

PPL Report on the 217th General Assembly of the PC(USA)

Birmingham, Alabama, June 15-22, 2006

GA Commissioners affirm lives of viable babies

An overture from Redstone Presbytery affirming that “lives of viable unborn babies – those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered – ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted,” was amended and then approved by a wide margin late Wednesday evening, June 21st, at the 217th GA in Birmingham, Alabama. All General Assembly business is referred initially to committees for discussion. Committees then make a recommendation to the plenary for final action on the overture, report, or other business. The Health Issues Committee was assigned all business related to abortion, euthanasia and other life issues. This committee sent to the plenary floor the recommendation affirming protection of viable babies. The committee’s decision to recommend the overture followed a respectful debate and prayerful consideration during which commissioners acknowledged the deep divide in the church on abortion and sought clarity about this overture’s effect on the 1992 “Problem Pregnancy and Abortion” policy.

Some commissioners expressed concern that the nuanced language of the 2002-2003 statements on late-term abortion might be lost and moved to add some of that language to the Redstone statement. An amendment was also made to clarify that this overture would supersede only the 2002 & 2003 statements on late-term pregnancy and not the 1992 policy. The overture provides clarity in its simple call to protect viable unborn babies and their mothers. It looks to churches to provide “tangible support to women in problem pregnancies” and it affirms adoption “as a provision for women who deliver children they are not able to care for.” This is an overture the whole church ought to be able to affirm. “You can be pro-choice and vote for this overture,” declared Clergy Commissioner Donna Marsh from National Capitol Presbytery. Commissioners apparently agreed with her. The amended overture was approved by a vote of 381/117/6. The complete text of the statement is printed below:

General Assembly statement on late-term abortion

The church has a responsibility to provide public witness and to offer guidance, counsel, and support to those who make or interpret laws and public policies about abortion and problem pregnancies. Pastors have a duty to counsel with and pray for those who face decisions about problem pregnancies. Congregations have a duty to pray for and support those who face these choices, to offer support for women and families to help make unwanted pregnancies less likely to occur, and to provide practical support for those facing the birth of a child with medical anomalies, birth after rape or incest, or those who face health, economic, or other stresses.

The church also affirms the value of children and the importance of nurturing, protecting, and advocating their well-being. The church, therefore, appreciates the challenge each woman and family face when issues of personal well-being arise in the later stages of a pregnancy.

“In life and death, we belong to God.” Life is a gift from God. We may not know exactly when human life begins, and have but an imperfect understanding of God as the giver of life and of our own human existence, yet we recognize that life is precious to God, and we should preserve and protect it. We derive our understanding of human life from Scripture and the Reformed Tradition in light of science, human experience, and reason guided by the Holy Spirit. Because we are made in the image of God, human beings are moral agents, endowed by the Creator with the capacity to make choices. Our Reformed Tradition recognizes that people do not always make moral choices, and forgiveness is central to our faith. In the Reformed Tradition, we affirm that God is the only Lord of conscience—not the state or the church. As a community, the church challenges the faithful to exercise their moral agency responsibly.

When an individual woman faces the decision whether to terminate a pregnancy, the issue is intensely personal, and may manifest itself in ways that do not reflect public rhetoric, or do not fit neatly into medical, legal, or policy guidelines. Humans are empowered by the spirit prayerfully to make significant moral choices, including the choice to continue or end a pregnancy. Human choices should not be made in a moral vacuum, but must be based on Scripture, faith, and Christian ethics. For any choice, we are accountable to God; however, even when we err, God offers to forgive us.

We affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies — those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered — ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted. In cases where problems of life or health of the mother arise in a pregnancy, the church supports efforts to protect the life and health of both the mother and the baby. When late-term pregnancies must be terminated, we urge decisions intended to deliver the baby alive. We look to our churches to provide pastoral and tangible support to women in problem pregnancies and to surround these families with a community of care. We affirm adoption as a provision for women who deliver children they are not able to care for, and ask our churches to assist in seeking loving, Christian, adoptive families.

This General Assembly holds this statement as its position on a Christian response to problems that arise late in pregnancies. We find it to be consistent with current General Assembly policy on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion (1992), and supersedes General Assembly statements of 2002 and 2003 on late-term pregnancies and abortion.”

