

## **Actions of the 219<sup>th</sup> GA on Issues related to Human Life**

### ***More than once I found myself asking, "What did we just do?"***

Commissioners to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) took action on hundreds of pieces of business (I heard numbers from 200-1000) in 3 days of plenary action. Each item of business is sent to one of 19 Committees of the General Assembly for consideration and action by a 40-50 commissioners. Committee recommendations are then brought to the floor of plenary for action by the whole GA body. "No action" is not an option so every item must be approved or disapproved or answered by an alternative action.

In plenary session, committee recommendations are often 'voted' upon by consensus. It goes like this: the committee moderator moves the item. The GA Moderator, Cynthia Bolbach, elected on the first day of GA, then would ask, "Any objections?" If no one rose or ran to a microphone in the next 5-10 seconds, she would continue, "So ordered." And the item was approved. Even commissioners who have been to a number of General Assemblies are hard pressed under this process to find the item before its action is completed. It is a formidable hurdle for the many commissioners who are at GA for the very first time. It makes it easy for the institutional powers to maintain the status quo.

### ***You've already heard about the hot topics.***

You probably already know the actions of the 219<sup>th</sup> GA which have been widely reported in the public and church media. The Board of Pensions has been urged to provide health and pension benefits to same gender partners and their children. Three controversial items will be coming to presbyteries for their votes: 1) Another proposed re-write of the G-6.0106b section of the Book of Order to replace the fidelity and chastity ordination standard with vague language open to local interpretation, 2) a proposed replacement to the entire G section of the Form of Government, and a proposal to add the Belhar Confession to the Book of Confessions. In addition, two reports on Christian Marriage and Civil Unions have been sent to the church for study.

This report will focus on items which received less attention but have profound effect on how the church views life in the womb. The results are a mixed bag and cannot be described as "victories", but they represent the faithful witness of individuals, churches, and commissioners who continue to confront the PC(USA) with its error in condoning abortion.

### ***Actions on Life issues: a summary***

(For more detail on these items of business, visit [PPL's GA webpage](#))

### **Commissioners ask Stated Clerk to advocate ratification of CEDAW**

Commissioners approved (by consensus) an instruction to the Stated Clerk to send letters to the U.S. President and Congress urging them to ratify "without reservations" the U. N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The document was not made available to commissioners and was described to committee members as "abortion neutral". In fact, if the United States ratifies this document it has the potential to override all state restrictions on abortion and require medical providers to either provide abortion services or refer for abortion.

## **GA disapproves paper “On Living a Human Life Before God”**

A paper from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, “On Living a Human Life Before God,” was disapproved with the following comment.

With thanksgiving for the diligence and hard work of the authors of the study paper, *On Living a Human Life Before God*, the original paper, the Nature and Value of Human Life (1981), is in many ways superior as a tool for moral discourse. Moreover, the concerns of the overture adopted by the 212th General Assembly (2000), Overture 00-95: On Gun Violence, are more adequately addressed by item 11-06: *On Gun Violence*.

Commissioners voted electronically 538/119/15 to disapprove the paper which took 10 years to write. The paper failed to accomplish the assigned task to update a 1981 paper “On the Nature and Value of Human Life.” ACSWP asked for \$13,000 more in funds to be allocated to developing resources for more study and discussion papers on ethical questions on human life issues, but commissioners were not interested in giving more time or money to what they perceived to be a failed effort. PPL believes the PC(USA) needs a biblical, theological foundational paper on human life, but agrees that this paper was not helpful to the church.

## **Conflict of views on abortions brings confusion to clarity.**

Call me naïve if you will, but I really thought that two items brought to this assembly speaking out against violence, force, and coercion against women contained clear messages that the whole church could affirm together. I was wrong.

