



# The 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly (2014) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) June 14 – 21, Detroit, Michigan A Brief Summary

**Election of the Moderator:** Ruling Elder Heath Rada from North Carolina was elected the Moderator of the General Assembly on the first ballot with 52% of the votes from a field of three candidates. He has served as President of the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond and the CEO of the Greater Richmond chapter of the American Red Cross. As his Vice-Moderator he selected the Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia, pastor of Church of Forest Hills, a multicultural, multiethnic congregation in Queens, New York. Historically, election of a Moderator on the first ballot is not common; the last Moderator elected on the first ballot was the Rev. Jack Rogers who served as the Moderator of the 213<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2001).

**Mid Councils Commission 2 – Synod and Presbytery action:** The 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly established a Special Commission to study the structure of the denomination and make recommendations. The Commission's report to the last Assembly was sent back for further work by a somewhat restructured Commission. This year the Commission brought a recommendation to reorganize the current 16 synods into eight in a collaborative process based on “an emerging sense of purpose, partnership, context, and call.” The Assembly increased the number to 10-12 new synods and the Sinodo Presbiteriano Boriquen en Puerto Rico (Synod of Puerto Rico) successfully overtured to remain as is based on its cultural and geographic setting. In related business the Assembly granted the request of the Synod of Southern California and Hawai'i that Hanmi Presbytery be dissolved and the churches transferred to the corresponding geographic presbyteries. Hanmi did present an overture asking for a delay in the dissolution.

**Divestment: Middle East and Fossil Fuels:** Once again, the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) brought a recommendation to divest from three companies whose business dealings with Israel help support the Palestinian occupation: Motorola Solutions, Caterpillar and Hewlett-Packard. After intense advocacy by outside groups before and during the Assembly, and impassioned testimony and debate in committee and on the floor the Assembly voted 310 to 303 to support divestment. There were also numerous statements of support for both Israel and Palestine and a reaffirmation of the commitment to a two-state solution. In partial response to a controversial study guide issued by a PC(USA)-affiliated advocacy group earlier this year the Assembly added a first point to the resolution that reaffirmed Israel's right to exist.

The other matter was an overture to divest from companies that appear on the Carbon Tracker fossil fuel company list. The Assembly chose instead to refer the matter to MRTI for their study and recommendation.

It is worth noting that one of the financial officers of the Board of Pensions explained to the Assembly that most of their assets are placed with private investment advisers and when they receive the divestment instructions they do not have to divest but can keep any current holdings but will not acquire any more listed stocks.

**Marriage:** The Assembly took three actions related to Marriage regarding the PC(USA) Book of Order. They approved an Authoritative Interpretation permitting pastors to conduct marriage services, and the session may approve the use of facilities for such services, for any marriage in jurisdictions where they are permitted and in accordance with the conscience of the pastor and session. They approved a rewrite of W-4.9000, the section on marriage that, among other things now says marriage is between “two persons, traditionally a man and a woman.” Finally, they directed that a consultation process with presbyteries and churches be developed to promote reconciliation associated with these changes as the vote on the Book of Order amendment goes forward.

**Other actions:** The new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism was affirmed and the Belhar Confession will again be sent to the presbyteries for a 2/3 approval to be added to the Book of Confessions. Modifications were made to the Peacemaking Offering and it will be renamed the Peace and Global Witness Offering. A statement was issued about the need for due process regarding weaponized drones. The 248 New Worshiping Communities were celebrated. Mandatory background checks are urged when hiring pastors but it was decided not to add it as a requirement of the call process in the Book of Order. *Per capita* rate was set at \$7.07 for 2015 and \$7.12 for 2016.

# Commissioner Reports from the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly

## Teaching Elder Chris Weichman (Clen-Moore)

I am grateful for the opportunity to serve the church by attending the General Assembly.

### Positive things I saw:

- Churches in the broad spectrum of the PCUSA, liberal to the most conservative, are doing good and faithful work. Within our disagreements there is common ground.
- The committees were open and fair in their work. I particularly want to hold up Rev. Jeffery Bridgeman who chaired the Marriage and Civil Unions Committee. Jeff is an evangelical from California and did an outstanding job leading the committee through the most divisive issue of this GA. He was a great model for how we should do our work as Presbyterians.
- The PCUSA takes justice and peacemaking seriously. Though I don't always agree with the methods adopted, these issues are important and generally fly under the radar of churches in Shenango Presbytery.
- The continuing success of the 1001 New Worshiping Communities and the development of a new program, "Educate a Child, Change the World" a mission to better educate one million children in the U.S. and around the world as a way to alleviate poverty.

