

# *Theology Matters*

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## **Three Important Votes in the Presbyteries**

### **A Fourth Issue Affects Every Congregation**

As a result of actions by the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in July 2010, the presbyteries will vote on three major issues. We recommend a NO vote on all three of these:

1. Amend G-6.0106b to remove the specific ordination standards regarding sexual behavior, thus clearing the way for the ordination of those who engage in sexual relationships outside of the marriage of a man and a woman. Vote NO.
2. Replace the current Form of Government, found in the *Book of Order* in the “G” section, with the proposed Form of Government. Vote NO.
3. Include the Belhar Confession in the *Book of Confessions*. Although the Belhar was written in response to the racism of South Africa’s apartheid, the language of Belhar does not limit it to the sin of racism. Some people interpret the Belhar to affirm same-sex behavior. Vote NO.

In addition to the three items above that will be voted on in presbyteries, the General Assembly “urged” the Board of Pensions to cover same-sex partners of church employees using the mandatory pension and medical plan of installed pastors. Every congregation will be required to financially support a behavior that Scripture, the Confessions, and the *Book of Order* call sin. Presbyteries will not vote on this. We encourage individuals, sessions and presbyteries to take action to prevent this from happening.

#### Table of Contents

Prayer of Confession.....	p. 2
A Critique of the Proposed Replacement G-6.0106b .....	p. 3
A Critique of the Proposed Replacement Form of Government .....	p. 7
A Critique of the Belhar Confession.....	p. 11
Voting? On the Belhar Confession .....	p. 14
GA “urges” Board of Pensions to Extend Benefits to Same-Sex Partners ....	p. 15

# Prayer of Confession

by Mateen Ellass

O God, King of Zion clothed in majesty, You are our sure defense. Great You are and greatly to be praised. The whole earth is full of Your glory. Together with the seraphs we cry, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts,” and feel the foundations of the thresholds of heaven and earth shudder under the weight of Your effulgence. With Isaiah we lament, “Woe is me, for I have unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people with unclean lips.... For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!”

Our guilt is ever before us, Lord. Though You have brought us into Zion and unveiled to us her strongholds, and urged us to number her towers and survey her soaring ramparts and know the safety of her citadels, yet we continue to live in fear of the forces of darkness. While we should be telling the next generation, “This is our God, the Prince of life who has conquered the grave, the Victor who holds the keys of death and Hades, our God forever and ever,” we instead have huddled behind fortress walls, afraid to emerge from the shadows to follow You in reclaiming Your Kingdom.

We have received Your appointment as heralds, to go out into the fields of harvest and trumpet Your coming, secure in Your strong hands. Yet we feel like lambs cowering before wolves. Forgive our paralyzing fear, Lord; our disobedience born of unbelief. We call ourselves evangelicals, but we want to hide in Zion. Only reluctantly have we engaged the world; only with diffidence have we called out the enemy and unsheathed the sword of truth.

We confess that we have loved our church positions more than Your Kingdom, that we crave the sweet aroma of praise so much more than the acrid smoke of the battle field. As we face the prospect of protracted struggle which will tax already bone-weary bodies, many of us want to silently slip away into anonymity. But You have called us to march in Your strength, and promised Your victory. So we will go. Protect us, Lord Jesus, from the doubts that assail us. But equally, gracious God, protect us when You work mightily through us in the fray—protect us then from believing

our own press clippings. As the realms of darkness must retreat from Your light, as the gates of hell must shatter before the advance of the church militant, spare us, we pray, from the hubris of our fallen hearts: “Even the demons are subject to us....” Help us to remember in times of victory as well as setback that because of Your sovereign, electing grace our names are written in heaven, and in that truth find our joy.

So we raise our Ebenezer in tribute to Your unmatched work of salvation, grateful beyond words that You sought us when we were strangers, wandering far from Zion, and to rescue us from danger interposed Your precious blood. Gladly with the saints of all ages we confess:

O to grace how great a debtor *daily* I’m constrained to be.

Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to Thee.

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love.

Here’s my heart; O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above. **Amen.**

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*Rev. Dr. Mateen Ellass is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church, Edmund, OK. This prayer was offered at the Presbyterian Coalition, Y’All Come meeting, in Chicago, August 17, 2010. Used with permission.*

For additional resources for the presbytery votes see the *Theology Matters’* website [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com) and the Presbyterian Coalition website [www.presbycoalition.org](http://www.presbycoalition.org).

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# A Critique of the Proposed Replacement G-6.0106b

by G. Thomas Hobson and Susan Cyre

## Current G-6.0106b

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church.

Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.

Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

## Shift Away from the Candidate's Obedience to the Governing Body's Examination

The proposed replacement G-6.0106b does not include specific sexual standards required of *each candidate* for ordained/installed office. The proposed replacement G-6.0106b instead lists general responsibilities of *governing bodies* as they examine candidates. These general responsibilities of governing bodies are already included in the previous paragraph of the *Book of Order* at G-6.0106a.

## The First Sentence

The current G-6.0106b calls the candidate to "lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church." The proposed replacement G-6.0106b claims, "standards for ordained office reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of

## Proposed Replacement G-6.0106b

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000).

The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003).

Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

life." But these "standards for ordained office" are nowhere listed. In this proposed replacement G-6.0106b, it is the "church" which is seeking to live under the Lordship of Christ rather than the individual living in obedience to Scripture. What does that Lordship mean in the area of sexual expression? No clear standards are given by the replacement. In what the Confession of 1967 calls, "the moral confusion of our time," the proposed replacement offers no sexual standard.

The proposed replacement G-6.0106b severs the connection between the clear word of Scripture on sexual behavior and the Lordship of Christ. It is in Scripture that God has revealed Christ and his will for us. The Westminster Confession makes clear,

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith

and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men... (6.006).

The Scots Confession tells us,

When controversy arises... [ask] what the Holy Ghost uniformly speaks within the body of the Scriptures and what Christ Jesus himself did and commanded. For it is agreed by all that the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of unity, cannot contradict himself. (3.18)

The proposed replacement of G-6.0106b puts the church in jeopardy of rejecting the unambiguous witness of Scripture on sexual behavior that is repeated from Genesis to Revelation. The proposed replacement of G-6.0106b asks the church to follow the spirit of the age by allowing behavior that God does not bless as if it is consistent with living under the Lordship of Christ. The proposed replacement seeks to bless sinful behavior that God seeks to transform.

