



IN THE NEWS

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What *Really* Happened at the 2014 PC(USA) General Assembly?

Introduction

Approximately 2,800 registered participants gathered in Detroit June 14–21, 2014, for the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Organizers of the church's biennial national meeting had chosen the theme "hope abounds" based on Romans 15:13. Bolstered by that theme, the Assembly's 654 commissioners (voting delegates) and 218 advisory delegates debated a number of potentially controversial issues, including same-gender marriage, Israel/Palestine, and gun violence.

As is true at many Presbyterian meetings, entanglements with parliamentary process sometimes slowed decision making. A string of technical glitches during the election of a moderator reduced commissioners to voting by paper ballot for the first time in more than twenty-five years. Yet in spite of the occasional procedural hurdle, the Assembly plowed ahead through a packed agenda. After seeking to ensure that voices on various sides of an issue were heard, commissioners more often than not rejected the safe or typically Presbyterian approach (refer for study, appoint a committee) in favor of more decisive action.

Assembly Leaders

Heath Rada, an elder from western North Carolina, was elected to a two-year term as moderator of

the General Assembly. Rada has had a long career as an educator and until his retirement was CEO of the Greater Richmond (Virginia) chapter of the American Red Cross. His supporters cited his skills as a mediator and bridge builder, qualities sorely needed in a church often polarized by divisive issues.

Rada's vice-moderator, Larissa Kwong Abazia, is a young Chinese American pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Forest Hills, a multicultural congregation in Queens, New York City. When first asked to stand for moderator, Rada hesitated, he said, because "I wasn't sure that I, as an older white male, was the face of the denomination as we're moving into the future." Introducing his vice moderator, he quipped, "Larissa is everything I am not."

Same-Gender Marriage

The Assembly adopted an "authoritative interpretation" of the PC(USA)'s constitution to grant pastors discretion in determining whether or not to conduct same-gender marriages in civil jurisdictions where such marriages are legal. The vote on the authoritative interpretation—which takes effect immediately—was 371 in favor and 238 against.

It also proposed a constitutional amendment to the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order* that would change

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the constitutional definition of marriage from “between a man and a woman” to “between two people, traditionally between a man and a woman.” The vote on the proposed constitutional amendment—which must be ratified by the denomination’s 171 presbyteries before taking effect—was 429 in favor and 175 against.

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Opponents argued against the measures on biblical and theological grounds, also warning that they would put at risk the already-fragile unity of the church. In the end, the desire to grant pastors greater discretion on marriage decisions outweighed other arguments. Nineteen states currently allow same-sex marriage, eight by court decision, eight by state legislative action, and three by popular vote.

The Assembly was careful to protect the consciences of those on both sides of the marriage issue. Both actions include language stating that no pastor is compelled to perform a marriage service for a same-sex couple and no church session is compelled to authorize the use of church property for such a service.

Previous Assemblies may have paved the way for this year’s historic action: The 2010 General Assembly approved—and the presbyteries ratified—a constitutional change allowing gays and lesbians to be ordained as ministers, elders, and deacons. Two years later, the Assembly voted neither to reaffirm nor change the PC(USA)’s definition of marriage but asked the whole church to

engage in a two-year period of study and discernment regarding Christian marriage.

Middle East

In the closest vote of the Assembly, commissioners approved divestment from Caterpillar Inc., Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions—U.S.

companies they determined are engaged in non-peaceful pursuits in Israel/Palestine. The vote was 310 in favor of divestment and 303 against it. A similar overture failed by two votes at the 220th General Assembly (2012).

Commissioners were told that the PC(USA)’s Board of

Pensions and Foundation have about \$21 million invested in the three companies. The recommendation to divest originated with the Mission Responsibility through Investment Committee (MRTI), which advises the denomination on socially responsible investing. MRTI has spent a decade monitoring and attempting to engage in dialogue with the companies, which it says are selling Israel bulldozers, surveillance technology, and other equipment that Israel uses to demolish homes and to enforce checkpoints and other harsh restrictions targeting Palestinians.

