

The Board of Pensions  
of the  
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Copy of letter sent to churches, pastors, and governing bodies

March 1999

Greetings!

The 210th General Assembly (1998) approved a report of the Board of Pensions regarding a new Relief of Conscience process. In approving that report the General Assembly also adopted the following comment: "That the Board of Pensions continue to communicate to all sessions and pastors the specific description of the relief of conscience program, including details on how to enroll in it." (*Minutes*, 1998, Part I, pp. 38, 544)

This letter is intended to meet this request of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

### **Background**

The 203rd General Assembly (1991) requested the Board of Pensions to find a way "...of providing relief for congregations and ministers who object, as a matter of conscience, to participation in the denominational medical plan to the extent that it funds abortions...." (*Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 64)

The 204th General Assembly (1992) adopted the Board of Pensions report on the results of the study and a process for relief of conscience (*Minutes*, 1992, Part I, pp. 809 ff.; pp. 96, 98). Discussions continued regarding the adequacy of the relief of conscience process. In 1995 the Board of Pensions implemented a revised administrative process that included a two-year review.

In 1996 the General Assembly again requested the Board of Pensions to study relief of conscience. During the 209th General Assembly (1997), the Board of Pensions made an interim report. (*Minutes*, 1997, Part I, pp. 656-657) The final report was presented to the 210th General Assembly (1998). (*Minutes*, 1998, Part I, pp. 545, 546)

### **A Polity Based Relief of Conscience**

This Relief of Conscience process is based on the polity of the assignment.

Presbyterian polity affirms that actions are adopted by a representative majority and that the majority shall prevail. But the *1992 Problem Pregnancies and Abortion Report* adopted by the General Assembly clearly recognized that persons come to different conclusions on the basis of the study of scripture and prayerful decision and that the church ought to maintain its fellowship with those who differ. Further, the General Assembly's objective was to assure that mission funds would not be used in violation of conscience.

The polity-based Relief of Conscience provides that the parliamentary majority, defined only as employing organizations who have not sought relief of conscience, afford coverage for those who seek to terminate a pregnancy.

There are two position papers adopted by the General Assembly that may be helpful for persons wishing to study relief of conscience and some of the attending issues: *Problem Pregnancies and Abortion Task*

## Regarding Relief of Conscience – page two

*Force Report* (see *Minutes*, 1992) and the Historic Principles, Conscience and Church Government (See *Minutes*, 1983). These papers are also available through the Office of the General Assembly.

### **How This Concept Works**

The Board of Pensions divides the dues stream between those employing organizations and subscribers who have not sought relief of conscience and those who have been certified by their presbytery of jurisdiction to be relief of conscience employing organizations. All medical claims for abortion procedures and HMO capitation fees shall be paid from the non-relief of conscience dues stream. A dollar amount equal to the cost of abortion claims from the prior year will be set aside from the relief of conscience dues stream and placed in an account to assist in the medical claims of adopted newborn dependents. After payment of those claims and fees, the two dues streams will be joined and all other medical claims and costs will be paid from the merged dues streams.

### **How Relief of Conscience is Obtained**

Relief of Conscience is granted to churches because churches pay the benefits dues. To obtain the status of a relief of conscience church, the session must pass a resolution seeking relief of conscience from the presbytery of jurisdiction. The resolution is sent to the presbytery's Stated Clerk. If granted, the presbytery Stated Clerk notifies the Board of Pensions of the action of the presbytery.

There is no recommended form or style of the request to the presbytery. The request should note that the Session is opposed to the medical plan payment for abortion on grounds of conscience and the date the Session took the action.

The Board of Pensions acknowledges the receipt of the action to both the church and the presbytery.

The request for relief of conscience is granted at the discretion of the presbytery. Relief of conscience continues for a relief of conscience church regardless of the incumbent pastor because relief is granted to churches. If a session chooses to rescind its relief of conscience status, that request is also made through the presbytery.

If the pastor of a relief of conscience church changes service, the relief of conscience does not automatically follow to the new position.

The full coverage protection of the Medical Plan is available to all Plan members whether or not the church of service is a relief of conscience church.

Finally, The Board of Pensions serves the whole church. In serving the whole church, it is hoped that this Relief of Conscience process provides relief for those who object to medical coverage of abortion and at the same time affirms a woman's right to make a moral choice.

Cordially yours,

signed when sent