### **The Second Sentence**

The current G-6.0106b offers clear, biblical standards for sexual expression that are consistent with what the Confessions teach. A governing body examining a candidate for office needs only to ask, “are you living in compliance with G-6.0106b?” The candidate needs only to respond, “yes” or “no.”

The proposed replacement G-6.0106b speaks of the candidate’s “calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office.” It directs that the examination “not be limited to a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all the requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). This parallels what is already a part of the *Book of Order* in the paragraph before the current G-6.0106b, in paragraph “a”, which states,

...God gives suitable gifts for their various duties. In addition to possessing the necessary gifts and abilities, natural and acquired, those who undertake particular ministries should be persons of strong faith, dedicated discipleship, and love of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world.

*The proposed replacement language for G-6.0106b repeats requirements already appearing in the previous paragraph (G-6.0106a) and removes the specific sexual standards found in the current G-6.0106b.*

### **The Third Sentence**

In the current G-6.0106b the requirement for office is not perfection; it is repentance. The only candidates barred from ordination/installation are those who “refuse[ing] to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin.” The ordaining body should satisfy itself that the candidate has examined his/her own life and repented of behaviors that the confessions call sin. No candidate for office is without sin. The issue is whether any sin is defiantly embraced, or is repented of with a desire to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live an amended life. This standard applies to all candidates.

The current G-6.0106b calls for “obedience to Scripture and conformity to the historic confessional standards.” The proposed replacement for G-6.0106b claims “Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to the individual candidates.” Since “guided” is a weak, nonspecific term, one can conceivably be “guided” by a specific admonition in Scripture while rejecting its command to obedience. “Guided” as used in this proposed replacement amendment, is a vacuous term that allows disobedience to the clear word of Scripture.

How would a candidate know what standards a particular governing body is applying to sexual relationships? It could depend on a policy stated in presbytery manuals; or it could depend on who attends and votes at a particular meeting of the governing body and what convictions those individuals hold on sexual behavior. Instead of one consistent biblical standard across the church, there could be as many standards as there are voting members.

### **Ordination Is To The Whole Church**

Ordination is to the whole church. A minister of Word and Sacrament, an elder or a deacon, ordained by one session or one presbytery is ordained to the whole church. Since the PCUSA is a connectional body, what one session or presbytery does, it does on behalf of the whole church and it does in the name of Christ, the head of the church. Each Presbyterian is a party to each ordination/installation.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) has settled its understanding on this issue as reflected in majority votes of its presbyteries four times since 1997.

G-6.0106b was placed in the *Book of Order* in 1997 to give specific guidance to governing bodies and judicial bodies of the church. It did not change what had been the teaching or practice of the church.

The current biblical standards on sexuality unite the PC(USA) with the church around the world and throughout history. Scripture, the confessions, and the worldwide church have been clear and unequivocal that sexual expression is limited by Scripture to a man and a woman in marriage.

## Further Consideration

### The Lordship of Jesus Christ

As indicated in the first line of the proposed replacement for G-6.0106b, the real issue is the Lordship of Jesus Christ: Shall we submit to him “in all aspects of life”? And if so, then what exactly did Jesus say?

Some have said that the proposed change is so that we can follow Jesus rather than obey Scripture and the confessions. This is a false choice and leads to a Jesus who may speak apart from Scripture and in opposition to the clear word of Scripture. To avoid a distorted Jesus, it is important for us to submit joyfully to the entire revelation of Jesus in Scripture, not just the parts we like. If we create a Jesus separated from the full Jesus revealed in Scripture, we settle for a distortion invented by our own imagination.

Scripture from Genesis to Revelation has one consistent teaching on sexuality. Sexual expression from Genesis 2 when God says, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh” to Jesus’ quoting of that passage in Matthew 19:5, to Paul’s admonitions about sexual expression, all present one consistent teaching regarding God’s intent for sexual expression.

The centerpiece of Jesus’ teaching on this subject is found in Matthew 19:5 (Mark 10:8), when Jesus quotes Genesis 2. This is reaffirmed by the apostle Paul: “the two [man and woman] shall become one flesh.” Jesus, the Old Testament and Paul all teach that sex was created to form a lifelong inseparable bond between a man and a woman. Any other sexual expression—whether it be fornication, prostitution, homosexual intercourse, or a marriage that is less than lifelong—is a violation of this often repeated central teaching of Scripture on God’s intention for sexual expression.

Jesus makes these implications more explicit in passages such as his sin list in Mark 7:21-23. At the very top of this sin list is *porneia*, a broad term for all sexual behavior outside of marriage between a man and a woman. By forbidding *porneia*, Jesus reaffirms the teaching of the Old Testament, and contradicts the Greco-Roman culture of his day; by so doing, he also contradicts our own culture.

In Mark 7:22, Jesus also names the sin of *aselgeia*, a word that is usually translated “licentiousness.” It’s a word for shocking sexual behavior. Jews consistently used this word to refer to sexual offenses. I have published evidence that Jesus and other Jews used this word as a synonym for what they considered to be the most shocking sexual offenses named in the Old Testament: homosexual behavior, incest, and bestiality.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when some people claim that Jesus never spoke on homosexuality, here is evidence that he did.

Jesus’ upholding of the OT law may be seen in his teaching that even lust in the heart is a form of adultery (Matt 5:28), and in his teaching against divorce, where his point is that no one can erase a sexual relationship. Scripture never shows Jesus permissive toward sexual immorality. Indeed, this is the same Jesus who condemns the church at Thyatira for being tolerant toward sexual sin (Rev 2:20-21).

The proposed replacement to G-6.0106b is unacceptable, not because of what it says (yes, we should joyfully submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life), but because of what it removes: an explicit standard that fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness are part of what it means to follow Jesus, according to our authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in Scripture, to which our confessions also bear witness.