A preamble added by commissioners affirms the PC(USA)’s long-standing commitment to interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and relationships in the region. Before the divestment vote, the Assembly had voted to send out for presbytery endorsement a policy statement titled “The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” that states that the denomination “at all levels will be open to and will see opportunities for respectful dialogue and mutual relationships with entities and persons from other religious traditions.”

Moderator Rada reaffirmed that commitment, pleading with the media, “Please don’t report that this action is anything other than an expression of love for both our Jewish and Palestinian brothers and sisters.”

The divestment proposal sparked the most contentious debates of this Assembly, with former moderators advocating on both sides and a Jewish rabbi and a Palestine advisory delegate giving passionate plenary addresses. The Assembly’s action capped a week of intense lobbying, with multi-sloganed T-shirts crowding the hallways of the convention center as Jewish groups and others advocated both pro-divestment and anti-divestment stances.

Supporters of the Assembly’s action stressed repeatedly that it does not mean the Presbyterian Church is divesting from the State of Israel. In fact, the action urges “all church institutions to give careful consideration to possible investments in Israel-Palestine that advance peace and improve the lives of Palestinians and Israelis.” The measure passed by the Assembly also was amended to read: “This action on divestment does not mean an alignment with the overall strategy of the global BDS (Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions) movement.”

The measure states the denomination’s ongoing “commitment to a two-state solution in which a secure and universally recognized State of Israel lives alongside a free, viable, and secure state for the Palestinian people.”

Divestment from Fossil Fuels

Another divestment proposal—urging the church to stop investing in fossil fuel companies immediately and to liquidate any holding within five years—came to the Assembly with the endorsement of twelve presbyteries and enthusiastic backing, especially among the church’s younger members. One other denomination, the United Church of Christ, has approved a plan for fossil fuel divestment.

While agreeing on the need for action on climate change, the Assembly opted to follow the

denomination’s established process for investment decisions. Commissioners voted 469–110 to refer the overture to MRTI “for action and discernment in accordance with its long-standing and detailed procedures to engage with individual corporations to advance their actions in support of important social policy issues.”

The committee’s coordinator, Bill Somplatsky-Jarman, has stated that MRTI already has a history of engaging companies on environmental issues. He said the committee has successfully lobbied corporations to reduce carbon emissions and has used the church’s shareholder status to encourage the development of environmentally friendly energy sources. Divestment has historically been the action of last resort after other engagement tools have failed.

Belhar Confession

By a wide margin, the Assembly voted that the Belhar Confession—developed by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in the 1980s in response to the system of racial separation called apartheid—be included in the PC(USA)’s *Book of Confessions*. Supporters of the measure argued that Belhar’s themes of racial reconciliation and unity are as crucial to U.S. society and churches today as they were in South Africa at the time the confession was written. The confession must now be approved by two-thirds of the 171 presbyteries for it to become part of the denomination’s doctrinal statements.

This is the second time the Belhar Confession has been considered by the denomination. The 2010 General Assembly approved the confession, but it failed to receive the required two-thirds vote of presbyteries. The 2012 Assembly has authorized appointment of a special committee to begin the process all over again.

Gun Violence

Recommendations that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) advocate measures to prevent gun

violence won resounding approval from the Assembly. “Gun violence is a public health crisis in the United States that is not being adequately addressed,” said Wallace Fletcher, a minister from Philadelphia, adding that “30,000 people a year are killed by guns in the United States.”

Among other actions, the Assembly called on Presbyterians to support legislation regulating ammunition, banning semiautomatic assault weapons, and raising the age of handgun ownership to twenty-one. It called for opposing legislation that exempts gun manufacturers and marketers from legal liability and/or financial accountability for the costs of gun misuse as well as opposing “stand your ground” and other legislation that may entitle gun owners to shoot before taking alternative measures.

The Assembly encouraged church sessions and PC(USA) entities that own property to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones. It also called for the formation of support, healing, and advocacy groups for those who have experienced gun violence in their families. A related measure approved by the Assembly calls for the church to offer trauma counseling for pastors and other caregivers so that they can respond more effectively to the needs of survivors following a homicide or mass shooting.

