

“Upbuilding the Body in Love”
Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16
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Report from the General Assembly

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It's not often the Presbyterian Church makes the news anymore, so when we do, it captures our attention. These were the headlines from our church's General Assembly in the Tribune last month: “Presbyterians revisit the Trinity” (Richard Ostling, Associated Press, date unknown); “Presbyterians won't divest over firms' ties to Israel” (*Chicago Tribune*, 6/22/06); “Presbyterian churches given leeway on gays” (*Chicago Tribune*, 6/21/06) – plus a commentary in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Turn Left at the Presbyterian Church” (6/15/06). Many of you have expressed your concern over what you're reading in the papers. By the way, may I recommend two superb and independent sources: *The Presbyterian Outlook* (www.pres-outlook.org) and Presbyterian News Service (www.pcusa.org/pcnews). Today, to clarify the news, I will report on what I observed at General Assembly, and what I think our denomination's actions mean to us.

First, for those who may be new to the Presbyterian Church, a little background. Our form of government is representational – we don't have bishops deciding things from the top. Just as our congregation elects elders for our Session, so also our Session elects representatives to Chicago Presbytery, and the Presbytery elects delegates to the General Assembly. (We also send representatives to the Synod of Lincoln Trails, which covers Indiana and Illinois; but the Synod is not a policy-making body.) The General Assembly is the highest governing body of the denomination, deciding all policy and constitutional matters. Those decisions are carried out by staff in our national headquarters in Louisville, and by committees elected by the Assembly.

The biennial meeting of the General Assembly is part convention, part family reunion, part legislative body, part worshiping community. Officially, the Assembly is made up of nearly 600 delegates, equally divided among elders and ministers representing the 173 presbyteries in the U.S. Also attending are scores of

advisory delegates, non-voting official observers, and hundreds of unofficial observers like me. Around the edges you'll find, as in any convention, the caucuses' hospitality suites hosting strategy sessions, and a huge display hall full of vendors hawking their wares – booksellers, mission agencies, special interest groups, a gift shop featuring third world fair trade artisans and, most importantly, coffee.

The official work of the week-long General Assembly, or “G.A.,” is divided into two sections: after the Moderator is elected, the delegates divide into assigned committees. The committees read reports, hear from expert witnesses, on occasion, hold open meetings to listen to interested constituencies, and ultimately vote their recommendations on the items assigned to them. G.A. returns to plenary session for the second half of the week. During plenary each Assembly Committee reports its work, and the entire Assembly may debate and will vote again on every item of business, usually but not always voting with the committee's recommendation. That's *how* every G.A. works.

What issues each G.A. entertains is determined by overtures from presbyteries, committees or task forces reporting back from assignments made at previous Assemblies, or commissioners' resolutions made in the first day of the Assembly. It is a mind-boggling amount of business – polity matters like ordination standards; theological matters like the Trinity; financial matters like per capita payments; social justice matters like abortion, the environment, and divestment. Parenthetically, having been on the inside of three Assemblies, serving with Bills & Overtures Committee that divides the work among the committees and insures that it is dealt with, I find it to be a colossally ineffective way to do business. It is inconceivable that any minister or elder commissioner elected for one Assembly will have adequate background on most issues; moreover, once they return to their home churches and presbyteries, they hold no accountability for their actions. It is messy and inefficient ... but democratic processes often are.

Enough background. Now to this General Assembly.

The PC(USA) is struggling to find our unity – and it has been for some time. The issues that divide us have been with us since at least the 60s and 70s: is the church's stance on social justice matters bravely prophetic or knee-jerk liberal? Should gays and lesbians be ordained, or are we acquiescing to cultural immorality? Should inclusive language be promoted or are we diluting our essential theology? Should women's right to choice be supported or are we killing babies? Not surprisingly, the very issues that divide our country also distress our denomination. What's different is that portions of the church can get up and leave if they get fed up. That's why the debate about who owns church property – the denomination or the local congregation – is such a loaded question. Many pastors quip that the only thing keeping us all together is the Pension Plan.

Regardless of property and pensions, the actions of this General Assembly will undoubtedly cause some people – and some congregations – to leave. Factions represented by groups such as the Presbyterian Layman and New Wineskins are meeting later this summer and may call for withdrawal. If it happens, I will be very sad. What saddens me most is the timing: because at last I'm seeing signs of hope. In the recent past, I felt like we were struggling to find our unity by seeking the vast middle – a least common denominator on which we could all agree. Before that we tried to find our unity through tolerance – expanding the tent as wide as we could so we could keep everybody in. But something has shifted, I think, and I witnessed it at this Assembly: most of us are still striving to find our unity, but we're striving to find it in our common identity in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let me say more about how this played out in this Assembly in three places. First, in the Trinity report. A panel commissioned by the 2000 General Assembly came back with a paper on the doctrine of the Trinity that was decidedly controversial, suggesting numerous three-person alternatives to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While some options were quite orthodox – such as Creator, Savior,

and Sanctifier – others stretched into poetic territory – Lover, Beloved and Love, for example. The General Assembly didn't buy it. Instead of adopting the report, the commissioners "received" it, essentially thanking the panel for their work without giving the paper any official status. My sister Karen, who served as a commissioner from Scioto Valley Presbytery in Ohio, read the action of the Assembly this way: not as a slap in the face to feminists, among whom she counts herself, but as a statement of our core belief in Trinitarian theology.

