

Presbyterians
Pro-Life

The 218th General Assembly---It's not church camp!

By Marie Bowen, Executive Director of PPL

General Assembly in San Jose was difficult! Commissioners faced hundreds of decisions ranging from grammatical wordsmithing in Committees to the "elephant" issue of whether to remove the fidelity and chastity standard for ordination from the Book of Order. Debate on the floor of plenary about a variety of social issues made clear the deeper theological divisions in our denomination.

Our divisions are real and deeply troubling. Presbyterians Pro-Life is concerned about what the church says about the value of life, but our disagreement on issues like abortion only serve to cast a spotlight on the spiritual chasm at the very roots of our faith. Our disagreements start with what we believe about Scripture, the Triune God, and our identity and purpose as the Body of Christ.

We are divided in our view of Scripture. Is it authoritative for our lives or merely informative? We are divided about the identity of Jesus Christ. Although he was often proclaimed as Lord at this assembly, we are a people who do not agree about whether Jesus is the Son of God and the only way to salvation, or merely a good example we should emulate. For me, God is Supreme Creator and owner of all things---a Sovereign Being to be worshipped and gratefully served, while for others God is a universal cosmic force with whom we work (almost as equals) to bring the kingdom of God on earth. We disagree about whether we are being transformed into the image of Christ by the power of his Word and Spirit or whether we are working out our salvation by bringing justice and peace to the world's systems.

It is important to remember as we respond to this assembly that NOT ALL commissioners agreed with the decisions of the majority. Many faithful men and women worked long hours, meeting at mealtimes, in early morning, and late at night to do their utmost to influence faithful decisions by the larger body. Many signed dissents and protests in the wake of harmful majority decisions that are not faithful to Scripture, our confessions, or our constitution. Renewal organization leaders, board members, and volunteer teams worked alongside commissioners with little rest or food to bring a faithful witness to the work of this Assembly.

Following a series of decisions made on Thursday members of the Presbyterian Renewal Network issued a [press release](#) in response to actions of the General Assembly that effect ordination standards and the confessions.

What exactly happened at this GA?

Actually those who stayed home and stayed online, may know more than those of us who attended. GA business is conducted very quickly on the plenary floor. Each committee (17) makes recommendations to the entire Assembly on the business assigned to that committee. Actions often move more quickly than PC-Biz and commissioners often must vote before the committee recommendation appears on their screen.

PPL's report focuses on the life issues. Other groups have focused more on ordination issues, confessional decisions, the many social and polity issues and I would recommend that you visit the following websites to learn more about related GA actions.

[PC-Biz](#) – for the exact actions taken on each piece of business

[Presbyterians for Renewal](#) & [Presbyterian Coalition](#) for commentary on ordination issues.

[Presbyterian Action](#) for information on actions on Middle East

[Presbyweb](#) & [The Layman Online](#) for GA news and reactions on a daily basis

[Letter from PC\(USA\) leadership](#) to pastors and churches

Reports from the PC(USA) [News Service](#)

Life issues among some of the good decisions at the 218th GA

PPL is grateful to God that the actions on three overtures from Pittsburgh Presbytery and Beaver Butler related to abortion had positive outcomes at this Assembly. By clicking on the item numbers below you can read the exact language of the action that was approved.

Board of Pensions Annual Reporting on Relief of Conscience

[Item 15-02](#) requires the Board of Pensions to issue an annual report providing information on participation and process in the [Relief of Conscience](#) Program. The ROC program allows a way churches can be certain that their dues, paid to the Board of Pensions Medical Benefits Plan as part of a pastor's terms of call, will not be used to cover abortions. The General Assembly action requires the Board of Pensions to report the number of churches participating in ROC, the total dollars collected for ROC, and the total dollars deposited in the adoption assistance fund. The BOP is also asked to communicate with churches to assure them of their participation in the Relief of Conscience Program and to clearly communicate the process of application on their website. Many churches remain unaware that the dues paid for their pastor's Medical Benefits Plan are used to pay for abortions. Most do not know that there is a process whereby their dues can be re-directed to a separate stream that will not be used to pay for abortions. That process is called Relief of Conscience. PPL has a [booklet](#) which has helped to inform many churches and pastors about this process and how to apply for it through their presbytery.

