

June 23, 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

In Jeremiah 29:11, God encourages us with these words, *“For surely I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord, “plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.”*

The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) met June 14 – 21, 2014, in Detroit, Michigan. Many complicated issues came before the Assembly that are of interest to the churches of our presbyteries. Our commissioners, as did those of our sister presbyteries, worshiped, studied, discussed, prayed, and together they made decisions in service to the Church of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Now, over the next two years, commissioners of the 221st General Assembly (2014), and we, as presbytery leaders, will be about the business of interpreting and guiding our members and member congregations through the decisions made.

There are also decisions which each individual presbytery will have to make. These decisions include proposed amendments to the *Book of Order* and a proposed amendment for inclusion of the Belhar Confession in the *Book of Confessions*. May we seek to embody the grace and love of our Savior as we engage with these decisions and commit ourselves to one another and to Almighty God as we move forward together in service to Christ’s church.

The 221st General Assembly (2014) has taken three significant actions on the teaching and practice of marriage, relating to our life together and to the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s Book of Order. First, following a lengthy debate, the Assembly approved, in a 371 to 238 vote, to adopt an “Authoritative Interpretation” (AI) of the Constitution. An AI is an interpretation of the Constitution by the General Assembly or the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. It is binding denomination-wide. The AI approved by the Assembly permits pastors to marry same-gender couples in churches **where it is permitted by state law**, even though marriage is currently defined in our Constitution as being between a man and a woman. This permission takes effect immediately. **Please note: Same-gender marriage is not permitted by state law in South Carolina.**

Second, the Assembly approved, in a 429 to 175 vote, to recommend rewriting the *Book of Order* section W-4.900, in which marriage is described as between “a man and a woman”. The new language being proposed for presbytery ratification defines marriage as “a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and to support each other for the rest of their lives.” After several other provisions, it concludes with this important qualification: **“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.”

Now, unlike an authoritative interpretation, a constitutional amendment is first voted on by the General Assembly, ***but it must be confirmed by the majority of presbyteries before it is effective.*** This constitutional amendment to the *Book of Order* will require ratification by a majority of the 171 presbyteries.

The constitutional amendment to the *Book of Confession* will require ratification by a two-thirds majority of the 171 presbyteries. Therefore, each presbytery will vote on these constitutional amendments sometime within the next year. ***All church councils are under the authority of the Constitution.***

Third, the 221st General Assembly (2014) also directed the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board (PMAB) and the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) to **engage in the process of working together with churches in the task of reconciliation.** The reconciliation process will start with visits to each presbytery. The PMAB and OGA will serve as a resource for each presbytery's discussion of these actions in congregations and the presbytery at-large, as they present voices of reconciliation for the unity of the church.

Included with this letter are Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about what each of these actions means and does not mean for our presbyteries and for each of our churches. Also included is a bibliography of resources and responses, which have come from a variety of sources in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Each of our five presbyteries will be moving ahead with plans to report on actions of the General Assembly. This will include receiving reports from our commissioners, providing opportunities for members to ask questions, and preparing ourselves to vote on proposed changes to the Constitution.

We recognize that other issues that the 221st General Assembly approved will be a cause for joy for some and concern for others. One of those issues is the divestment from three U.S. companies involved in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in the Middle East. After more than a three-hour debate, the Assembly approved, in a 310 to 303 vote, an overture calling for divestment from Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola Solutions. Also included in this mailing is a resource on Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) on this decision made by the Assembly.

Here is a brief outline of Middle East divestment decision: After a 10-year history of attempted engagement with Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard, and Motorola Solutions, the 221st Assembly directed the church to divest its holdings in these three companies, as they violate the denomination's policy of not profiting from "non-peaceful pursuits." The action affirms Israel's right to exist securely. It disavows association with or endorsement of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement. It does not call for divestment from Israel or economic boycotts. The church maintains significant

investments in companies that do business in Israel. Another important note is that the Assembly stated the following concerning the controversial study called *Zionism Unsettled*: The General Assembly “declares that *Zionism Unsettled* does not represent the views of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)”

If there are other issues which are of concern to you, please contact your presbytery leadership and commissioners to the 221st General Assembly. We will be glad to assist you in any manner that we can.

We are aware that there are those who are rejoicing and there are others who are weeping, due to some of the actions of the 221st General Assembly. Therefore, one of the challenges before us is whether or not we are able to exercise mutual forbearance with brothers and sisters who differ from us. Can we show a more excellent way by remaining together in love and forbearance amid our differences? Can we model the way of living that Scripture calls us to embrace: “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15)?

Moreover, Jesus says, “...go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). The Lord is with us. Therefore, let us fix our focus on following Christ’s commission to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them.

Praying that it may be so, we remain,

Yours in Jesus Christ,

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