

**REPORT OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE  
ON CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS  
PROVIDENCE PRESBYTERY**

The Advisory Committee on Constitutional Amendments of Providence Presbytery met on December 1, 2008 and again on January 13, 2009 to review the proposed constitutional amendments approved by the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and recommended to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes. Members of the committee included Elder Kenn Cruse, Rev. Dan Holloway, Rev. Matt Horne, Elder Linda Kennedy, Rev. Douglass Key, and Rev. Mark Verdery, staff.

**THE AMENDMENTS**

**1. Amendment 08-A: Vows of Membership**

**Background**

This amendment will require all persons received into the membership of particular churches to renew their Profession Faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. This will be required even of those who are uniting by certificate of transfer. Presently such vows are required only of those joining by reaffirmation or profession of faith.

**Pro:** It is always appropriate to declare our faith publicly and this amendment would mandate a practice already current in many congregations.

**Con:** G-5.0202 already permits congregations to adopt “other conditions of active membership that meet the needs of the particular church and are consistent with the order and confessions of the Presbyterian Church USA.” It is unclear that this Amendment will make any substantive change to what congregations are permitted to do. It will however make that permission a mandate.

Presbyterians have historically been suspicious of anything resembling a loyalty oath, for God alone is Lord of the conscience and hath left it free.

**Committee Recommendation:** Committee recommends approval

**2. Amendment 08-B: Ordained Officers**

**Background**

Over the last twenty five years there has been an ongoing debate in the PCUSA on the relationship between one’s sexuality and ordination. The predecessor denominations of the PCUSA (the UPCUSA in 1978 and the PCUS in 1979) both adopted standards called Definitive Guidance which had the effect of disallowing the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian candidates. In the mid 90’s an amendment to the Book of Order was approved by the presbyteries which strengthened this position by adding the language of fidelity and chastity to our requirements for ordination. Twice since that time formal votes have been taken in the presbyteries to remove that language from our Book of Order, with the effort being defeated both times.

Despite the negative votes, the PCUSA has remained divided over our ordination standards and current Book of Order language. As a way of responding to this ongoing division, the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force was formed in 2002 and charged with helping our denomination move forward on this issue.. They brought their report to the 2006 General Assembly in Birmingham.

The PUP report called on the denomination to keep its current standards regarding ordination. However it also called for governing bodies to allow for scruples when it came to decisions on ordination. This practice went back to 1729 when the Westminster Standards were first adopted as the constitution for the fledgling Presbyterian Church. Simply put, a candidate who came for ordination could declare a scruple, or disagreement, over what he believed to be a non-essential tenet of the church. (In those days all candidates were “he.”) The governing body could determine if the candidate’s scruple was an essential or non-essential tenet of the faith, and then either proceed with ordination or reject ordination. The PUP report essentially asked us to go back to that former practice. Their report was approved by a vote of 57% to 43% by the 2006 General Assembly.

The Permanent Judicial Commission of the PCUSA has also entered into this debate. The most recent ruling of the PJC suggested that a scruple was not acceptable when it came to behaviors specifically prohibited by the constitution. The 2008 General Assembly responded to this ruling by voting to remove the 78/79 Definitive Guidance and also recommended to the presbyteries the removal of G-6.0106b as currently written. It would be replaced by the language that is currently before us for a vote. The 2008 Assembly also approved a new Authoritative Interpretation which would allow us to go back to the standards and processes proposed by PUP in the event the proposed amendment is defeated.

**Pro:** It gives greater freedom to governing bodies to determine for themselves who is to be ordained. It moves us away from our focus on sexuality as a primary determinant of readiness for ordination and adds Jesus Christ to the standards for ordination. It eliminates language from the Book of Order that focuses on one form of behavior to the exclusion of many others. It will be seen by many as an appropriate interpretation of scripture.

**Con:** It significantly changes our current standards and will be seen by many as both a rejection of Biblical standards and a weakening of our moral standards. It will end the process suggested by the PUP report and cut off debate for many who are still trying to make up their minds on this issue. It may lead to greater turmoil across the denomination and the loss of members and congregations.

