



A FIREWORKS SPECTACULAR: THE 220TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — June 30-July 7. 2012

BY JACK HABERER, *Outlook* editor

The 220th General Assembly reached its zenith — literally — when the commissioners ascended to the rooftop terrace of the David L. Lawrence Convention Center to enjoy Pittsburgh’s spectacular Fourth of July fireworks display. Funny thing about fireworks: as dramatic and stunning as they can be, when all is said and done, nothing much has changed.

Fireworks of other kinds were exploding throughout the week at the assembly, but not much changed either. Even seasoned observers kept finding themselves whiplashed by climactic moments of high drama, but most episodes concluded with the status quo intact.

This year’s drama began two weeks prior to the assembly when the *Outlook* broke the story that vice-moderator candidate Tara Spuhler McCabe had signed the marriage license of two women in Washington, D.C., even though the PC(USA) defines Christian marriage as being between a woman and a man. McCabe’s running mate, Neal Presa, was elected on the fourth ballot, prevailing over three other nominees with 52 percent of the commissioners’ votes. They confirmed McCabe’s election a day later, but on July 4, troubled by criticism and facing the possibility of ecclesiastical discipline, she resigned from the post, stunning many.

Presa nominated a Colorado pastor, Tom Trinidad, to replace McCabe.

DIVESTMENT. Gasps sounded again when, by a minuscule margin, the assembly rejected a plan to withdraw church investments from three companies accused of complicity in the Israeli oppression of Palestinians. In a move closely watched by the secular media and by Jewish groups, the assembly voted 333-331 to favor “creative engagement” and investment rather than divestment of more than \$17 million in pension and foundation investments from Caterpillar, Motorola Solutions and Hewlett-Packard.

MARRIAGE. Recognizing the volatility of the issue, the assembly pulled back from taking a stand on same-gender marriage. An assembly committee had recommended approving a proposed amendment to the PC(USA) constitution to change the definition of Christian marriage in the *Book of Order* from being between “a man and a woman” to being between “two people.” The assembly voted 308-338 not to send the proposed amendment to the presbyteries. It also did not approve an authoritative interpretation to give ministers the discretion to perform same-gender weddings in states where it is legal. Instead, the assembly voted for presbyteries and congregations to “enter into a [two-year] season of serious study and discernment

concerning its meaning of Christian marriage.”

MID-COUNCILS. Declining to follow the lead of the Commission on Mid Councils, the assembly voted not to allow the creation of non-geographic presbyteries during a “designated season of experimentation” in the PC(USA). The commission had argued for constitutional changes, including dissolving synods as ecclesiastical entities, intended to reduce a layer of hierarchy and encourage innovation in mission. The assembly did vote to create an administrative commission to continue discussing those issues, plus a task force to examine racial ethnic ministries in the PC(USA).

SPECIAL OFFERINGS. A special committee formed by the 2010 GA proposed bold changes to the four major churchwide special offerings, along with modernizing the fundraising methodologies, aiming to increase the giving by 50% by 2020. The assembly rejected all changes to offerings allocations. It endorsed the new fundraising strategies and asked the commission to lead in their implementation and monitoring for the next two years.

IN OTHER ACTIONS, the assembly ...

- » Introduced UKIRK Ministries (i.e., University Church), signaling a new direction for PC(USA) collegiate ministries;
- » Launched the 1,001 Movement to form 1,001 new worshipping communities in 10 years;
- » Changed the name of the elected General Assembly Mission Council to Presbyterian Mission Agency Board; and staff to Presbyterian Mission Agency;
- » Declined to eliminate the constitutional language that church property is “held in trust nevertheless for the use and benefit” of the denomination;
- » Asked the Board of Pensions to consider sharing its benefits program with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church; ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians; and other possible partners;
- » Sent for presbytery approval a proposed constitutional amendment to the denomination’s ordination standards, stating that each candidate’s manner of life should include “repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace;”
- » Endorsed the DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) and renewed the church’s advocacy for and work with immigrants;
- » Directed the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly to study presbyteries’ ability to pay obligatory per capita funds;
- » Sent a new translation of the Heidelberg Confession to presbyteries for adoption, and recommended that the 2014 GA consider adopting the Belhar Confession;
- » Declined to allocate \$137,000 to do a study of women’s status in the church;
- » Issued statements on racism, incarceration, economic reconstruction, the housing and mortgage crisis, the EPA, workers’ rights and income equality, corporal punishment of children. ●

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