A second place our theological unity played out was in the committee on divestment. As you're well-aware, the 2004 Assembly made waves with its exploration of divestment from companies supporting Israel's military *viz a viz* Palestinians. The G.A. Committee dealing with this issue this year did an absolutely stunning feat: it created a new statement that satisfied almost all the parties in the conversation. The new statement first acknowledges the hurt and misunderstanding caused by the earlier action, calls both Palestinians and Israelis to accountability, removes language of divestment, and introduces language of investment in "peaceful pursuits." Given the current situation in Lebanon and Israel, any statement from our denomination feels a bit like waving a little white flag. But it will at least put American Presbyterians and Jews back at the table again, and allow our church to move forward in our support of the beleaguered, tiny minority of Arab Christians in the Middle East.

The third and final place our theological unity appeared was more tenuous: in the narrow approval of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force. Let me tell you who the Task Force was, what the report says, and then what I think it means.

The Task Force was created by the 2001 General Assembly "to lead the [church] in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century." The 20-member Task Force was carefully chosen for their range of views – so much so that many of us on the outside were convinced it would never work. How could you ever get agreement from evangelicals like Gary Demarest and Jack Haberer and liberals like Barbara Wheeler and John Wilkinson? But that

is precisely what happened, primarily because they allowed themselves not to demonize the other. From what I've heard, those on the left began to appreciate that those on the right held understandable concerns about diluting theology and undermining Scripture. And those on the right began to understand that those on the left really did hold Scripture precious, and really did love the Lord Jesus Christ.

The resulting report held these tenets, which were, not inconsequentially, based on the patterns of agreement forged over the last three centuries at moments of controversy in our denomination. (These four points can be found in their entirety in "A Season of Discernment: the Final Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church to the 217th General Assembly (2006), pp. 25-28.)

1. To honor communal discernment of God's will and the Spirit's leading while also recognizing that God alone is Lord of the conscience under the authority of Scripture.
2. To adhere to essential and necessary beliefs and practices that bind the faithful into the body of Christ while also respecting freedom in nonessential matters of belief, worship, piety, witness and service.
3. To maintain a distinctive Presbyterian and Reformed witness to the world while also engaging in mission with Christians of other traditions.
4. To uphold the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have original jurisdiction in church governance while also sustaining the rights and responsibilities of governing bodies that have the power of oversight and review.

As a result of these beliefs, the Task Force unanimously recommended that while the *Book of Order* unequivocally set forth the scriptural and constitutional standards for ordination and installation, and be determined by the whole church, nevertheless, churches and presbyteries have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards.

What does that mean? The best analysis I've seen comes from Joe Small, the Director of our denomination's Office of Theology and Worship. He says this recommendation requires presbyteries and Sessions to reclaim their historic role of seriously examining candidates for ministers and elders – not just lobbing a few softballs, but addressing each person's theological orthodoxy and personal fitness for service. This will require a major change in how we do business. As Dr. Small says, "We have neither the theological capacity nor the shared faith to engage in serious, respectful examinations. Perhaps most sadly, we do not have the will." The adoption of the Peace, Unity, and Purity report challenges that incapacity: "It makes clear that presbyteries have the responsibility to ... determine whether a candidate 'has departed from scriptural and constitutional standards' and whether any departure 'constitutes a failure to adhere to the essentials of Reformed faith and polity.' The most significant question ... is whether [we] possess a shared sense of Reformed faith and polity that will render [us] capable of determining the core of faith and practice. ... Mere lists of 'essential tenets' are not the answer. Instead, presbyteries [and I would add, sessions] must now reclaim their historic privilege and responsibility to be theological bodies before they are 'governing bodies'" (from a guest viewpoint in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, "Ordination Tryals," 7/10/06).

Are we capable of such a shift? I don't know. But I sincerely hope so. If we do not find our unity theologically – that is, in our common faith in Jesus Christ our Lord – then we have no real unity at all. Our divisiveness isn't a new problem, and it's not going away soon. Not because we've been wrestling with these issues since the 1960s and 70s ... but because the Christian church has been wrestling with these issues since the time it began: over whether Gentiles must first become Jews before they become Christians ... whether women could speak in church, let alone be ordained ... whether the church ought to make policy regarding essential secular matters like slavery. The church has never been without divisions. But *how* we work out our divisions is as essential to our unity as the theological conclusions to which we come. It was in the first century after Christ that these words were penned: "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you

have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ... Therefore, speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:1-2, 15-16). May it be so with us now. Amen.