### Responding To Those Who Say: “But times have changed...”

Jesus’ teaching on sexual expression is crystal clear. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, the apostles continue to lift up Christ’s teaching that sexual expression must be limited to the marriage of a man and a woman. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, *porneia*, *aselgeia*, and *arsenokoitēs* (a masculine word used in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 that means “he who has *koitos* with a male”) appear on numerous sin lists, along with Romans 1:26-27, which does not use any of these words, but clearly rules out same-sex behavior.

But those who wish to revise the Biblical teaching on sexuality often argue, “Times have changed! We know today that Paul’s word for homosexuality really means abusive pederasty. We also know that people in New Testament times knew nothing about the loving, mutual same-sex intimacy that we know today. They had no concept of inborn homosexual orientation. We live in a different world than the apostles did. It’s time to leave the Bible’s primitive morality in the past and replace it with a morality more acceptable to people in our modern age.”

That is incorrect. Here's the truth: *There is no discovery from ancient Greek or modern science that overthrows our historic Biblical teaching on sexuality.* The word Paul uses in 1 Corinthians is a generic word. We have no reason to believe that the same-sex activity forbidden in the Bible is anything other than loving and mutual. And it is totally false that the first century church had no concept of sexual orientation like our modern one. Read Plato's *Symposium!* Or read Callicratidas in Pseudo-Lucian who gives a speech pledging lifelong inseparable devotion to his male lover (even calling for their ashes to be mixed together). Or read Protogones in Plutarch, who declares homosexual love to be far superior to heterosexual love, which he says is "unmasculine."

Our contemporary ideas cannot invalidate what God has said regarding sexual expression. God said it to a world with just as much sexual freedom as our own. God's word to us remains the same.

### **Responding To Those Who Ask: "What about people who have gifts for ministry?"**

In the last nationwide presbytery debate over fidelity and chastity, we often heard stories of gifted people in our churches, including Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and pastors, who later acknowledged they were engaged in same-sex behavior. Some ask, "If God can use such persons to lead others to faith in Christ and to provide loving service to Christ and the church, how can we rule out ordination or leadership roles for such persons?"

There are many heterosexuals who have led people to Christ and had effective ministries, and yet have been removed from office because of heterosexual misconduct, some temporarily, some permanently. Scripture is clear that sin is a denial of Christ's Lordship and no leader can be effective in leading others to submit to the Lordship of Christ when he/she has rejected it in his/her own life.

When there is repentance and evidence of an amended life, presbyteries have the discretion of restoring such leaders to office.

We are told that G-6.0106b is only about keeping gays and lesbians out of church office. This is true only if we ignore the far larger numbers of leaders who have been disciplined or have been removed from office because of heterosexual immorality, substance abuse, domestic violence, and embezzlement. No, G-6.0106b is about "any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin" and applies to all people equally.

One false argument made against the current standard in G-6.0106b is that it prevents anyone who has ever committed serious sin from serving in church leadership. No, it only rules out individuals who "refuse to repent." The church ordains only sinners—repentant sinners.

### **Balkanization of the Church**

The proposed G-6.0106b replaces a clear standard with no sexual standard. This local-option model works in cases where local presbyteries must judge whether an offender has sufficiently demonstrated repentance or recovery from life-dominating sin. But, without a clear sexual standard the denomination will become "balkanized" with pastors unable to move from presbytery to presbytery because of different standards in each.

### **Conclusion**

For all its talk of joyfully submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life, this amendment leads us away from following the Jesus of Scripture. If we really want to follow Jesus, we need to keep our current standards. When questions arise on a subject (like Christology in 325 AD), the church needs to state clearly what it believes.

1. "*Aselgeia* in Mark 7:22" by G. Thomas Hobson, originally published in *Filologia Neotestamentaria*, can be found on [www.presbycoalition.org](http://www.presbycoalition.org), "Ordination Standards."

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*Rev. Dr. Tom Hobson is on the Board of Directors of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry. Rev. Susan Cyre is executive director of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry.*

### **Additional extensive resources on this amendment are available at [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com)**

The resources developed for the 2008-9 debate on replacing G-6.0106b are pertinent and helpful for the current debate with the exception of the rewording of the amendment itself. These resources are being revised and updated. These resources include: exegesis of the biblical texts, what the confessions say, talking points, helps for preparing for the debate, scientific evidence, and stories of those whose lives have been transformed by the truth of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit.

# A Critique of the Proposed Replacement for the Form of Government in the *Book of Order*

by Carol Shanholtzer

A completely rewritten Form of Government is being sent to the presbyteries for their votes. It would have far-reaching impact on our denomination. This amendment would replace the entire Form of Government section of the *Book of Order* with two sections: a new section called Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and an entirely-rewritten Form of Government section. An “Advisory Handbook for Councils for the Development of Policies and Procedures Required by the Form of Government” was commended to governing bodies by the General Assembly and follows the text of the replacement Form of Government in the amendment packet.

The General Assembly (GA) made a number of changes to the draft documents they received, including the correction of several of the serious problems. However, most of the changes made by the GA were minor modifications in wording with no significant effect. The end result is that almost all of the fundamental deficiencies that characterized the draft which was sent to the GA remain in the version which is being sent to the presbyteries for their votes.

## **A new fourth section, Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, will be added to the *Book of Order***

The *Book of Order* currently consists of three sections: Form of Government, Directory for Worship, and Rules of Discipline. If the amendment sent to the presbyteries is approved, a fourth section, Foundations of Presbyterian Polity (numbered with a prefix “F-”), will be added as the first section of the *Book of Order*. The ramifications of having a separate “Foundations” section cannot be known unless the documents are put into use and authoritative interpretations are made by the GA or by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC). Foundations provision F-3.03 states the following:

The statements contained in this section, ‘The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity,’ describe the ecclesiological and historical commitments on which the polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) rests. Provisions of any part of this Constitution are to be interpreted in light of the whole Constitution. No provision of the *Book of Order* can of itself invalidate any other. Where there are tensions and ambiguities between provisions, it is the task of councils and judicial commissions to resolve them in such a way as to give effect to all provisions.

In its “Comment” to the GA, the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) wrote: “The creation of a new section of the *Book of Order* requires consideration of both its contents and how they relate to the other parts of the *Book of Order*.”

