



A Pastoral Letter

from

presbyterians for renewal

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace from God our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. The 219th General Assembly is now adjourned. This Assembly faced an overwhelming amount of business. Like their predecessors throughout our history, commissioners responded faithfully and well in several decisions and faltered in others. Throughout these ten days, however, there has been much evidence of God's continuing grace and power. Now it is our turn, as Jesus' followers within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), to understand and respond appropriately to the Assembly actions that most directly impact our ministry and our witness, and to honor and serve Jesus Christ both in our congregations and in our communities.

If you were looking to this Assembly for a "win" you will be disappointed by some actions and elated by others.

- This Assembly voted to remove the "fidelity and chastity" standard for ordained officers, an action that requires the approval of the presbyteries in order to be implemented. This action gives us the opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness as a standard of behavior for deacons, elders, and ministers of the Word and sacrament. While it is unfortunate that we must face this challenge again, face it we will in joyful obedience. When Assembly actions come before your presbytery, we urge you in the strongest possible terms to see to it your congregation is fully represented and your voice is clearly heard.
- Proposals for non-geographic synod or presbytery structures that would allow congregations to maintain more rigorous standards for membership and leadership while remaining united in ministry within the PC(USA) failed, along with the request to form an additional non-geographic Korean presbytery. Clearly there is continuing misunderstanding of the term "inclusive" among Presbyterians. These conversations are far from over, however, and we are already initiating next steps.
- The Assembly did not approve a potentially catastrophic action that would have granted local option for the solemnization of same-gender marriages to pastors and sessions in states where this is now legal. This action came to the Assembly as a request for Authoritative Interpretation. Had it passed, the decision by the Assembly would have taken effect immediately without the possibility of consideration in the presbyteries. We commend the Assembly for their action not only in defeating this attempt to circumvent the essential deliberative nature of our polity, but by reaffirming their convictions by an even stronger margin when a call was made to reconsider the initial vote.
- Perhaps the most alarming action the Assembly took was to urge the Board of Pensions to extend benefits to the same-gender spouses and domestic partners of non-ordained church employees. If this request is implemented by the Board of Pensions, it will result in a projected 1% increase in pension and medical payments across the board. Please remember that the Assembly can only make this a request to the Board of Pensions. A request has also been made to the BOP for some form of relief of conscience.

No matter the outcome on any single vote, we who follow Jesus must remember that "winning" and "losing" are matters of the body politic, not the Body of Christ. For every "win" in a divided body, there are brothers and sisters who suffer loss, and the Scripture we love and affirm reminds us that, when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer. Jesus Christ has already attained the final "win." Conveying that truth in biblical faithfulness and missional justice is our central calling.

If you are looking for signs of hope and progress this week, you can find them. The Assembly:

- corrected misguided language in the statement of the 218th General Assembly (2008) on the relationship between Christians and Muslims,
- affirmed the continuing project to retranslate the Heidelberg Catechism in a healthy and exciting partnership with the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America,

- dramatically improved 27 key sections of the proposed new Form of Government which will now be considered by the presbyteries,
- took a reasoned stand in speaking to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, and
- sent the full witness (majority and minority reports) of the Special Committee on Civil Unions and Christian Marriage to congregations and presbyteries for study.

If you are looking for an opportunity to be a clear and faithful witness for Jesus Christ, we have it!

- Efforts to uphold biblical standards were once again defeated in part by the assertion that unity and health in the denomination will be achieved the moment we get past our current debates. To suggest that condoning gay sex among members and ordained leaders will bring unity and peace to the Body of Christ is like saying pre-marital sex will stabilize adolescent dating relationships or an extra-marital affair will help heal a broken marriage. It is a lie, and people on all sides of the issue know it. We are called to be witnesses to the transforming truth of Jesus Christ. Will we rise to the challenge with gentleness, determination, compassion, conviction, and abundant grace?
- Voices that speak with authority including, but not limited to, advisory and advocacy groups, are not met with a substantive challenge when they mislead or misguide the thoughts and actions of commissioners. This happens at every level in our denomination, largely because many of us have opted to disengage from conversation and debate. We who are attempting to speak with the orthodox Church throughout history and the majority Church today are being perceived by some as a dwindling minority in the PC(USA) because we are staying away or staying silent when we have the God-given opportunity, the Christ-given commission, and the Spirit-given power to speak. Will we take these opportunities and be silent no more?

Now is not the time to lay low or even to consider leaving the PC(USA). This Assembly has forestalled overtures and committee revisions that could have had devastating consequences in many of our congregations. Now is the time for truly evangelical voices to speak and lead us toward revival in the name and in the spirit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Oswald Chambers once wrote,

Thank God that he does give us difficult things to do. His salvation is a joyous thing, but it is also something that requires bravery, courage and holiness. It tests us for all we are worth... God's grace produces men and women with a strong family likeness to Jesus Christ, not pampered, spoiled, weaklings. It takes a tremendous amount of discipline to live the worthy and excellent life of a disciple of Jesus Christ in the realities of life (and we add, of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)). And it is always necessary for us to make an effort to live a life of worth and excellence.

—*My Utmost for His Highest*, devotional reading for July 7th

When the PFR General Assembly Team convened on July 1st, it was with these familiar words. As we close this letter, we commend them now to you:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” — Philippians 4:4-7

Presbyterians for Renewal is committed to helping you continue in biblically faithful, missionally minded leadership within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Look to us for continuing resources to understand, interpret, and navigate the opportunities we have before us, and to help build networks of faithful witness across the denomination in the strength and love of our Savior Jesus Christ.

The Board, Staff, and General Assembly Team
of Presbyterians for Renewal

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