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee makes no recommendation on this amendment but invites thoughtful and respectful debate.

### **3. 08-C: Replacing “Sympathy” with “Compassion”**

#### **Background**

This amendment originated in an overture from a presbytery requesting the word “sympathy” be replaced with “empathy” in G-6.0401 – the description of the Office of Deacon. The rationale

for that change focused on the dangers of undifferentiated deacons becoming too entangled (sympathetic as opposed to empathetic) with those for whom they were caring.

The Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) observed that “sympathy” and “empathy” have “semantic fields that significantly overlap so there is nothing to be gained by making the proposed change. In fact, of the two, “sympathy” is actually in the Bible.

**Pro:** Surely we want deacons to be compassionate. If changing the word *sympathy* to *compassion* will prevent over-functioning deacons from becoming inappropriately entangled in the lives of those under their care, then this amendment has merit.

**Con:** Don’t we want sympathetic deacons? The New Testament does. (1 Peter 3:8)

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends disapproval of this amendment.

#### **4. 08-D: General Assembly Council Name Change**

##### **Background**

This amendment would change the name of the General Assembly Council to the General Assembly Mission Council.

**Pro:** Adding the word *mission* to the name of the Council would emphasize the primary role of the GAC as the coordinator of mission for the Presbyterian Church (USA).

**Con:** None

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends approval of this amendment.

#### **5. 08-E: Non-geographic Presbyteries**

##### **Background**

The Form of Government currently allows Synods to form within their bounds non-geographic presbyteries solely on the basis of ethnicity and language. Non-English speaking Koreans, Native Peoples, and Hispanics have difficulty participating in the life and mission of English speaking Presbyteries. This amendment further clarifies rationale for these judicatories and expands slightly the church’s latitude in establishing them.

**Pro:** We are a church seeking to serve faithfully in an immigrant nation. Non-Geographic Presbyteries give voice to those in our fellowship who might otherwise be silenced.

**Con:** We are one church and should find better ways to include our non-English speaking congregations in the life of the denomination.

Non-Geographic presbyteries privilege the voice of the minority congregations inappropriately. This is an unnecessary division in the body of believers and should be done away with entirely.

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends approval of this amendment.

## **6. 08-F and 08-I: Certified Christian Educators**

### **Background**

“The Church offices mentioned in the New Testament which this church has maintained include those of presbyters (ministers of the Word and Sacrament and elders) and deacons.” (G-6.0103)

“Presbytery is a corporate expression of the church consisting of all the churches and ministers of the Word and Sacrament within a certain district.” (G-11.0101)

Periodically in its history the Presbyterian Church has tried to create room within its polity for an elusive *fourth* office of ministry. These honest attempts to validate the contributions of talented and dedicated church professionals have most recently involved granting the rights and responsibilities of Presbytery membership to persons who work in and remain members of particular congregations. Granting voice and vote to Commissioned Lay Pastors and Certified Christian Educators creates confusing contradictions in the church’s polity. These amendments are good faith attempts to clarify the relationship between Presbyteries and the Certified Christian Educators laboring within their bounds.

Certification is a professional credential earned by individuals working as Christian Educators in the church. The Certification process does not involve an examination by the Presbytery or a vote by Presbytery to confer Certification. Certified Christian Educators (CCEs) are not ordained to an office of ministry nor are they admitted to membership in the Presbytery. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution finds it an “aberration in our polity” that such persons should be granted the rights of full membership in the Presbytery.

**Amendment F** clarifies the relationship between the Presbytery and CCEs within its bounds by explicitly limiting CCEs who are granted the rights of voice and vote to those CCEs presently engaged in educational ministry within the Presbytery. A CCE who is, for instance, teaching in a public school would not be granted voice and vote at Presbytery on the basis of their Certification alone.

**Amendment I** seeks to limit the rights of voice and vote at Presbytery by explicitly excluding Certified Associate Christian Educators from those granted such rights. If passed these privileges would be conferred upon Certified Christian Educators alone.

Since Amendments F and I involve changes to the same paragraph of the Form of Government, should they both pass ratification the final language will be determined by the Advisory Committee on the Constitution.