Although much of the material in the Foundations section is included in the first few chapters of the current Form of Government, changing just a few words or sentences can have a significant impact. For example, our current Form of Government in G-2.0500b states, “Thus, the creeds and confessions of this church reflect a particular stance within the history of God’s people.” The new Foundations section retains that concept using different wording. The second paragraph of section F-2.01, however, also adds a sentence declaring that the creeds and confessions of this church “appeal to the universal truth of the Gospel while expressing that truth *within the social and cultural assumptions of their time*.” [emphasis added] Of course each confessional statement was written in a specific historic and cultural context. But, to state that in the *Book of Confessions*, authors of the creeds and confessions expressed truth *within the social and cultural assumptions of their time*, is a far different claim than acknowledging historical context. The new statement explicitly invites the possibility that faulty cultural assumptions could have resulted in inaccurate interpretations of Scripture being incorporated into the *Book of Confessions*. It clouds the issue of how the contents of the *Book of Confessions*, our subordinate authority, will be authoritatively

interpreted by the GA and the GAPJC to apply to our denominational life in the future. For example, one of the constitutional questions requires officers to “sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do...be instructed and led by those confessions as you lead the people of God” (W-4.4003c). Will this requirement contained in the Directory for Worship section of the *Book of Order* take on a different meaning because of that new sentence included in the Foundations section that describes the purpose of confessional statements? Will our confessional exposition of Scripture, which specifies that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman, be interpreted in the future to be a product of “social and cultural assumptions” of the time rather than God’s unchanging truth?

### **Foundations section sets no theological limits and mandates inclusion of “all persons and groups” as officers**

Another highly significant change in the Foundations section is the diversity provision, F-1.0403, which states:

The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church’s membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

Does the church really want to adopt the wording “regardless of...theological conviction”? Does the church truly want to approve a provision stating that the PC(USA) “shall guarantee full participation...in...governance...to all persons or groups within its membership”—thereby making ordination to office a *right* of every church member? When these documents go to presbyteries for their votes, they can no longer be amended. Presbyters must vote “yes” or “no” on the wording as it is received.

### **Impact on the “fidelity/chastity” requirement cannot be known**

The “fidelity/chastity” requirement currently found in G-6.0106b is retained in the proposed replacement Form of Government as G-2.0104b. Presbyteries are therefore being asked to approve a document which states in G-2.0104b that “fidelity/chastity” is required for officers while section F-1.0403 (quoted above) guarantees full participation in governance to all persons or groups within its membership. Section F-3.03 (quoted above) requires that conflicts be resolved in a way that will “give effect to all provisions.” However, when provisions are mutually-exclusive, that is not possible. Which of these mutually-exclusive provisions will prevail? If the replacement to the Form of Government is approved, the answer will be determined in the future by an authoritative interpretation either by the GA or by the GAPJC. The concern of many is that because the guarantee of participation in governance is in the Foundations section, material in the Foundations section is likely to be considered to have more weight than provisions in the other three sections of the *Book of Order*. No one can know the outcome before an authoritative interpretation is made. All that is required for an authoritative interpretation is a majority vote of one General Assembly.

### **We become a hierarchical, rather than a connectional, denomination**

The *Book of Order*, in G-9.0103, currently describes our governing bodies as being “separate and independent.” In the 1992 remedial case which determined that per capita contributions by sessions are voluntary, *Central v. Long Island* (Remedial Case 204-5), the GAPJC wrote in its decision:

These issues go to the heart of our Presbyterian system of church governance. Our system is unique. It neither imposes decisions from the top down nor allows particular churches to operate in a vacuum.... While our Book of Order speaks in terms of “higher governing bodies,” we acknowledge that our system contemplates a partnership of church governance in which each governing body has responsibilities, exercises authority, and carries out mission in particular areas (G-9.0103).

Instead of describing governing bodies as “separate and independent,” the new Foundations section vaguely describes them only as “distinct” (F-3.0203). In “What is Missional Ecclesiology?,” a paper offered by OGA as an on-line resource accompanying these amendments,

Paul Hooker (one of the four writers of the new documents) states, “As sessions guide and *govern* the work of congregations, as presbyteries nurture, guide, and *govern* the work of sessions, and as synods and the General Assembly support and *govern* the work of presbyteries...” [emphasis added].

Although the specific word “govern” is not used in the replacement Form of Government in describing relationships between governing bodies, the hierarchical concept it denotes is unmistakably present in multiple places, including the structure for mission. Currently each governing body carries out mission in its own sphere of responsibility and authority. Under the current Form of Government, the session is responsible for the “mission and government” of a congregation (G-10.0102). Under the replacement Form of Government, this is no longer the case. The General Assembly has the responsibility and power to “establish[ing] a comprehensive mission strategy and priorities for the church” (G-3.0501a); a synod’s “responsibility may include developing, in conjunction with its presbyteries, a broad strategy for the mission of the church within its bounds and in accord with the larger strategy of the General Assembly” (G-3.0401a); the synod “is charged with ...developing, in conjunction with its presbyteries, joint plans and objectives for the fulfillment of mission, providing encouragement and guidance to its presbyteries and overseeing their work” (G-3.0403a); and, interestingly, a presbytery has responsibility for “assisting congregations in developing mission and participating in the mission of the whole church” (G-3.0301c), has authority to “develop strategy for the mission of the church in its district” (G-3.0303a), and “leads and guides the witness of its congregations” (G-3.0301). The session is left out of the chain entirely and its responsibility is limited to “leading the congregation in participating in the mission of the whole church” (G-3.0201c).

Leaving the session out of the chain was not an oversight. When someone on the Assembly committee moved to amend the wording to give the session the authority for the mission of the congregation, Presbytery Executive Paul Hooker (one of the authors of the documents and a resource person to the Assembly committee), spoke against amending the language, saying that such a change would begin to deflect away from the authors’ intent because the amendment sees mission as the prerogative of a congregation when the church exists to serve the mission of God, not our own mission. A basic flaw in Hooker’s argument is the premise which assumes that the session is incapable of discerning the mission God intends for that congregation but that the hierarchy of governing bodies is able to discern God’s will and convey those

instructions to the congregation from the GA, through the synod, and through the presbytery.

Under both the current and the proposed Form of Government (G-3.0101) “The jurisdiction of each council is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution, with the acts of each subject to review by the next higher council. Powers not mentioned in this Constitution are reserved to the presbyteries.” This means that if the *Book of Order* does not expressly give a power to the session, the session does not have that power.

