



WHAT'S COMING TO THE 219TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY? Minneapolis - July 3-10, 2010

For Presbyterians who care about how their faith intersects with the bigger world, this summer's General Assembly will provide a panorama of possibilities for discussion. Even assembly veterans seem stunned by the amount of work to get done when the 219th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) meets in Minneapolis July 3-10.

This assembly will bring together 712 commissioners from 173 presbyteries, who will be divided randomly into committees to discuss everything from Afghanistan to wetlands. The docket includes both messy, controversial items (gay marriage, peace in the Middle East, immigration), and quieter ones close to the heart of congregational life, such as how small churches with limited resources can find pastoral leaders and how Presbyterians can most effectively do AIDS work around the world.

Here's a quick look at some of the business.

ISRAEL-PALESTINE. In recent years, relations between the PC(USA) and Jews have sometimes been stressful, and Middle East relations undoubtedly will be a hot issue again this year. The denomination's Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee is asking the assembly to denounce Caterpillar Inc. for continuing to profit from "non-peaceful" use of its bulldozers and other equipment in Israel-Palestine.

The report of a special Middle East study committee — with 30 recommendations, including one calling on the U.S. government "to repent of its sinful behavior throughout the Middle East" — has already drawn some criticism from Jewish groups.

The assembly also will consider theological papers on Christians and Jews, and Christian-Muslim relations.

FORM OF GOVERNMENT. For the second time in two years, the assembly will be asked to consider proposed revisions to the PC(USA)'s Form of Government, or FOG.

Those comprehensive changes are intended to streamline and shorten the FOG document and make it more responsive to local needs. The FOG task force says the proposed changes will help Presbyterians better meet the mission needs of the 21st century, moving from a more detailed regulatory approach to the flexibility needed in a diverse, multicultural environment. The task force could not change certain FOG elements, specifically, ordination standards.

The proposal, however, is complicated. In 2008 the assembly held off voting the FOG proposal up or down, saying the church needed more time

to consider it — and forming a new committee (with many members of the old task force plus some new ones) to make additional revisions.

Whether the assembly is ready to vote now — whether the commissioners will read this complicated report and whether they agree with it — remains to be seen.

MIDDLE GOVERNING BODIES. The assembly also will be asked to consider a proposal from the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly to create a General Assembly Commission on Middle Governing Bodies. The idea is to create a 21-member commission that would consider the mission of presbyteries and synods in a changing environment, and to give that commission some power to act when the assembly is not in session.

GAY ORDINATION. Once again, the assembly will be asked to vote to remove the PC(USA)'s requirement that those being ordained practice fidelity if they are married or chastity if they are single. In 2008, the assembly did that — and for the third time, a majority of the presbyteries refused to change that constitutional standard.

What will happen in July is anyone's guess. Each assembly is distinct and different. But more than 25 presbyteries flipped last year from keeping the current standards to favoring change, so those who support gay ordination are energized to keep pushing.

Some presbyteries have sent overtures asking that the "fidelity and chastity" language be removed. Others want a moratorium or "season of rest" on considering any changes to the ordination standards before 2012. And some want previous authoritative interpretations speaking against homosexual practice to be restored.

MARRIAGE. The 2008 General Assembly created a Special Committee to Consider Issues of Christian Marriage and Civil Unions. It too was instructed not to change the "fidelity and chastity" language. The assembly will consider both a majority and a minority report from the committee that wrestled with such issues as the differences between Christian marriage and same-sex union ceremonies. In some states, same-sex marriages are legal, but the PC(USA)'s *Book of Order* defines Christian marriage as being between a man and a woman.

The committee's majority report asks the assembly to develop resources consonant with the denomination's constitution, but which could help congregations sort through questions such as what role clergy can play in same-sex ceremonies and whether church property can be used for them.

The minority report states that marriages "which are outside of God's design for sexual expression, cannot be encouraged or blessed."

SOCIAL WITNESS. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness policy is submitting reports on gun violence, AIDS, the economic crisis and public education. And there's sure to be discussion on other concerns in the public eye, including immigration, care for the environment and peacemaking. ●