Congregational Resources on 'reproductive options' to be re-developed

[Item 10-03](#) from Pittsburgh and **[Item 10-04](#)** from Beaver-Butler both requested that the GA ensure fairness and balance in funding advocacy & publications on abortion. This action would comply with the intention of the 1992 Problem Pregnancies and Abortion document which called for diverse views to be reflected in future publications. The Health Issues committee did not approve either overture but did listen extensively to the two overture advocates and asked many probing questions about the pro-life position and how that might be reflected in publications and advocacy. Ultimately the response of the Health Issues Committee did not address advocacy, but did call for re-developing of resources for pastoral counseling addressing "reproductive options":

[The 218th General Assembly \(2008\) directs the appropriate PC\(USA\) entities to redevelop congregational resource materials, on the subject of reproductive options, to more adequately reflect the full spectrum of biblical, theological, and pastoral counsel, while remaining consistent with the policy of the 1992 report](#)

of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion and the 2006 policy on Late-Term Pregnancies and Abortion. The General Assembly Council will report back to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

PPL is hopeful that the PC(USA) entities that are charged with producing these materials will honor the will of the Committee to see that the pro-life perspective is given substantial representation in the producing of these materials and that pro-life views on the value of human life will be fully and honestly reflected. We will be proactive in making contacts in the upcoming months to offer our participation in this publishing effort. Several commissioners have pledged their help in reminding the entities assigned with this writing project that they are charged with including and reflecting the pro-life position.

Other Actions taken on life and family issues were also successful

Marriage - Commissioners voted to disapprove [Item 04-08](#) which would have re-defined marriage in the Book of Order. Debate on that item revealed it was one of the "hot" issues of the assembly. Though this General Assembly was not ready to change the definition of marriage in our Book of Order from a "civil contract between a woman and a man" to a "covenant between two persons," they did approve in a separate action a recommendation for a study to report to the 219th General Assembly (2010) that is sure to keep this debate alive in the next General Assembly. The study may come back with policy recommendations in the following areas:

- a. [The history of the laws governing marriage and civil union, including current policy debates.](#)
- b. [How the theology and practice of marriage have developed in the Reformed and broader Christian tradition.](#)
- c. [The relationship between civil union and Christian marriage.](#)
- d. [The effects of current laws on same-gender partners and their children.](#)
- e. [The place of covenanted same-gender partnerships in the Christian community.](#)

To read the full text of this GA recommendation for study, go to [Item 04-13](#).

Children with disabilities - In the Board of Pensions Committee 15 another overture was approved which asks the Board of Pensions to provide health plan coverage for habilitative therapies for children with congenital disabilities such as Down Syndrome, autism, and others. ([Item 15-01](#)) This coverage will allow medical treatment and therapies that help those with Down Syndrome, Autism and other disabilities reach and live to their full potential. Such medical coverage may encourage parents whose children have been diagnosed with congenital developmental disabilities *in utero* to give birth to babies which might otherwise be aborted. This action is a proper extension of the policy of full inclusion of persons with disabilities that was approved by the 2006 General Assembly.

Adolescent Development Resources - An overture ([12-08](#)) calling for Adolescent Development Resources was approved. It asks the General Assembly Mission Council (formerly General Assembly Council) to:

["...produce adolescent human development resources based upon Scripture and the Reformed theological tradition. These resources would explore all facets of](#)

adolescent development including human sexuality.”

The 217th General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama directed all PC(USA) entities

“to use the biblical and confessional teachings that sexual relationships belong only within the bond of marriage of a man and a woman as the standard for development of any future materials or recommendations for materials in print or in its website.”

What is God doing in the PC(USA)?

Many people worked very hard in the two years between assemblies to educate and influence commissioners to make faithful decisions. In spite of those efforts, the majority voted to take actions that are likely to further division and separation. More importantly, some of these actions which do not honor or glorify Christ. Most commissioners sincerely seek to find God’s will in making decisions at the General Assembly. Why then, did it go so badly? What is God doing in the PC(USA)?

My first impressions are that there are several elements that are of a piece--- judgment, purifying, a turning over to spiritual blindness, and a strengthening of the remnant through suffering. There seems to be a new peace and steadfastness among those who have been doing this work of GA witness for a long time. There is grief too but a sense of confidence that God is working. Though we may not understand all the results of this General Assembly, we continue to experience his presence and put our trust in Him.

God is always pursuing his people---not to punish but to extend mercy and to call us to himself. I believe the greatest work we can do in the next year as members of Christ’s Body is the work of repentance and prayer on behalf of the PC(USA). It will take more than votes and politicking to heal what ails this denomination. We need a Savior!

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