Commissioners declined an opportunity to end funding for advocacy for abortion.

The Assembly chose not to approve an overture from Beaver-Butler Presbytery asking the GA to cease funding for advocacy "for or against" abortion. Little discussion took place on the plenary floor but in committee there was substantial debate on this overture. Commissioners were clearly concerned that something be done to communicate abortion policy more clearly to church members and to eliminate one-sided advocacy on abortion.

Many conscientious pro-life Presbyterians are deeply disturbed by the blatant and long-term advocacy for abortion rights by PC(USA) entities such as the Washington Office, PARO (Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options) and ACWC (Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns). These groups reiterate that they do not advocate 'abortion' but only advocate 'choice.' Overture Advocate Jim Powers presented clear examples to the committee of opposition to the Federal Unborn Victims of Violence Act, the Partial Birth Abortion Ban, the appointment of pro-life judges and "Abstinence Only" education by these groups. It became clear to committee members that advocacy by PC(USA) entities is focused on preserving only one choice – the choice of abortion. There is no advocacy by these groups promoting pregnancy care or support for adoption – both which offer women life-giving choices for their babies.

Commissioners wanted to know how advocacy for abortion choice was funded.

Many on the committee expressed disapproval that church dollars are used to publish and distribute materials that advocate for the choice of abortion. Some noted that their churches withhold per capita for this very reason. Committee members sought clarification of the exact source of funding for such materials. Elenora Giddings Ivory, Director of the Presbyterian Washington Office, stated that PARO received funding of \$9000 in designated contributions and that individuals "can contribute directly to PARO and PPL if that is their choice."

Committee members asked specifically how the recent PARO mailing to commissioners was funded. They were told by denomination staff that they "did not think it was funded by per capita." After further questions it was clearly stated that General Mission funding is used for the publications of ACWC (Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns) and the Washington Office and that ACWC also receives some per capita funds.

Commissioners expressed a desire to see an end to one-sided advocacy but did not agree that ceasing funding for all advocacy "for and against abortion" was an appropriate means to accomplish it. Commissioners in ple-

nary upheld the committee's recommendation to disapprove this overture by a vote of 399/71/2.

Commissioners charge every Presbytery to study abortion using Scripture and prayer.

One item of business presented commissioners with an opportunity to make a stronger, clearer statement against abortion. In their overture Mississippi Presbytery stated that "God alone is the "author and giver" of life and reveals in Scripture that the miracle of life begins at the moment of conception." Because of this belief, the presbytery declared, "the church stands against abortion." The overture was the result of a study on abortion by the Covenant Church Session of Jackson, Mississippi.

Overture Advocate John Henegen explained the process of careful study in which his church engaged. The session studied Scripture, interviewed physicians and ordained ministers, and studied what other denominations have said about abortion. They did this, Henegen said, "because we thought this is part of the reformed tradition of this church." We thought it is important for the church to speak with clarity about this issue." Describing himself as a "yellow dog democrat" who would have opposed this overture when they began their study, he wholeheartedly advocated that the General Assembly adopt it. "We fully believe that God knows us before we are born," Henegen said. "He is inclusive. He wants us to protect those that cannot speak for themselves and this includes the unborn." To those who fear that the overture would obstruct a woman's right to choice, Henegen said "The overture does not violate any previous statement of the GA, ...does not have a government role, does not deny the woman has a role in making the decision."

In the end, it was the *process of study* used by Covenant Church that commissioners affirmed rather than the clear statement opposing abortion. Rather than adopt the overture which encouraged tangible help for women and extended grace to those who have had abortion experiences, the Assembly endorsed the following:

To commend the Presbytery of Mississippi for its use of group discernment concerning abortion, and recommend that all Presbyteries create task forces to replicate their process of prayer and study, that hearts and minds may be open to God's wisdom through scripture, other resources, and one another, and to direct the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to communicate this action to the Presbyteries.

A monitoring report from ACSWP was amended by committee and then received by the GA.

The committee chose to recommend 'receiving' the report rather than 'approving' it. A statement that would have reaffirmed *all previous statements* on problem pregnancies and abortion was amended to clarify that only

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the *current* (1992) abortion policy was affirmed. Text was added to “ensure an evenhanded and fair representation” of current abortion policy by entities of the church. ACSWP was charged by the 212th GA (2000) with the task of developing a monitoring report on the fair implementation of the 1992 policy on abortion and reporting back every five years beginning in 2005. They were to ensure that all of the views outlined in the 1992 statement are represented in PC(USA) advocacy and publications.

