minneapolis—outbursts of joy and hope? Absolutely, because God is in our midst. Will there be other “moments” in Minneapolis—discussion leading to action for which we will be called to account before God? Absolutely, because we are fallen people whose only hope and comfort is that we “belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to [our]selves, but to [our] faithful Lord and Savior Jesus Christ...” To Him be all glory, honor, and praise.