
PC(USA) leaders issue pastoral letter to the church on Assembly's marriage actions

June 19, 2014

To congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Earlier today the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved a recommendation from its Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee allowing for pastoral discretion to perform *"any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform,"* where legal by state law.

They also approved a recommendation to change language in the Book of Order to indicate that "marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman." Both decisions came with much thought, discussion and prayer, and clearly the entire body that is the PC(USA) will be interpreting these actions for some time.

Please know that the same triune God in whom we place our hope, faith and trust in is still in control, and that the Assembly's action today is the result of deep discernment to hear God's voice and discern God's will.

We concur with the feelings expressed by Teaching Elder Commissioner Jeffrey Bridgeman, moderator of the Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee, during his presentation to the Assembly. "The apostle Paul tells us that ours is, in fact, 'the ministry of reconciliation' as 'ambassadors of Christ,' and he died for us so that we might be reconciled, that we might become reconcilers," Bridgeman said.

In this season of both happiness and sadness over the Assembly's decisions, we call on you to remember the overflowing grace and love God gifts us with, and to take seriously our charge to bestow the same grace and love on one another.

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,



Ruling Elder Heath K. Rada
Moderator, 221st General Assembly



The Reverend Gradye Parsons
Stated Clerk of the General Assembly



Ruling Elder Linda Bryant Valentine
Executive Director, Presbyterian Mission Agency

A statement of protest by the Presbyterian Lay Committee repudiating the action of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to redefine marriage.

Detroit, MI

June 19, 2014

The 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has approved both an Authoritative Interpretation of the Constitution and an amendment to redefine marriage. In the name of 1.8 million Presbyterians nationwide, the General Assembly has committed an express repudiation of the Bible, the mutually agreed upon Confessions of the PC(USA), thousands of years of faithfulness to God's clear commands and the denominational ordination vows of each concurring commissioner. This is an abomination.

The Presbyterian Lay Committee mourns these actions and calls on all Presbyterians to resist and protest them. You should tell your pastor and the members of your session that you disapprove of these actions. You should refuse to fund the General Assembly, your synod, your presbytery and even your local church if those bodies have not explicitly and publicly repudiated these unbiblical actions.

God will not be mocked and those who substitute their own felt desires for God's unchangeable Truth will not be found guiltless before a holy God. The Presbyterian Lay Committee will continue to call for repentance and reform: repentance of those who have clearly erred at this General Assembly, and reform of the PC(USA) according to the Word of God.

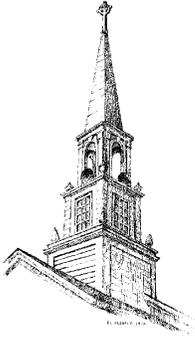
Presbyterian Lay Committee
Board of Directors, June 19, 2014

Original documents may be found on

<https://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/6/19/pcusa-leaders-issue-pastoral-letter-church-assembly/>

<http://www.layman.org/presbyterian-lay-committee-board-directors-repudiates-action-pcusa-general-assembly/>

GCCP's *"What We Believe"* remains unchanged. However, at their June 19 stated meeting, the GCCP session formally appointed an Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force charged with the responsibility of studying, evaluating and making recommendations for action regarding our continued relationship to the PC(USA) and/or other potential affiliations.



Greenwood Community Church, Presbyterian

805 Main Avenue, Warwick, Rhode Island, 02886 Tel. (401) 737-1230; Fax (401) 739-8067

The Rev. Dr. Stephen L. Clark, Pastor

August 20, 2014

Dear Members and Friends,

As mentioned in the March *Fishermen's News*, many of you know there have been a growing number of serious constitutional, theological, ethical, moral and even legal concerns straining our ecclesiastical affiliation these past years. At their June stated meeting, Session formally approved the creation of an Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force charged with the responsibility of studying, evaluating and making action recommendations to Session regarding our continued relationship to the denomination and/or other potential affiliations (*Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force members: Steve Nazareth, chair; Emmy Kmet, Angie D'Albora, Michael Desmond, Matthew Barber, Harry Curran, Robert Petrucci*).

A special meeting of the Session was held August 19, 2014 to act on a recommendation of the Ecclesiastical Relations Task Force that we send the enclosed letter in protest of recent actions of the 221st General Assembly of the PC(USA). After much discussion and deliberation, the motion was approved with one dissenting vote. On the back of this page you will find two statements that have been available on our church's website since June 20 which may help summarize the issues causing our serious concern. As similarly mentioned in my January 10, 2012 correspondence regarding Session's action at that time to defer/delay per capita payments, these matters are not viewed as simply a difference of opinion; these are viewed as serious violations of the constitutional and theological standards which define us as Presbyterian, and thus a breach of the bonds of trust binding us together as a denomination.