Several life related actions passed by consent.

Four items came from the Health Issues Committee to the plenary floor as a consent agenda and were overwhelmingly affirmed by the larger body.

- Theology and Worship received a two year extension for planning a conference on end-of-life issues.
- An overture calling for “theological and moral discourse” addressing the spiritual dimensions of suicide was approved. It focuses on preventing suicide and self-harm among youth. The topic of teen suicide will be incorporated in an upcoming paper on mental illness being written by ACSWP.
- Another paper, “Living into the Body of Christ: Towards Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities,” was sent to plenary with amendments. Language related to inclusiveness in areas of reproductive choice and sexual orientation was removed resulting in a more focused paper. Committee members worried that such all-inclusive text would inhibit full support by the church for those with disabilities and was, in fact, related to a different issue altogether.
- Commissioners also approved a letter calling for the removal of a toxic landfill in New Orleans threatening the lives and health of Vietnamese immigrants.

Scripture & the Confessions are the standard for future materials about sexual relationships.

Shenango Presbytery sent an overture that was approved by the GA and directs the General Assembly Council and all other PC(USA) entities:

[T]o use the biblical and confessional teachings that sexual relationships belong only within the bond of marriage of a man and a woman as the standard for the development of any future materials or recommendations for materials in print or in its website.

Youth Advisory Delegates prompted an amendment to add “information on reproductive health” to teaching and discussion materials. (For an excellent article on this overture’s impact see www.jimberkley.blogspot.com.)

The Trinity Report 'received' but not 'approved.'

A paper from Theology and Worship titled “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing” was amended to preserve traditional names of “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” for use in the Baptismal Formula and then ‘received’ rather than ‘approved’ by the General Assembly. The controversial paper explores new names for The Triune God

such as ‘Ark,’ ‘Rainbow,’ and ‘Dove.’

“We do believe this paper is looking to the culture,” said Jonathan Lovelady. Lovelady moved a minority report to refer the paper back to Theology & Worship for re-writing and return to the 2008 GA. “What does God want to be called? What name gives us the greatest possibility for relationship?” Youth Advisory Delegate Ken McDevitt added: “This paper has conformed the Word of God to our lifestyles rather than our lifestyles to the Word of God. It was not the ‘womb’ that descended upon the disciples, but the ‘Holy Spirit.’”

“We must be reverent when we speak of God’s name,” said Dorothy Hill, a theological student from Gordon-Conwell. His name is “revealed through his Word in Old and New Testaments.” Commissioner Gray from Abingdon charged that the world needs clear proclamation. “We call God Father because he reveals himself in Scripture as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Commissioner Alan Trafford referred to the version of the Doxology sung in that plenary session which omitted the use of ‘Father,’ ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit.’ “Words matter,” Trafford said. “Our Triune God is not ‘Speaker,’ ‘Word’ and ‘Breath’ ...our Triune God is ‘Father,’ ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit.’ Words matter.”

The attempt to return the report to Theology and Worship was defeated. The amended report was received for study, but not approved as a theological statement.

Action on PUP Report gives local bodies power to determine what is essential for ordination.

Presbyteries and sessions have power and responsibility to determine which standards are essential for ordination of church officers according to a new Authoritative Interpretation, part of the Report of the Peace, Unity and Purity Task Force approved by the 217th GA. “The standards have not changed,” declared Stated Clerk Clifton Kirkpatrick to the press immediately after the vote. Still, the AI in Rec. 5 of the PUP Report clearly gives local governing bodies authority to determine

(1) Whether a candidate being examined for ordination and/or installation as elder, deacon, or minister of Word and Sacrament has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards for fitness for office, and (2) Whether any departure constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity under G-6.0108 of the Book of Order, thus barring the candidate from ordination and/or installation.

Under Rec. 5, ordination decisions are still subject to review by higher governing bodies who can determine:

Whether the examination ordination and installation decision comply with the constitution of the PC(USA), and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately.

