



Assembly in Brief is a partnership of the Presbyterian News Service and the Office of the General Assembly

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The Assembly of Yes ... mostly

The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (GA221) will most likely go down in history as one that said “yes” on a number of controversial issues that have been before various Assemblies without resolution.

GA221 took purposeful action on the questions of same-gender marriage, divestment from companies pursuing non-peaceful business practices in Israel-Palestine, including the Confession of Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*, and reorganizing and revitalizing synods.

The 654 commissioners spent a great deal of time crafting messages and means for interpreting their actions, emphasizing the importance of individual conscience in Presbyterian polity, and devising plans for church leaders to visit all 171 presbyteries to seek as much reconciliation as is possible in a deeply divided church.

And they chose a leader with conciliatory style and a ready smile.



Heath Rada receives his confirmation as Moderator - by Michael Whitman

Ruling Elder Heath Rada of Western North Carolina Presbytery was elected Moderator of the Assembly on the first ballot. Rada, who is retired and living in Montreat, N.C., is a former president of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Va., and former chief executive officer of the Richmond branch of the American Red Cross. A skilled mediator, Rada told the Assembly: “We need to find ways for people to live together and disagree. A mediator can help find significant common ground.”

Rada’s Vice-Moderator is the Reverend Larissa Kwong Abazia, a Chinese-American pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, a multicultural, multiethnic congregation in Queens, N.Y. She echoed Rada’s—and the Assembly’s—call for reconciliation. “If we can share our stories so we can learn and build relationships, we won’t feel so isolated or disconnected from the larger church,” she said.

'Yes' to divestment from three U.S. companies

Commissioners voted 310-303 (51%-49%) to divest from three companies whose business practices the Assembly determined are contributing to non-peaceful pursuits in Israel-Palestine. The companies are Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions.

A similar measure was defeated by the 2012 Assembly 333-331. The Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee has been attempting corporate engagement with the three companies, without success, since an action by the 2004 General Assembly.

The Assembly emphasized that the vote was not a vote to divest from Israel and did not represent in any way endorsement of the more controversial BDS (boycott, divestment, sanctions) Movement and in a preamble added to the divestment action said:

"The PC(USA) has a long-standing commitment to peace in Israel-Palestine. We recognize the complexity of the issues, the decades-long struggle, and the pain suffered and inflicted by policies and practices of both the Israeli government and Palestinian entities. We further acknowledge and confess our own complicity in both the historic and current suffering of Israelis and Palestinians [yearning for justice and reconciliation.]"

'Yes' to same-gender marriage: pastoral discretion and a new definition

By a vote of 371-238 (61%-39%), the Assembly approved an "authoritative interpretation" of section W-4.9000 of the Book of Order to grant pastors discretion in determining whether or not to conduct same-gender marriages in civil jurisdictions where such marriages are legal. The ruling, which currently applies to 19 states and the District of Columbia, effectively removes a ban on Presbyterian pastors conducting marriages for same-gender couples in those jurisdictions that was imposed by an authoritative interpretation issued by the 1991 General Assembly. The authoritative interpretation takes effect immediately.

The Assembly also proposed an amendment to W-4.9001 that would change the constitutional definition of marriage from "between a man and a woman" to "two people, traditionally [between] a man and a woman." The vote on the proposed amendment-which goes to the denomination's 171 presbyteries for ratification during the next year-was 429-175 (71%-29%). (cont'd on p.3)



Jeff Bridgeman and Rebecca Tollefson, moderator and vice moderator of the Committee on Civil Union and Marriage Issues - by Danny Bolin

The Bottom Line

Actions taken during the Assembly added \$295,119 to the General Assembly mission budget for 2015 and \$68,418 for the 2016 budget. Therefore, the Assembly approved revised mission budgets for the two years of \$73,671,744 and \$78,226,389 respectively. The 2016 budget is higher because in that year the next Presbyterian Youth Triennium will be held, drawing thousands of Presbyterian young people to the campus of Purdue University in Indiana.