Other notable manifestations of a hierarchical structure can be seen at a congregational level. Currently in G-7.0103, “The members of a particular church voluntarily put themselves under the leadership of their officers, whom they elect.” In the replacement Form of Government G-1.0103, however, “The members of a congregation put themselves under the leadership of the session and the higher councils (presbytery, synod, and General Assembly).”

The instructions in the Advisory Handbook “Policies and Procedures Guide for the Work of the Session” include: “What follows is a listing of those areas in which a presbytery is required to or justified in reviewing the work of the session of a congregation.”

The Handbook then presents a chart listing 45 references to sections in the Foundations and the replacement Form of Government. It summarizes the topic of the cited constitutional provisions and lists “Questions or Options to Consider” for the presbytery’s review of the session. Many questions are routine; others go beyond what would now be considered standard. These are some of the questions:

Each council shall develop procedures and mechanisms for promoting and reviewing its implementation of the church’s commitment to inclusiveness and representation. Has the session developed such procedures and mechanisms? .... Elections in the congregation are to be fair, just, and inclusive. Is a nominating process in place that represents the diversity of the congregation and is it made up of a majority not currently in active service as ruling elders or deacons? Is evidence given of the concerns for diversity being addressed? ... Meetings conducted decently and in order. Is some form of procedure agreed to and followed? . . . Has the presbytery initiated discussions with the session as to mutually beneficial mission activities? ... Are any directives from the presbytery properly recorded?

All of these examples demonstrate a relationship between governing bodies which is very different from our current governance.

### **Other serious problems also remain in the documents**

Significant problems are found in numerous areas of the documents proposed to replace the current Form of Government. Among the important areas of concern are the following:

- The opening sentence of Foundations (F-1.01) expresses universalism, stating “God...redeems... all people.” Although the *Book of Order* is not our primary source for theology, one would expect that the theological statements it contains would accurately reflect our confessional beliefs.
- Many of the specifics now included in our Form of Government have been removed from the new documents. Each governing body will need to write and adopt its own rules for how those situations will be handled. This means a loss of church-wide standard procedures in such basic matters as how Pastor Nominating Committees relate to presbyteries and how ministers move from one church or presbytery to another. Each presbytery is free to set its own rules within the broad boundaries of the five sentences describing the call process in the proposed G-2.08.
- Approval by a majority of the presbyteries is needed for amendments to the *Book of Order*, but such approval is not needed for changes to manuals of governing bodies. Key matters, such as how persons prepare for the ministry, including the number and subjects of ordination exams and how they will be graded, have been removed from the replacement Form of Government. These will need to be written and incorporated into General Assembly manuals. If the replacement for the Form of Government is approved, a majority of commissioners to any future General Assembly is free to change any of those requirements without approval by the majority of presbyteries.
- The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) does not typically take “positions” on matters before the GA, but it did take a position *opposing* the replacement of the Form of Government because of its direct impact on the GAPJC’s work. The GAPJC stated the following in its document:

Authoritative Interpretations (AIs) are interpretations of *specific* wording. If one or more words are changed in the text, it may no longer be said that a prior AI authoritatively interprets the new wording—such an interpretation would require either a new GA action or a new GAPJC decision. The interpretive history of the *Book of Order* represents decades of work on the part of the church working out procedures for pastoral call processes, Freedom of Conscience rights, Committee on Ministry authority, etc., which will be called into question by new wording. [emphasis in original]

The GAPJC called particular attention to the lack of due process requirements for pastors in termination processes, noting that provisions in the current G-9.0505(b) 1 and 2 contain precise language and that the interpretive history of those provisions contains at least nine separate GA and GAPJC Authoritative Interpretations related to those requirements. The GAPJC noted that the replacement Form of Government is silent on specific due process requirements and clearly renders the history of past Authoritative Interpretations invalid.

- Currently G-4.0301e reads, “Decisions shall be reached in governing bodies by vote, following opportunity for discussion, and a majority shall govern.” In the replacement document section F-3.0205, the words “and discernment” were added, so the sentence reads: “Decisions shall be reached in councils [governing bodies] by vote, following opportunity for discussion *and discernment*, and a majority shall govern.” [emphasis added] The new wording indicates that discussion alone is not an adequate process before voting since there must be (“shall”) opportunity for discussion “and” discernment. That wording demonstrates that ordinary parliamentary process following *Roberts’ Rules of Order* is not adequate and something more is *required*, but what that provision will be interpreted to mean cannot be known now. After attending the 2003 GA of the Uniting Church of Australia, which uses a “consensus method” of decision-making, Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons wrote an article<sup>1</sup> recommending that the PC(USA) further explore consensus decision-making. Moving in that direction would fit with this change in wording.

## **Familiar terms are replaced with unfamiliar ones**

Although the most significant changes are the substantive ones, a sampling of which has been described in this paper, presbyters should be also aware that familiar terminology is replaced with unfamiliar terms. The term “governing bodies” disappears and is replaced with “councils.” “Officer” and “office” (referring to the offices of deacon, elder, and minister of the Word and Sacrament) become obsolete and are replaced by “ordered minister” and “ordered ministry.” (Therefore elders would be “ordered ministers,” not “officers.”) The term “officer” is redefined to mean only “officer of a council [governing body].” “Elder” is replaced with the current alternative term “ruling elder.” “Minister of the Word and Sacrament” is replaced with the current alternative term “teaching elder.”

### **Conclusion: It is unwise to discard our entire basis for government in exchange for these fundamentally-flawed documents**

It is difficult to overstate the significance of replacing the entire Form of Government with the completely rewritten material being presented to the presbyteries. The contents have not simply been consolidated, but

rather have been *substantively changed* in such basic ways as to mandate unlimited inclusiveness, establish a hierarchical rather a connectional relationship between governing bodies, and place virtually all of the interpretive history of the *Book of Order* in jeopardy. The significance of adding a fourth section, Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, on interpretation of the other three sections of the *Book of Order* cannot be known in advance of adopting the document.