An overture from Boise Presbytery asked the GA to make a statement regarding violence against pregnant women. Overture advocate, Rebecca Lee, was concerned about what she saw as negativity toward pregnant women in our culture. She was alarmed by growing reports of violence toward pregnant women and the increasing numbers of murders of pregnant women. It seemed like a simple request to ask the GA to speak out against such violence—not so! The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy advised against the overture suggesting alternate reproductive rights language and commissioners obliged. The resulting statement focused on womens’ rights does not reflect the intent of the Boise overture, but was adopted by the General Assembly and reads as follows:

*“The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affirms females’ right and capacity to make responsible decisions regarding their sexual lives, including the right to use contraception, to reject sexual activity, to continue a pregnancy, or when necessary to end a pregnancy; condemns the injustice of any force, coercion, or violence against females to compel pregnancy, the continuation of pregnancy, sterilization, or abortion; commends and encourages those who provide shelter, medical care, and counseling for females subject to domestic violence and coercion in reproductive issues; and instructs the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly to communicate this concern and commitment to the Congress of the United States and the state legislatures, urging them to expand support for women’s shelters and transitional housing for women and children fleeing domestic and all other acts of violence, and to adopt legislation that provides adequate means of prosecuting those who perpetrate violence against females.*

*“In light of the many forms of violence perpetuated against women, the 219th General Assembly (2010) condemns violence against women in all forms and under all*

*circumstances as violations of God's will for women and men, whether that violence is perpetuated by a stranger or by an intimate partner, and commends and encourages all persons who provide shelter, counseling, and other forms of assistance for women experiencing coercion and violence."*

A motion offered in plenary, to delete the convoluted first paragraph and "say only those things we can say together" against violence to women, was defeated.

In another similar action, a startlingly clear statement proposed by the Presbytery of Prospect Hill speaking against forced abortion was made to be also about "the injustice of any forced or coerced decisions to carry a pregnancy to term." The resulting text (below) was approved by consensus.

*"The Presbytery of Prospect Hill overtures the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA) to declare that we stand with all women against the injustice of any forced or coerced abortions [and the injustice of any forced or coerced decisions to carry a pregnancy to term]."*

### Addition of John Calvin quote to Book of Order rejected

Commissioners assigned to the Committee on Theological Issues and Institutions debated whether to include words from John Calvin in the Directory for Worship of the Book of Order section on baptism, regarding God's adoption of believers children before they are born. With the added quote the section would have read:

***"The Baptism of children witnesses to the truth that God's love claims people before they are able to respond in faith and God pronounces that he adopts our infants as his children, before they are born."***<sup>1</sup>

*" 1. (John Calvin, The Institutes of the Christian Religion, IV:15:20)"*

During the open hearings on this item 13 persons gave testimony: 5 in favor of adding Calvin's words and 8 against. P.J. Southam was the sole overture advocate speaking for the overture while 8 resources persons from staff and entities of the PC(USA) opposed the addition. The committee's recommendation was to disapprove and the General Assembly concurred with that recommendation. In spite of the defeat of the overture it served as a witness to the truth of Scripture that God knows and calls us while we are yet in the wombs of our mothers. (see related [article](#) by Carolyn Poteet).

### Commissioner's Resolution answered with an alternate resolution

A Commissioner's resolution urging the Board of Pensions "to discontinue paying for induced abortion as a covered benefit in its Medical Benefits Plan (unless a licensed physician documents that it is necessary to preserve the physical life of the mother), was answered by an alternate resolution which reads:

*The 219th General Assembly (2010) urges the Board of Pensions to develop a plan to ensure that funds from any Relief of Conscience churches do not go to fund abortions through any avenue.*

The current Relief of Conscience plan is ineffective for three reasons: 1) It does not separate dues streams for the health care coverage of Presbytery, Synod, & GA staff whose wages and

dues are paid for out of per capita funds. 2) The ROC plan is not publicized and many pastors and churches do not know that there is a way they can ask for their dues to be separated from funds that cover the cost of abortions. 3) All abortion claims continue to be covered as requested, even for pastors and their families in churches that have requested relief of conscience.

On my first day back in the Presbyterians Pro-Life Office after General Assembly, I received an email from a pastor who wanted to know how to request relief of conscience. He had not heard of ROC before this General Assembly and did not know such a plan was available. I sent him [PPL's booklet](#) which describes the plan for Relief of Conscience and how to apply for it through your presbytery. The Board of Pensions has no such resource available. Finding information about the process for applying for Relief of Conscience on their website is an exercise in frustration.

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