Social Justice and Peacemaking

Ever since the PC(USA) adopted an essentially pro-choice stance in 1970, abortion has been a recurring issue at General Assemblies. This year’s Assembly voted 465–133 to disapprove an overture calling for a special committee to review PC(USA) policies on abortion and propose new policies if needed. The rejected overture also urged a two-year churchwide “season of reflection” on the plight of unwanted children, “both born and not-yet-born.” Opponents of the new study argued that a comprehensive policy paper on abortion and problem pregnancy adopted by the denomination in 1992 is still relevant.

In other actions, the Assembly

- called for measures to promote food sovereignty and affirm the importance of maternal and child nutrition in the 1,000 days between the beginning of a woman’s pregnancy and her child’s second birthday;
- called for a national moratorium on the death penalty;
- urged reformation of the tax structure and of the political and financial sector in the United States, including campaign finance reform;
- authorized a churchwide study to discern how to advocate for more effective drug policies in the United States;
- declared its opposition to targeted killings by military drones unless due process is followed and called on the U.S. Congress to pass legislation that would restrict the use of drones;
- urged the U.S. government to lift all restrictions on travel to Cuba by U.S. citizens and to remove Cuba from the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism;
- recognized a new immigrant advocacy group within the PC(USA); and
- authorized development of a comprehensive policy on human trafficking as a human rights issue.

Streamlining Church Structures

With tighter budgets and reduced staffing threatening the viability of many synods and presbyteries—the PC(USA)’s mid-level governing bodies—two separate commissions have been studying the role and function of these mid-level councils for more than four years.

The 2012 General Assembly turned down a recommendation that synods be eliminated as ecclesiastical units of the PC(USA). This year’s Assembly voted to reduce the number of synods from the current sixteen to between ten and twelve. The Assembly directed that the new

configuration of synod boundaries be established “based on an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context, and call through a collaborative process between the synods and presbyteries.”

Mission and Evangelism

Like other mainline denominations, the PC(USA) is losing members and is seeking new ways to spread the gospel in an increasingly secular culture. Thus, three initiatives aimed at unifying Presbyterians around ambitious goals in mission and evangelism were celebrated and endorsed enthusiastically by the 221st General Assembly.

Commissioners heard progress reports on a movement to organize 1,001 new worshipping communities in the PC(USA) in the next decade. Formally launched at the 120th General Assembly (2012), the 1,001 initiative has facilitated the organization of close to 250 new worshipping communities across the country to date.

Two new churchwide initiatives won the Assembly’s endorsement:

“Educate a Child, Transform the World” aims to involve Presbyterians at every level in efforts to improve the quality of education for one million children in the United States and around the world over the next four years. The initiative builds on a long-standing Presbyterian commitment to transforming society by providing access to quality education. It seeks to address “the root causes of

poverty, particularly as they impact women and children”—a priority focus of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. Three large congregations—in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Chicago—have already pledged a total of \$1.65 million toward education projects in South Sudan.

“Living Missionally” seeks to “inspire, equip, and connect Presbyterians to continue to go beyond the walls of their congregations and increase their engagement in service to their communities and the world.” Building on the conviction that “doing mission is central to what it means to be the church,” the initiative proposes a goal of engaging at least 1,000 congregations a year in volunteer service and mission endeavors at home and around the world.

For More Information

To find out more about actions of the General Assembly, go to <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga221/>.

The Presbyterian News Service published a number of in-depth articles about the actions of the Assembly. They may be found in the PC (USA) archives at <http://www.pcusa.org/news/archives/2014/6/>.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do decisions of national assemblies or conferences in your denomination affect your local church community?
2. Which decision(s) of the General Assembly would you like to know more about? How will you research them?
3. Presbyterian national assemblies are not meetings of national staff but rather meetings of commissioners representing all the local presbyteries. If you are Presbyterian, at least two commissioners from your presbytery went to this meeting and participated. Their job for the next two years is to interpret this assembly to the larger church. How might you meet with them and learn more?