Similarly, other Assembly actions added \$14,800 to the 2014 per capita budget, \$124,945 to the 2015 budget, and \$61,165 for 2016. As a result, the Assembly voted to increase the per capita apportionment by five cents each of the next two years-to \$7.07 per member in 2015 and to \$7.12 in 2016.



Commissioners speak to various issues at the Assembly - by Michael Whitman

'Study' to fossil fuel divestment

The Assembly voted 469-110 (81%-19%) to refer an overture that would have called for divestment from all fossil fuel companies within five years. The Assembly instead referred the measure to the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee, which has engaged companies over their corporate behavior on behalf of the PC(USA) for 30 years. Under the MRTI rubric, divestment has historically been the action of last resort after other corporate engagement efforts have failed.



Attendees line up to ask questions. - by Danny Bolin

'Educate a Child, Transform the World'

Presbyterians were called on by the Assembly to provide quality education to 1 million children in the U.S. and around the world in the next four years as a way to alleviate poverty, especially for women and children.

The initiative, co-sponsored by World Mission and Compassion, Peace and Justice Ministries of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, has already attracted support. The Reverend Tim Hart-Andersen, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, announced his church, along with Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, had pledged \$1.65 million to the Educate a Child initiative's effort in South Sudan.

The Assembly approved a second Presbyterian Mission Agency initiative, "Living Missionally," which encourages PC(USA) congregations to engage in mission activities beyond their walls.

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And the Assembly celebrated the continuing success of the "1001 New Worshiping Communities" initiative. More than 240 such communities have registered since the initiative was launched at the 2012 General Assembly. Presbyteries were encouraged to propel the movement by conducting educational and training events and every presbytery was asked to start at least one new worshiping community during the next two years.

Peacemaking Offering expanded

By a hand vote, the Assembly voted to retool the annual Peacemaking Offering after 2016 to include global witness. Since its inception 20 years ago, the Peacemaking Offering has been designated for the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.

By including world mission efforts in the retooled offering-which will be called the Peace and Global Witness Offering-the PC(USA)'s Special Offerings Task Force hopes to make greater progress toward the church's goal of roughly doubling receipts from the four special offerings- Peacemaking, Christmas Joy, One Great Hour of Sharing, and Pentecost-to \$20 million by the year 2020.



PC-biz.org tracks business. - by Michael Whitman

(same-gender cont'd)

The dual actions came after the 2010 Assembly appointed a special committee to study marriage issues for two years. The 2012 Assembly then called for an additional two years of churchwide study.

The Assembly was careful to protect the consciences of pastors on both sides of the issue, including protective language in both measures. A clause in the proposed amendment states:

"Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder's or the session's discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God."

'Yes' to the Belhar Confession

The Assembly voted 551-87 (86%-14%) to send the Confession of Belhar-which has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s-to the 171 presbyteries for their votes to include it the PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions.

The confession-which addresses justice, reconciliation, and unity-must now be approved by two-thirds of the presbyteries and then by the 2016 General Assembly for it to become part of the denomination's doctrinal statements. The 2010 Assembly approved Belhar 525-150, but it failed to gain approval by the presbyteries, falling eight votes short (108-63) of the required super-majority.

'Yes' to new synod boundaries

The Assembly voted 449-128 (78%-22%) to reduce the number of PC(USA) synods from 16 to between 10 and 12, including the Sinodo Boriquén in Puerto Rico. It will be up to synods and the presbyteries that comprise them to decide where the new boundaries are drawn and which services each synod will provide.

The recommendation is based on a report from the second of two Mid Councils Commissions that have been addressing the role and function of synods-and presbyteries to a lesser extent-since 2010. The 2012 General Assembly, responding to the first of the commissions, rejected a proposal that synods be eliminated as ecclesiastical units of the PC(USA). The second commission recommended that synods be reduced "to no more than eight."

Synods and their presbyteries were directed to reconfigure synod boundaries "based on an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context, and call." The Assembly concluded:

"... Synods continue to have a vital role within our life as a denomination. However, the time has come for fewer synods within a structure of mutual accountability that encourages each synod to discern God's call to find its unique role in affirming the creativity that already resides in our mid council system."