I'd like to share a related personal vignette from the morning of July 2: A son of charter members dropped by the office (*he now lives in New Hampshire*) and gave me a box of mementos from his late mother's files, including bulletins, articles and other assorted materials from our church's founding years. One item that caught my eye was a denominational pamphlet from the '40s entitled *Why A Presbyterian Church?* It was part of the appeal package given by the denomination when Greenwood was trying to decide whether to go Presbyterian or Congregational. The following is from page 12, subtitled "Presbyterianism Has a Creed:" *"Some denominations have none; but Presbyterian elders, ruling or teaching, accept at ordination the Westminster Confession of Faith as 'the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures.' Those who sacrifice for the Presbyterian Church today can do so in confidence that it will not be captured tomorrow by people with an entirely different purpose."* As you may know, beginning in the late sixties, specific fidelity to the Westminster Confession of Faith (*while it remains in our Book of Confessions*) was no longer required for ordination.

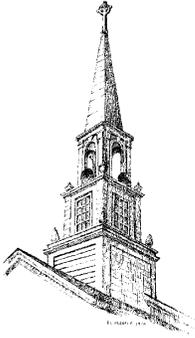
It struck me that morning that we as a Session are not out of step with the denomination Greenwood Community Church originally joined. However, it's becoming progressively more obvious to me the present organization (*which appears to be increasingly "captured by people with an entirely different purpose"*) is not that same denomination.

Thank you for your kind attention to the enclosed. On behalf of the Session I solicit your continued prayers, as well as your written or vocal input, as we seek to be faithful stewards in this and in all matters of our beloved church's mission and ministry.

Sincerely,

Stephen L. Clark

Enclosure



Greenwood Community Church, Presbyterian

805 Main Avenue, Warwick, Rhode Island, 02886 Tel. (401) 737-1230; Fax (401) 739-8067

The Rev. Dr. Stephen L. Clark, Pastor

August 19, 2014

Elder William Thomas
Stated Clerk, Presbytery of Southern New England
P.O. Box 388
Chester, CT 06412

Dear Mr. Thomas,

The Session of Greenwood Community Church, Presbyterian protests the lawless action of the 221st General Assembly approving the Authoritative Interpretation overture, Item 10-3. This action was taken contrary to the official written advice of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) declaring the overture to be out of order,¹ and also violated Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised.²

This Authoritative Interpretation purports to interpret a clear and unambiguous portion of the Book of Order in a manner that reverses and redefines the plain meaning of those words, thus creating an irreconcilable contradiction which pits the Presbyterian Church (USA) against its own constitution. The ACC written advice also reiterates the protest of our moderator on the floor of the Presbytery of Southern New England when a similar A.I. overture was proposed February 11, 2012.³

We also protest the lawful but egregious action of the 221st General Assembly approving a constitutional amendment to allow same-sex "marriage" in the church. This proposed amendment is contrary to the plain meaning of the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments, thus contrary to what we believe to be God's revealed will. This proposed amendment also (a) sets our denomination at odds with an overwhelming majority of Christians in the world today, (b) sets our denomination at odds with virtues taught and affirmed for two millennia in the Christian church universal, and (c) potentially sets our constitution at odds with itself by creating an irreconcilable contradiction between Part II, the Book of Order and Part I, the Book of Confessions,⁴ the latter of which clearly and consistently defines/describes marriage as between a man and a woman.⁵

This letter shall serve as notice that the duly elected and installed leadership of the Greenwood Community Church, Presbyterian, as stewards of the financial resources of this church, will be making no further contributions to the Presbytery of Southern New England, the Synod of the Northeast or the General Assembly of the PC(USA) until such time as these governing bodies reverse course on these matters by (a) repenting of their refusal to be governed by the polity and constitution of our denomination, and (b) returning to God's natural design for human sexuality as revealed at Creation, affirmed by Jesus Christ, confirmed by both books (Part I and Part II) of our present Constitution, and otherwise taught and affirmed by a plain reading of the Holy Scriptures.

Furthermore, we reiterate what we have publicly affirmed and reaffirmed since joining the Confessing Church movement June 21, 2001: that Jesus Christ alone is the Lord of all and the way of salvation; that Holy Scripture is the triune God's revealed Word, the Church's only infallible rule of faith and life; and that God's people are called to holiness in all aspects of life, which includes honoring the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman, the only relationship within which sexual activity is appropriate.