## **D: 4**

**Pro:** Each of these amendments sorts out particular areas of confusion about the role of Certified Christian Educators in the life of the Presbytery. They do not speak to the underlying “aberration” but they do provide guidance for Presbyteries on the specific concerns which they seek to address.

The resulting language in G-11 and G-14 will be slightly less muddled than it is now.

Vote for these amendments if you feel strongly about what membership in the Presbytery involves and requires.

**Con:** Clarity in these matters is elusive.

If Certified Christian Educators (and CLPs for that matter) are admitted to the Presbytery as hybrid, adjunct members, why not Certified Associate Christian Educators as well?

Vote against these amendments if you feel strongly about preserving and expanding the privileges currently conferred upon Christian Educators by way of peer certification.

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends disapproval of these two amendments.

## **7. 08-G: Synod Membership on Permanent Committees**

### **Background**

This is a technical adjustment to the language of the Constitution to allow the size of General Assembly permanent committees (other than the GAC, GANC, and Committee on Representation) to be determined by the mission of the committee itself and not based on some formula of geographical representation.

**Pro:** The Amendment will make the work of the General Assembly proceed more efficiently.

**Con:** The gathered wisdom of the entire church may not be available to committees that do not have members from each synod.

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends approval of this amendment.

## **8. 08-H: Ordination Exams**

### **Background**

Because passing the exams is a requirement for Ordination, and they are administered only twice a year, it has become common practice for Inquirers and Candidates to start taking the exams as early as possible in their Seminary studies in order to get as many attempts as possible prior to graduation. Currently the book is permissive as to when Inquirers and Candidates may begin taking the exams requiring only the approval of the Committee on Preparation for Ministry under whose care they are enrolled.

## D: 5

For all exams except Bible Content, the amendment advises Committees on Preparation for Ministry to approve only Candidates who have completed two years of Seminary, or its equivalent as well as supervised experience in the practice of pastoral ministry. It would require the CPM to attest to the Candidates academic preparedness for taking the exams.

The goal of this amendment is to raise the competency of those persons taking the Ordination exams in hopes of lowering the failure rate. If, for instance, we advise Presbyteries to require seminarians to have taken a class in Reformed Theology before they will be authorized to take the Theology Exam then fewer people will fail the Theology Exam.

The Amendment, however, makes no such requirement. If passed, authorization for taking the Ordination Exams will still be at the discretion of the Presbytery CPM, and the incentive to start taking the exams as early and often as possible will remain in tact.

**Pro:** The goal of this amendment is worthwhile. Regulatory (must) instead of Advisory language (shall ordinarily) would be preferable, but the advice offered is valid. The Ordination process is distorted by repeated exam failures by under-qualified inquirers or candidates.

**Con:** The Amendment makes no substantive change to the Book of Order. It may be seen as another burden for the Committee on Preparation for Ministry to assume.

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends disapproval of this amendment.

## 9. 08-J: Alternative Forms of Resolution

### Background

The Amendment would clarify language in the Rules of Discipline adding needed specificity to wording that is currently vague. It would identify and expand the rights of the accuser in a disciplinary proceeding regarding the use and outcome of “Alternative Forms of Resolution.” Alternative forms of resolution in disciplinary cases would become easier to use.

**Pro:** The last place the Constitution should be vague is in the procedures followed during a disciplinary proceeding.

**Con:** None

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends approval of this amendment.

## D: 6

## **10. 08-K, L, M, N: Ecumenical Statements**

### **Background**

Each of these Statements represents an advancement of ongoing ecumenical dialogue. None of them unite us to another Christian communion in a way that would compromise our denominational integrity. On the whole they identify points of common agreement and pledge us to continuing conversation with our Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Korean Presbyterian, and Moravian sisters and brothers.

**Pro:** These statements lift up Jesus' desire for unity among all believers and affirm our belief in the one, holy and apostolic church.

**Con:** The statements aren't perfect, the points of agreement and contact between denominations, the pledges of future conversation and joint mission are excessively tentative.

**Committee Recommendation:** The Committee recommends approval of these ecumenical statements.

**D: 7**