Recommendations 1-3,6 and 7 of the PUP report were approved unchanged. Rec. 4 encourages governing

bodies within the church to use alternatives to parliamentary decision-making. The following amended text clarified that alternative methods should be used prior to, rather than during, decision-making. The edited text reads: "to explore the use of alternative forms of discernment preliminary to decision-making, especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues."

Attempts to remove G-6.0106b were defeated.

This GA disapproved all attempts to alter or delete G-6.0106b which defines "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness" as a behavioral standard for all deacons, elders or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. Commissioners also steadfastly refused to approve any statements affirming marriage as a 'gift of God,' defining marriage as between one man and one woman, or calling for ministry to those in sexual brokenness.

Divestment statement of 2004 revised.

An alternate resolution was the response chosen by commissioners to multiple overtures seeking to rescind the 2004 GA action related to "phased selective divestment in multinational corporations operating in Israel." The new resolution acknowledges the hurt and misunderstanding caused in the Jewish community by the 2004 action and states that any financial investments of the PC(USA) in the Middle East area should "be invested in only peaceful pursuits."

Social Justice Issues reflect work of ACSWP.

- ACSWP is to study and update the policy on ministry to the homeless in consultation with Presbyterian Hunger Program, Urban Ministries Program, The Presbyterian Washington Office and PHEWA.
- Commissioners approved an overture objecting to torture in spite of concerns of a former member of the armed forces that the overture implied guilt without substantiating information. A paper on human rights was approved and a statement that terrorism and suicide bombings are a crime against humanity.
- A report on globalization from ACSWP was adopted after deletion of an item calling for a study of U.S. tax policies and its effects the economies of the world.
- A request to make a statement about labor practices at Smithfield Packing Inc. was referred to ACSWP.

Montreat Historical Society to be closed.

Commissioners upheld the COGA recommendation to close the Presbyterian Historical Society in Montreat. Montreat records will be housed at Columbia Theological Seminar in Decatur, GA or the PHS site in Philadelphia with a few artifacts remaining at Montreat.

The GA responded to polity and property items.

- A feasibility study on the establishment of a Korean-language synod was approved but Beaver-Butler's proposal for non-geographic presbyteries was disapproved.

- A proposed amendment to G-11.0503 of the Book of Order to include commissioned lay pastors in presbytery COM communications was approved.
- A Stockton Presbytery overture to amend G-8.0201 to make "all property held by or for a particular church ...the sole property of that church" was defeated.
- The Office of the General Assembly was given the task of adding a reverse concordance of Scriptural allusions to the Indexes in the Book of Order.
- The Form Of Government (FOG) Task Force was charged with reporting to presbyteries by Sep 1, 2007 with a revision of the FOG that "shall preserve our foundational polity" and provide "leadership for local congregations as missional communities." The revised FOG is to keep the presbytery as the central government unit but provide flexibility at all levels. The Task Force is to be guided by Rec. 1-4 of the PUP report. Sections G-6.0106b and G-8.0201 of the Book of Order are to be excluded from the revision process.
- A proposed revision of Chapter 14 of the FOG was sent to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes as were six additional amendment possibilities.
- The Assembly voted to permit churches to make staff members ineligible for election as church officers, and interpreted G-14.0513b in the Book of Order to mean that associate pastors and interim pastors are not eligible to be the next installed pastor of that congregation.
- Commissioners rejected an overture requiring presbytery consent for AIs. They approved a pastoral letter on the AI of 1993 explaining its role in the church's constitution and charged Theology & Worship with preparing a study guide on this AI to be sent electronically to each congregation.
- All overtures seeking to change G-6.0106b were disapproved in light of actions taken on the PUP report.

Mission Coordination & budgets

Commissioners approved a 5% fee on all designated receipts insisting that GAC help churches communicate this change to members. They implored GAC & the Mission Funding Task Force to seek ways of budgeting to deal with this changing reality. Joe Bailey, chief financial officer, stated that \$800,000 was received in 2005 from such fees avoiding elimination of another 16 positions. Bailey explained that the fees offset administrative costs for the whole work of the church.

A task force was approved to respond to issues raised by the Women of Color Consultation held in 2004. Costs were projected at \$75,000 over three years.

The Assembly included HIV/AIDS as a beneficiary of the Peacemaking Offering (25% suggested).

Commissioners approved a per capita budget of \$5.79 for 2007 and the same amount for 2008.