Respectfully submitted,

D. Elaine Stedman Magyar

D. Elaine Stedman Magyar
Clerk of Session

Stephen L. Clark

Stephen L. Clark
Moderator

cc: The Revs. John Webster and Steven Thayer, co-chairs, Presbytery of Southern New England Roundtable
Elder Heath K. Rada, Moderator, 221st General Assembly of the PC(USA)
The Rev. Gradye Parsons, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, PC(USA)
The Rev. Nancy Talbot, Stated Clerk of the Synod of the Northeast, PC(USA)

FOOTNOTES:

¹ *Advice of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC), a permanent committee of the General Assembly of the PC(USA) --*

“The Advisory Committee on the Constitution advises that the 221st General Assembly (2014) disapprove Item 10-03. This overture proposes an authoritative interpretation which would allow the exercise of pastoral discretion and freedom of conscience in conducting a marriage service for any couple as permitted by the ‘laws of the place where the couple seeks to be married.’ It suggests an interpretation contrary to the clear statement of W-4.9000.

Section W-4.9001 and related citations (W-4.9002a, W-4.9004, W-4.9006) limit marriage to couples who are ‘a woman and a man.’ **Because these statements are clear and unambiguous, they can not be interpreted in a manner that is inconsistent with their plain and ordinary meaning.** (*emphasis added*)

The Book of Order is not based upon state and civil law, but the church’s understanding of Scripture and Reformed theology. As noted in Southard v Presbytery of Boston (GAPJC 2012, 220-02), ‘While the PCUSA is free to amend its definition of marriage, a change in state law does not amend the Book of Order.’

Freedom of conscience is a foundational principle of the PC(USA) (G-2.0105) but must be exercised within certain bounds. The exercise of freedom of conscience in and of itself is not necessarily a violation of polity or an obstruction of constitutional governance. Such freedom of conscience, however, is not freedom of action. All persons in ordered ministry have a duty to fulfill constitutionally mandated responsibilities.

If it is the will of the assembly to change the definition of marriage, such a change is better accomplished by amendment of W-4.9000 rather than by authoritative interpretation.”

² Roberts Rules of Order Newly Revised, 39:15 -- “Motions that conflict with the corporate charter, constitution, or bylaws of a society, or with procedural rules prescribed by national, state or local laws, are out of order, and if any motion of this kind is adopted, it is null and void.” (*an earlier edition adds, “Before introducing such motions, the constitution or by-laws must be amended, or the conflicting standing rule or resolution must be amended or rescinded.” See also G-3.0105 --“Meetings shall be conducted in accordance with the most recent edition of Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised, except when it is in contradiction to this Constitution.”*)

³ *February 11, 2012 recorded protest of Stephen L. Clark --* “This overture should have been ruled out of order and never have come to the floor for a vote. Those proposing this overture should have been directed to pursue the process to overture for a change in wording of the Book of Order (that is, to replace ‘man and woman’ with ‘two people’), rather than that of an ‘authoritative interpretation.’ However, as now (rather cynically) stated by the [moderator of one of the churches moving the overture], the first process ‘takes too long.’ W-4.9000 (9001-9006) clearly states eight times (three times in the opening paragraph) that Christian marriage is between a man and a woman (*or, husband and wife*). Requesting General Assembly to authoritatively interpret that ‘a man and a woman’ means ‘two people’ is linguistically ignorant at best and intentionally disingenuous at worst. Such deliberate functional illiteracy strikes me as contemptuous of our constitutional standards and does nothing to engender my trust in the integrity of those endorsing such manipulation of language.”

The gist of the above was repeated in the following comment spoken February 8, 2014 during the floor discussion on this repeated overture:

“On 1/16/14, President Obama stated: ‘Our system of government is built on the premise that our liberty cannot depend on the good intentions of those in power; it depends upon the law to constrain those in power.’ The Presbyterian Church (USA) is also built on this premise; it is to be governed by constitutional law, not the good intentions of those in the pulpit. Our constitution remains clear; W-4.9000 (9001-9006) clearly states eight times that Christian marriage is between a man and a woman (*or, husband and wife*). Requesting General Assembly to trust the good intentions of our pastors to authoritatively interpret that ‘a man and a woman’ means anything but ‘a man and a woman’ is linguistically ignorant at best, intentionally disingenuous at worst, and displays a deliberate functional illiteracy contemptuous of our system of government and its constitutional standards.”

⁴ *F-3.04, THE CONSTITUTION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.) DEFINED --* “The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) consists of the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order.”

⁵ Book of Confessions on Marriage -- Marriage as between a man and a woman (*or husband and wife*) is explicitly addressed at least six times in the BOC: Once in the Second Helvetic Confession (5.246), four times in the Westminster Confession of Faith (6.131, 6.133, 6.134, 6.137) and once in the Confession of 1967 (9.47).