Commissioners in small groups before difficult votes were made. - by Danny Bolin

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'Yes' to leaders of General Assembly agencies

The Assembly confirmed the elections of Presbyterians to head three of the national agencies of the PC(USA):

- Ruling Elder Linda Valentine was confirmed to an unprecedented third, four-year term as Executive Director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. A former corporate attorney in Chicago, she is a member of Highland Presbyterian Church in Louisville.
- The Reverend Tom Taylor was confirmed to a second, four-year term as president and CEO of the Presbyterian Foundation. A former pastor in southern California, Taylor also served as deputy executive director for mission for the Presbyterian Mission Agency.
- Ruling Elder Frank Spencer, a candidate for ordination as a teaching elder in the PC(USA), was confirmed as the new president and CEO of the Board of Pensions. He was most recently executive director for Habitat for Humanity in Charlotte, N.C.



Linda Valentine, Executive Director of PMA - by Michael Whitman

'Yes' to PC(USA)'s continuing commitment to peacemaking

The Assembly sent five "affirmations" related to the PC(USA)'s commitment to peace and non-violence to the presbyteries for their comments and advisory opinions. The affirmations, developed by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, are part of a six-year churchwide peace discernment process initiated by the 2010 General Assembly.

The affirmations uphold the essential role of peacemaking for Christians, confess Christian complicity in the world's violence, reclaim Christ's authority as the Prince of Peace, and commit the church to non-violent responses to conflicts in daily living, communities, and the world.

In other peacemaking issues, the Assembly:

- Declared its opposition to targeted killings by drones unless due process is followed and called on the U.S. Congress to pass legislation that would restrict the use of drones;
- Urged the U.S. government to lift all restrictions on travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens and requested the Obama administration to remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism;
- Called for development of a policy addressing human trafficking around the world as a human rights issue to monitor the status of companies that have signed the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism;
- Addressed conflict zones around the world, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Western Sahara.

'Yes' to preventing gun violence

Measures to prevent gun violence won resounding approval by the 221st General Assembly (2014).

By consent, the Assembly voted to address gun violence by calling for:

- Formation of support, healing, and advocacy groups for those who have experienced gun violence;
- Opposition to legislation that exempts gun manufacturers and marketers legal liability and financial accountability for medical and security costs "of predictable gun misuse";
- Opposition to "stand your ground" and other legislation that entitles gun owners to shoot before taking alternative measures "in perceived defense of persons or property";
- Encouraging sessions and PC(USA) entities to declare their premises and gatherings "gun-free zones";
- Raising the age for handgun ownership to 21;
- Supporting legislation to ban semiautomatic weapons, armor-piercing handgun ammunition, and large caliber rifles; and
- Advocacy in support of federal and state legislation to regulate ammunition.

On other social justice issues, the Assembly:

- Approved 425-170 (71%-29%) a statement of principles and recommendations on justice in taxation, including resources for study, from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy entitled, "Tax Justice: A Christian Response to a New Gilded Age," offering recommendations seeking a fairer tax system in the U.S.
- Rejected 465-133 (78%-22%) an overture calling for a special

committee to review the PC(USA)'s policies on abortion and to propose new policies if needed;

- Approved 317-260 (55%-45%) an overture calling for a two-year churchwide study to discern how to advocate for more effective drug policies in the U.S.
- Approved by consent measures to call for a national moratorium on the death penalty; a study of end-of-life issues; measures to promote "food sovereignty"-The right of all people "to safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food and food-producing resources"; affirming the importance of prenatal and post-birth nutrition; adoption by presbyteries and denominational agencies of more generous parental leave policies; and "actions to counter a new wave of voter suppression."

Working for the common good with people of other faiths

By a hand vote the Assembly approved a policy statement entitled "The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)." The policy states that the denomination "at all levels will be open to and will seek opportunities for respectful dialogue and mutual relationships with entities and persons from other religious traditions. It does this in the faith that the church of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is a sign and means of God's intention for the wholeness of all humankind and all creation."

The Assembly rejected-506-72 (88%-12%)-an overture calling for the creation of materials that would distinguish between the biblical land of Israel and the modern State of Israel.