The consequences of making so many significant, substantive changes without carefully considering the ramifications of each one should be a cause for genuine concern for all presbyters. The turmoil caused by the replacement of the entire Form of Government is the last thing our denomination needs at this difficult time in our history. We would be far wiser to amend our current *Book of Order* as needed instead of discarding the entire basis for our government in exchange for these fundamentally-flawed documents.

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1. “A Consensus Observed” by Gradye Parsons, *Perspectives: An Online Publication of the Office of the General Assembly*, Sept 2003.  
<http://oga.pcusa.org/perspectives/sep03/consensus.htm>

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*Carol Shanholtzer is an elder in Minneapolis, MN.*

# **A Critique of the Belhar Confession**

**by Susan Cyre**

Presbyteries are being asked by the General Assembly to vote on whether the Belhar Confession should be added to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) constitution in the *Book of Confessions*. A majority vote by 2/3 of the 173 presbyteries is needed for the confession to be included.

The Belhar Confession, named after the town where the Confession was drafted, was adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa to denounce the sin of apartheid. The Presbyterian Church in our country also spoke forcefully to the sin of racism

two decades earlier. The Confession of 1967, which is part of our *Book of Confessions*, confesses, “*God has created the peoples of the earth to be one universal family. In his reconciling love, he overcomes the barriers between brothers and breaks down every form of discrimination based on racial or ethnic difference, real or imaginary.*” (9.44) The Confession then goes on to list specific areas to be addressed such as housing, employment, and education.

Should the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) add the Belhar Confession from South Africa to our *Book of*

*Confessions?* There are two reasons why the answer should be NO. First, although the Belhar spoke to racism in South Africa, the words of the Confession, as well as the understanding of some who interpret it, demonstrate that the Belhar Confession may be applied broadly to other issues. Second, the Belhar Confession posits a very different understanding of “unity” and “justice” than Scripture and our Confessions. Christian faith teaches that unity is a result of truth. In the Belhar truth is subordinated to unity.

### **The Belhar Confession Is Not Limited To The Sin of Racism**

The Belhar Confession was written in response to apartheid, yet its major sections address “unity” and “justice” with the sin of racism addressed briefly in section 3. The themes of unity and justice appropriately condemn the sinful “separation of people on a racial basis.” The language of Belhar, however, does not limit its application to the sin of racism.

Allen Boesak, one of the architects of Belhar, told members of his Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa in 2008 that the Belhar should be used to end discrimination against those who practice same-sex behavior. Boesak claimed, “Based on Belhar, the church should fully accept gay members, should perform gay marriage ceremonies and allow ministers in gay relationships to serve in the church.”<sup>1</sup> Although Boesak’s own church rejected his interpretation of the Belhar, the fact that he would see its potential for this purpose demonstrates that Belhar can be used in this expansive way.

Speaking to a group at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary this past April on the Belhar, Boesak told the group, “the demand for inclusivity goes well beyond the issue of race” to include “women, people with disabilities and those whose sexual orientation is not heterosexual.”<sup>2</sup>

There is evidence of an intent to apply the Belhar to same-sex behavior in the PCUSA. Cynthia Holder Rich, a member of the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns that initially brought the Belhar to the General Assembly acknowledged that the Belhar is being used to “press other issues.” She told a joint meeting of the PCUSA Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, the Advocacy Committee of Women’s Concerns, and the Advocacy Committee on Racial Ethnic Concerns that met in January 2010, “Theologians have used this document to press issues other than race....You may or may not know that that is part of the international conversation.... This document is about freedom. People of different sexual

orientations are not free and so this document could be used to free people.”<sup>3</sup>

The Reformed Church in America (RCA) is a Formula of Agreement partner with the PCUSA and has approved the Belhar. The RCA interprets the Belhar in their official study guide to go beyond racism “to all forms of exclusion” including same-sex behavior. The study guide uses the Belhar to apply to the Israel-Palestine conflict and always in a way that is pro-Palestinian. The RCA Commission on Christian Action has publicly said they use the Belhar in addressing issues before them that include: the farm bill, Sudanese refugees, the Iraq War, immigration, minimum wage increases and America’s embargo of Cuba.<sup>5</sup>

How will this expansive interpretation of unity be used in the church? The Rev. John Austin, of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and member of the Special Committee that recommended to the GA that the Belhar be added to the Book of Confessions, said, “The church needs to be transformed by Belhar.”<sup>6</sup> We should ask, since the church rejected racism more than 40 years ago, how will Belhar transform the church? What new teaching does Belhar confess that will transform the church?

### **Belhar Is In Conflict With Scripture and The Confessions**

The Belhar Confession uses “unity” and “justice” differently than Scripture and the Confessions use them. The Belhar posits that since Christ’s work of reconciliation is completed, the church “must” manifest a visible unity. And “*anything* which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted” (italics mine). It then goes on to “reject any doctrine” which threatens this visible unity. In Belhar doctrine or the church’s witness to the truth is subordinated to “unity.” Scripture and the Confessions, however, view “unity” very differently. Scripture and the Confessions understand “unity” to be a result of accepting the truth that is revealed in Scripture and witnessed to by the doctrines of the church in the Confessions.

Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture unites people from different races, genders and classes. Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). The Galatians passage does not say that beliefs or behaviors do not matter. Rather it says that each person regardless of class, gender or race finds salvation in Christ alone. Later in Galatians 5, Paul gives a long list of “acts of this sinful nature” and concludes, “those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Clearly, while race, gender and

class do not affect salvation, “acts of this sinful nature” can affect salvation. What individuals believe and therefore how they live matters to their salvation.

The Belhar appears to say that beliefs and behavior do not matter and should not threaten unity when it claims “*anything* which threatens this unity...must be resisted.” The rationale in the report sent to the General Assembly from the Special Committee on the Belhar Confession similarly states that *convictions* are subordinate to unity when it declares, “This confession expresses clearly our own church’s longing for unity across barriers we see in our own situation of different spiritual gifts, backgrounds, *convictions*, languages and cultures, both within our church and across denominational lines” (italics mine). Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 12:12ff that spiritual gifts should not divide us. The Galatians 3:28 passage would apply to languages, backgrounds and cultures. However, there are *convictions* that divide us. For example, some Presbyterians, even clergy, reject the sacrificial atonement of Christ or reject the clear words of Scripture on sexual behavior. Aren’t these among the important theological and moral teachings where what is true must divide from what is not true?

