

The 219th General Assembly (2010) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) A Brief Summary



Election of the Moderator: Elder Cynthia Bolbach, an elder from Arlington, Virginia, in National Capital Presbytery, was elected moderator of the 219th General Assembly and will serve for the next two years. In a crowded field of six nominees she was the only elder standing for the position and was elected on the fourth ballot, with 51% of the votes. She has served both her presbytery and the national church, most notably as the co-moderator of the Task Force to revise the Form of Government. Professionally she is a lawyer and serves as an executive with a legal information services firm.

This Assembly was notable for actions that will have lasting impacts on the life of the PC(USA), notably approving the revised Form of Government section of the Book of Order and adding the Belhar Confession to the Book of Confessions.

Form of Government Revision: At the last General Assembly the Form of Government Task Force presented their report, including their revised Form of Government section of the Book of Order and a proposed new section called Foundations of Presbyterian Polity which would move the first four chapters into their own section. The goal of the revision is to make the Form of Government more of a constitutional document and less of a procedural manual while structuring the PC(USA) to be missional. The 218th General Assembly discerned that more input from the wider church was needed and so after receiving input and revising the document the Task Force brought it back to this General Assembly. The Assembly made some additional changes to individual sections and approved the revision by a vote of 468 yes, 204 no and 6 abstentions. To take effect the revision must now be approved by a majority of the presbyteries.

Confessions: This GA took two actions regarding changes to the Book of Confessions. The Assembly voted to approve the report of the Special Committee to study the Belhar Confession and to send the Belhar Confession to the presbyteries for their concurrence to include it in the Book of Confessions. This requires the approval of 2/3 of the presbyteries. The 1986 Belhar Confession comes out of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa and addresses the country's system of apartheid at that time. The second action was to approve the report of the Special Committee to correct translation problems in the Heidelberg Catechism. While this Special Committee was charged with correcting a few specific questions they concluded that there were more extensive translation problems and recommended that they continue work for an additional two years to work with other Reformed denominations to help produce a full new translation. The Assembly agreed.

Marriage: The 218th General Assembly created a Special Committee on Civil Unions and Christian Marriage which reported back to this Assembly with a Final Report and a Minority Report. While the definition of marriage in the Book of Order was not part of the mandate of the Special Committee several presbytery overtures were sent to the General Assembly asking to define marriage as being between "two people" instead of "one man and one woman." While the commissioner committee recommended the Assembly adopt the Special Committee's Final Report the Assembly instead decided to commend both the Final and Minority reports to the church for study by a vote of 439 to 208 with 12 abstentions. The Assembly then agreed to take no action on any other items related to marriage by a vote of 348 to 324.

Ordination Standards: The Assembly received no less than 17 overtures related to the church's ordination standards described in G-6.0106b. After studying all of these the Assembly committee recommended, and the full Assembly agreed, to a proposed change that would strike the current section and replace it with one that would lift up standards for ordination in a more general sense, that the "candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation." This was approved 373 yes, 324 no and 4 abstaining. Again, as a Book of Order amendment this will require the approval of a majority of the presbyteries.

Middle Governing Bodies Commission: With the continuing membership decline of the PC(USA) (almost 3% in 2009) and financial strain at all levels of our governing bodies, there were multiple proposals to restructure the denomination ranging from the elimination of synods, to a committee to study and report on how to restructure presbyteries and synods, to a commission that would be empowered to take action on restructuring presbyteries and synods. By a wide margin, 566 to 104, the Assembly approved the commission and granted it the power to reorganize presbyteries and synods with the approval of all affected presbyteries or all presbyteries in an affected synod. The commission will also consult with the presbyteries and synods and make recommendations to the next General Assembly.

Middle East Issues: Probably the issue before the General Assembly with the widest advance publicity outside the church was the report of the Middle East Task Force. Many groups viewed the report as being too sympathetic to Palestinian issues and too critical of the state of Israel. The Assembly committee made significant changes to the report to emphasize Israel's right to exist and its right to security while retaining a concern for the human rights of all groups in the Middle East. The modified report was approved by a wide margin. In a related action the Assembly voted to not divest from Caterpillar Corp. but to remain engaged with the company over concerns for how its equipment is used in Israel and Palestine.

Other actions: The GA portion of per capita was raised from \$6.15 for 2010 to \$6.50 for 2011 and \$6.63 for 2012. The request for a new non-geographic Korean language presbytery in the Synod of South Atlantic was disapproved.