



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF KINGWOOD

Actions of the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA)

Introduction

The 219th General Assembly (GA219) of the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA), held July 2010, referred to the church at-large for ratification votes or study and discernment four measures representing fundamental changes of direction for the national church. Concerned equally over the direction of the PCUSA and the potential impacts of these changes if implemented on FPCK's mission and witness in our home community, the Session selected a team of elders, deacons, and at-large congregation members to evaluate the proposed changes, determine the potential impacts on FPCK, and engage the congregation in an issue-awareness dialog and feedback program. This team is now described as the Denominational Relations Study Team, or DRST.

As a necessary first step in the evaluation directed by Session, the DRST recognized the need to craft a church values statement for FPCK, essentially setting out our shared values as a local church and congregation. The resulting *Statement of Values of First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood* (see Section 1) was approved by Session and then utilized by the DRST as a touchstone to evaluate the PCUSA's proposed changes.

The DRST then systematically evaluated each of the four major issues emerging from GA219. This report is the summary of the assessment on these issues with a particular view toward whether these changes are consistent with FPCK values and how FPCK might be impacted by the changes if they are implemented.

The DRST will shortly embark on a series of meetings amongst groups within the church to review our findings and gauge the reaction of our congregation to these changes as proposed for the PCUSA.

Proposal to Change Ordination Standards

GA219 proposes to delete section G-6.0106b of the current *Book of Order* concerning ordination (the "fidelity and chastity standard") which holds that "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." This standard would be replaced with a fitness-for-ordination review process conducted by the Presbytery calling for examination of "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."

The DRST concludes that this proposed change deletes from the Book of Order an absolute biblical standard consistent with FPCK's value statement which says, "*In accord with Scripture, we do not permit any person who refuses to repent of any self-acknowledged behavior the Scriptures or the Confessions call sin to be ordained to the office of deacon, elder, or minister of word and sacrament*" and which agrees with the current fidelity and chastity standard. The change would also undermine FPCK's belief that Scripture is "*the church's first and final authority in all areas of faith and life.*" This change would substitute in its place the judgment of a panel or reviewers at the Presbytery level charged with determining a minister candidate's fitness for ordination.

Proposal to Study Change in Marriage Standards

GA219 received two reports from the *Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage*, which had been charged to evaluate how the PCUSA should deal with covenanted same-gender relationships. The Special Committee issued a majority report proposing a change to the PCUSA's marriage standards allowing the church to sanction, bless, and perform same-sex Christian Marriages in states where same-sex unions are legal and a minority report strongly advocating maintaining the traditional marriage standard as "between one man and one



woman.” After an emotional floor debate, GA219 determined to send both the majority and minority reports out to the wider church for study prior to the next General Assembly. Since GA219 did not recommend any change to the current marriage standard for ratification votes by the Presbyteries, no change is currently pending consideration. Presumably, some form of overture to change the marriage standard will come back to GA220 (Summer 2012) for an approval vote and, if that succeeds, for ratification by the Presbyteries in the 2013 timeframe.

The DRST concludes that this proposed change is contrary to FPCK’s values which emphasize Scriptural Authority and the scripturally-based definition of Christian Marriage as “between one man and one woman.” (See Section 3 for more information.)

Proposal to Change to New Form of Government (“nFOG”)

GA219 proposes to dispose of the current Book of Order in its entirety and replace it with a new streamlined form of government. The new governing document attempts to identify the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and certain key governance provisions that would be retained in the new Book of Order, although in somewhat modified forms. Large sections of the current form of government will not appear in the new Book of Order, and instead will be moved into new or expanded “administrative operations manuals” that each Presbytery will develop to suit its own needs. This change ostensibly would allow customization of Presbytery and local church procedures and practices to meet local missional needs while reducing the “regulatory restrictions” of the current Book of Order.

The DRST concludes that nFOG does not achieve its stated objective of making the Church more missional and instead introduces the prospect for Presbytery-to-Presbytery differences, re-litigation of settled matters due to voiding past church case-law, further fundamental changes to the church, and continued theological drift. (See Section 4 for more information.)

Proposal to Add Confession of Belhar to PCUSA Book of Confessions

The Confession of Belhar was drafted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in response to South Africa’s legally mandated system of apartheid – the segregation of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. This confession defines all forms of forced separation [segregation] of people based on their natural diversity, eg. race, as sin and strongly advocates for unity within the church. GA219 recommended the inclusion of the Confession of Belhar in the PCUSA’s *Book of Confessions* and referred the proposal to the Presbyteries for ratification by June 2011.

The DRST concludes that the Belhar Confession includes very little new material that is not covered in existing confessions (especially *The Confession of 1967*), speaks directly only to issues which are not highly controversial within our church, and given the state of modern-day race relations in PCUSA, Belhar’s message is not particularly timely to us. (See Section 5 for more information.)