The Barmen Confession in our *Book of Confessions* was forged in response to Hitler’s imposition of his ideology on the church. In confessing Barmen those believers refused to subsume the revelation of Scripture to the German state’s ideology and thus they broke the unity of the German Evangelical Church, the state church, by forming the German Confessing Church. They confessed in Barmen, “*Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and beside this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation*” (8.11-12) Those believers refused to elevate “unity” over revealed truth.

The Preface to the Barmen declares, “In opposition to attempts to establish the unity of the German Evangelical Church by means of false doctrine.... the Confessional Synod insists that the unity of the Evangelical Churches in Germany can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit.” (8.01)

The Second Helvetic Confession shows this relationship between truth and unity, “unity consists not in outward rites and ceremonies, but rather in the truth and unity of the catholic faith. The catholic faith is not given to us by human laws, but by the Holy Scriptures....”

In contrast to these confessions, the Belhar places unity above everything including revealed truth. The Belhar confesses, “we reject *any doctrine*, which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace while believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of *diversity* and in despair of reconciliation” (italics mine). Is this “diversity” related to sexual behavior? Or to beliefs about the nature and work of Christ, or to birth status like “Jew and Gentile, slave and free”? Belhar isn’t clear.

Scripture and the Confessions are clear that false beliefs and sinful behavior cause disunity. It was the false priests and prophets that Jeremiah condemned who proclaimed “peace, peace” when there could be no peace because of Israel’s idolatry and sinful behavior (Jer. 6:14). Jeremiah was viewed by the false priests and prophets as the unity breaker. Ahab called Elijah the “troubler of Israel” because Elijah’s condemnation of sin destroyed unity. And Jesus said he came not “to bring peace but a sword” (Matt.10:34). We should seek unity but it cannot be at the expense of truth. Scripture and the Confessions are clear that as long as sin continues in us, unity cannot be realized fully. To attempt to produce unity apart from truth, as the Belhar does, is to deny truth matters and to put “truth and falsehood on a level” which the *Book of Order* rightly calls “pernicious.” Presbyteries should vote NO to including Belhar in the *Book of Confessions*.

1. “Boesak quits ‘anti-gay’ church” by Neels Jackson, [www.news24.com/New24/South\\_AfricaNew/0,,2-7-1442\\_2404899,00.html](http://www.news24.com/New24/South_AfricaNew/0,,2-7-1442_2404899,00.html)
2. “Apartheid foe Boesak speaks to Louisville Presbyterians,” by Peter Smith, Courier-Journal.com, April 26, 2010.
3. “Committees support elevating Belhar to confessional status” by Carmen Fowler, The Layman, Posted Wednesday, January 27, 2010, [www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=26703](http://www.layman.org/news.aspx?article=26703)
4. The Reformed Church in America Study Guide, [www.rca.org/belhar](http://www.rca.org/belhar); <http://images.rca.org/docs/aboutus/BelharGuideComplete.pdf>
5. “Why Not Belhar?” by Kevin DeYoung, *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought*, January 2010 Essay; [www.rca.org/Page.aspx?pid=6245](http://www.rca.org/Page.aspx?pid=6245)
6. Layman, January 27, 2010.

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*Rev. Susan Cyre is executive director of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry that publishes Theology Matters.*

# Voting? On the Belhar

by Jerry Andrews

I'd rather not. Let me explain.

I want very much for the PC(USA) to engage in sustained committed conversation over the things that matter—the Faith and the faithfulness of the Church. I believe that more than the loss of any one particular proposition of the Faith, the life of the Church has been diminished by the loss of the core conviction that the Church has a Faith without which she cannot live faithfully. Any conversation, anywhere, any time that has any promise to be a common conversation that is sustained, and to which presbyters commit to speak from the Faith and listen to the Faith has my support. I have been gladly engaged in several such conversations. I find hope there.

The consideration of adding to the confessional standards of the church a particular confessional such as Belhar is a grand church-wide opportunity for such a conversation. I welcome it.

In my role as Chair of the Ecclesiastical Committee of my presbytery, as part of our preparation for a vote, I have proposed this conversation in our common life. I hope for a good response and quality conversation that leads to greater faithfulness because the Faith has been newly attended to. But.

I will not be advising the presbytery to vote Yes on adding the Belhar Confession to our confessional standards for one simple reason: there is not enough time to give it the consideration it is due and which the Church should require before a decisive vote.

Confessions of Faith not only form the Church, they are formed by the Church. They, at their best and when we are at our best, arise from the hard work of advancing the theological mission of the Church, often in controversy, always with difficulty.

Confessions of Faith, prior to adoption by the Church, are to be examined—read closely, studied carefully, understood fully. This work is the work of the Church. It cannot be assigned to a task force. The work of any task force early in the process is to recommend further consideration or not, and produce helps for the whole

Church to examine it well. As a Church considering a confession, this is the place where we should be—using the helps provided to examine the document. Instead, the task force of the General Assembly recommended adoption of the confession without offering even its own examination (approval is not examination). The General Assembly, neither in committee nor plenary, debated any one sentence or even cited one phrase in its debates. It recommended that the Church adopt the confession without discussion of its content. This is not us at our best. General Assembly meetings seldom are. We, again, gave evidence of being an uncatechized Church, but now, most sadly, at the very moment we were to debate a standard of the Faith itself. Study materials are available from the Office of Theology, Worship, and Education. They invite you to use their materials. I invite you to accept their invitation.

Confessions of Faith, prior to adoption by the Church, are to be tested in a variety of contexts within the Church's life. Does it help you to teach the Faith to the Confirmands and to new believers? Does it help you to teach the Reformed Faith to your officers? Does it help as you preach, teach, and counsel? Does it sound certain sounds as the Church engages in mission and ministry? Does it advance the knowledge of the Faith in the disciple and help the elders to order the faithfulness of the congregation? Does it serve the shared life and witness of the presbytery and the work of the General Assembly?

Not all these questions need be answered completely before adoption but they all need to be asked as the confession is invited into our common life. Belhar is just now being introduced. While some academics and ecumenists and others have a 20 year history with the document, the PC(USA) does not. Research Services tells us that 83% of ministers are unfamiliar with the Belhar Confession; 98% of elders and 99% of members are unfamiliar with it.

