

CM - Note 7 - Secret Societies, Masons (G-13.0103p; W-4.10005)

January 5, 2004

From time to time the Office of the General Assembly is asked if the Assembly has stated a position on secret societies: whether they are cults or heretical; whether a person is permitted to be minister or an elder while being a member of a secret society.

There is no reference to General Assembly actions relating to Secret Societies or to the Masons in more than seventy years. It took some digging to find but the most recent action is from the United Presbyterian Church in North America, Article XXXV of The Confessional Statement, adopted in 1925:

Of Church Fellowship

We believe that all who have accepted Christ as their Redeemer should unite themselves with some branch of the visible Church, in order to share in the privileges and responsibilities of its members and confess Christ before men; that under Christ they should yield the Church their supreme loyalty, honoring its ordinances and seeking its welfare in season and out of season; and that with this they should forsake all associations, whether secret or open, that they find prejudicial to their Church allegiance and a hindrance to the fulfillment of Christian duties. (Digest, 1942 page 16)

In 1927 the UPCNA General Assembly replied to a memorial from one of the presbyteries that this means “the matter of membership in all associations is left to the individual conscience.”

In Alexander's PCUS Digest, published in 1910, at page 37 there is a note to the General Assembly minutes, 1904 page 42: “The Assembly records its hearty commendation of the brave stand taken by the majority in the Synod of Brazil in refusing to make membership in the Order of Free Masons a bar to communion in the Church.”

From 1860 to 1899 the UPCNA adopted eight or nine different actions interpreting the United Presbyterian Testimony to require that members of the Church not associate themselves with secret societies (Digest 1942, pp 436-441).

In Baird's Digest, published in 1856 at Philadelphia (the Old School publisher), it is reported on page 792 that there was discussion, referral to committee and report on the subject of Free Masonry in 1821: “After discussion of considerable length, the previous question having been called for, was taken, and determined in the negative; and the subject was indefinitely postponed.” (1821, pp 10, 13, 15) When the Minutes cited were checked it was found that in all three places it is not reported what the Synod of Pittsburgh asked, only that it was defeated.

A related question is whether secret society rituals are permitted in connection with funerals in the church or when conducted elsewhere by Presbyterian ministers.

The short reply to the question is that the instruction given in W-4.10005, “The service shall be complete in itself, and any fraternal, civic, or military rites should be conducted separately.” uses both the mandatory “shall” and the permissive “should”. So the question appears to be left to the discretion of the pastor. The office of Theology and Worship has advised that “the strong leading of W-4.1005 is that fraternal, civic, or military rites be separated in time and place from the church's witness to the resurrection. Thus, the pastor is not left to his/her own devices, and

the congregation and its members should understand the clear intention of the Directory for Worship.”