We are not ready to make an informed judgment on the Belhar. It has not been examined by us or tested by us. I do not recommend we vote Yes. Or No.

It has been recommended to us. Highly.

It is a word from the global south. That is very welcome. (I heard someone say at General Assembly, it would be the first word from Africa in our confessional documents. That is a failure to know the origin of the Nicene Creed, probably the Apostles' Creed, and a failure to recognize the profound reliance on Augustine and other African Church Fathers by the authors of all the Reformation creeds and the Westminster Standards.)

It is a word about racism. That alone recommends its study.

It is a word from a Reformed Church theologically divided in a nation long politically divided built by that Reformed Church, encouraging unity and righteousness

in nation and church. Any part of that sentence sound timely?

Not to give the Belhar full consideration would miss an opportunity to engage in sustained committed conversation about the things that matter—the Faith and faithfulness. So let's begin. But let us not pretend we can finish before voting deadlines. The deadline for presbytery voting will not sufficiently permit either its examination or testing.

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*Rev. Dr. Jerry Andrews is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church, San Diego, CA. He is co-moderator of the Presbyterian Coalition.*

## The GA “Urges” Board of Pensions to Extend Benefits to Same-Sex Partners

by James R. Tony

### The General Assembly Action

The recent 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (GA) passed a resolution that “1. Urge[d] the Board of Pensions ...to extend eligibility for spousal and dependent benefits under the Plan to Benefits Plan members, their same-gender domestic partners, and the children of their same-gender domestic partners.... 2. Approve an increase in dues for the Benefits Plan of up to 1 percent, effective January 1, 2012....”

Participation in the Board of Pensions (BOP) plan is mandatory for all installed pastors. The *Book of Order* stipulates that the terms of call for an installed pastor, “shall include participation in the Benefits Plan of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), including both pension and medical coverage...” (G-14.0534). In the language of the *Book of Order* the word “shall” makes an action mandatory.

This means that when a congregation has an installed pastoral position (even in a vacancy situation), the congregation must pay DUES for plan participation. Dues are not paid for individual coverage; thus, they are not like “premiums” to an insurance plan. Instead dues

are a percentage of salary; they are paid into common funds: a retirement fund and a medical fund. Then the common fund is used to make retirement and medical payments to individuals. Thus a portion of what is paid out to any individual who is a “member” of the plan is paid by each and every contribution to the plan. This distinction from ordinary medical insurance is important.

This GA action, if the BOP adopts it, would require church members to support—with their tithes and offerings—practices that Scripture, our confessions, and the *Book of Order* call sin. In authorizing the BOP to raise mandatory dues up to one percent, the mandatory dues could increase from the current 31.5% to 32.5% of the pastor's effective salary. This amounts to an actual increase of 3.17% to congregations. If this is implemented, the coverage and dues increase will be effective January 1, 2012.

Presbyteries will not vote to approve this requirement. Nothing constitutional or official stands in the way of the BOP implementing what the GA urged them to do. However, the BOP has discretion in how and for whom

The Rev. Dr. Kari McClellan is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry (PFFM). Rev. Susan Cyre is Executive Director and Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the PC(USA)'s witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry.

**We can be contacted at**  
scyre@swva.net; phone 540-898-4244;  
www.theologymatters.com.

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### Change Service Requested

to provide coverage. Therefore members, sessions and pastors can write letters to the Directors of the BOP and share their deep concerns. They can ask the BOP not to implement this action of the 219<sup>th</sup> GA.

### Some Considerations

1) This action, if implemented, forces sessions and individuals to support financially what Scripture, the confessions, and the *Book of Order* call sin.

2) The *Book of Order* requires that installed pastors participate in the BOP plan. Others may also participate in the plan. Participating clergy and elders cannot be in same-sex relationships, since to do so is prohibited by the sexuality standards for ordained officers in G-6.0106b. The proposed extension of coverage to same-sex partners only applies to church employees, such as youth directors, music directors, Christian education directors, and church secretaries who are not ordained elders. Employers (sessions, institutions and agencies) already possess the freedom to cover their employees through a wide variety of elective plans without using the power of the BOP to coerce other congregations to pay for same-sex coverage. It is noteworthy that the “urging” of the 219<sup>th</sup> GA did not extend to opposite-sex domestic partners.

3) The General Assembly included a comment in their recommendation that the BOP “be highly urged to provide relief of conscience, ...for those congregations for whom these actions cause a moral dilemma.” It is questionable, however, that a satisfactory relief of conscience can be found. Since covering same-sex partners and dependents crosses the whole breadth of the plan, it would likely require a separate plan and likely require higher dues for those covered. Unless everyone is forced to pay the higher dues, would unequal dues be discriminatory? Would civil law allow unequal dues based on same-sex behavior?

4) The proposed increase of up to 1% does not reflect potential increases to comply with the Federal healthcare plan recently approved by Congress. These significant dues increases affect small churches disproportionately. Some years ago, it took a congregation of about 125 members to support a full-time pastor. Since a majority of PCUSA congregations have 150 members or less, as dues increase and minimum compensation packages increase, and as PCUSA membership declines, more churches may be unable to call a pastor. This increase in mandatory dues, directly affects the ability of churches to do ministry.

This action of the General Assembly regarding BOP coverage demonstrates how the sexual behavior of one part of the church affects us all. If the proposed amendment 10-A is approved by the presbyteries, it will remove the clear standards of “fidelity and chastity” for church officers from the *Book of Order* at G-6.0106b. This would seem to weaken the case that to cover same-sex partners of church employees by the mandatory BOP would be contrary to our standards. The “urging” of the General Assembly demonstrates that even in the short run, there is no freedom to be granted in allowing for a difference of opinion about the moral standard of sexual behavior. Those who wish to change the standard are by this proposal demonstrating their intent to enforce their moral position on the whole church.

Editor’s Note: Write letters directly to the Board of Directors for the BOP, urging them not to adopt the changes the GA requested. The names and addresses of the Directors can be found on the *Theology Matters’* website [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).

*Rev. James R. Tony is pastor of Community Presbyterian Church, Palos Park, IL*