### Negative things I saw:

- The passing of the Authoritative Interpretation (AI) allowing pastors in states where same sex unions are legal to perform those services on church property with the permission on the session. An issue of this magnitude needs to be voted on by the presbyteries.
- The Use of an AI to make this change is dubious at best. An AI is used to address any ambiguities in the Book of Order. In the case of the definition of marriage there was no ambiguity. This may set a bad precedent.
- It was obvious to me that the debate lacked an evangelical presence - most likely because so many of the churches have left the denomination.
- Much of the debates on the floor centered on "emotional stories." There was painfully little biblical or theological reflection
- Too much was made of the "divestment issue." It doesn't help either the Israelis or the Palestinians and generally brings a great deal of misunderstanding.

### Closing thoughts:

- The way we disagree is a crucial part of our identity in Christ. We can dishonor God by giving in to anger and accusation. I/We need to monitor our own hearts on these matters and repent of ill will towards those with whom we disagree.
- We cannot expect unanimity among members of the PCUSA. The reformed tradition respects individual freedom of conscious. Members have the right to disagree with their pastors and their denomination.
- These issues raise the importance of discipleship. Perhaps we do not take seriously enough matters pertaining to how to live the Christian life: what it means to be a member of a church, baptism without expectations, the seriousness of traditional marriage, accountability in love within the body of Christ.

I jokingly said at the end of General Assembly that I am a "newly minted minority" in the PCUSA. I take comfort that Jesus was speak to a newly minted minority of men and women who left Judaism and paganism to follow a life giving savior.

## **Ruling Elder Frank Stratiff (Hillside)**

With so much happening and so many issues being discussed/debated and voted on over the weeklong 221<sup>st</sup> GA convention, I have the sense that to even try to “cover” the entire event could be foolhardy. I therefore have chosen three issues that caught my and others’ attention.

First of all, I want to say that the 221<sup>st</sup> GA Convention in Detroit, “Abound in Hope,” was a real learning experience for me, never having attended a national convention before, let alone a national church convention.

I quickly discovered that one has to have some computer skill and an understanding of meeting organization and participation—e.g., Robert’s Rules of Order—to really be a player in convention business, including this convention. A willingness to speak up before large groups also helps. While I realize it would be expensive, it would be helpful if a commissioner candidate could first attend a GA convention as an Observer to get a lay of the land, so to speak, and a better sense of how a convention is run. In short, knowledge is power.

Between Committee and Assembly meetings, the convention packed a lot of work into 7 days, with Saturday used to wrap things up and conduct the final convention service.

The convention issues were as varied as the folks attending the convention, and included Ecumenical & Interfaith Relations; Civil Unions & Marriage, a particularly difficult matter; Church Polity & Ordained Ministry; Social Justice; the Middle East, another trying issue, highlighted by the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; Congregational Vitality; Theological Issues & Institutions; GA Procedures; Peacemaking & International Issues; Mission Coordination; and Immigrations & Environmental Issues.

While the issues were of varying degrees of importance, there was little doubt that the redefinition of marriage and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were the biggies. In fact, while the Assembly was conducting a discussion/debate on redefining marriage and hearing the diverse opinions and votes, I kept repeating to myself, “You’re not messing with Webster. You’re messing with Webster’s creator and His Bible, His scriptural and Holy Word. Be careful what you do.”

In the end, marriage was redefined as a union between 2 people, winning approval by a wide margin. Later, as a kind of concession, the phrase “traditionally a man and a woman” was added to the redefinition. The landslide vote also included approval of Authoritative Interpretations, which only added to the proponents’ sense of victory, a victory that represented a thumping for the convention’s conservative element.

The convention’s action effectively removes the ban on Presbyterian pastors from marrying same-gender couples where such marriages are legal. However, the resolution gives pastors the right to exercise their consciences and not be compelled to perform a service that s/he considers contrary to his/her beliefs. Sessions also have the right to disallow same-gender marriages to occur in their church or on their church grounds.

Another matter that dominated the convention was the Middle East, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. After much debate and a plethora of resolutions, the resolution calling for a 2-state solution with Presbyterian divestment from Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions—3 companies that have been accused of engaging in “non-peaceful pursuits” in Israel and Palestine—won by a slim margin of 51%-49%.

Immediately after the vote on the issue, newly elected Moderator Heath Rada cautioned, “In no way is this a reflection of our lack of love for our Jewish brothers and sisters,” an attempt to deflect the perception that the convention is pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli.

The Belhar Confession also assumed a position of importance at the convention. By an overwhelming vote, the 221<sup>st</sup> GA convention sent a proposed amendment to the PC-USA to add

the Belhar Confession to the church's Book of Confessions. The Belhar Confession will now go to the 171 presbyteries for ratification, an action that calls for approval by 116, or two-thirds' vote, of our presbyteries.

Written in 1982, during the period of apartheid in South Africa, the Belhar Confession deals with the themes of unity, justice, and reconciliation. Adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and other denominations around the world, the Belhar Confession now seeks PC-USA approval.

## **Teaching Elder Jim Latta (Faith)**

Along with fellow Shenango Presbytery representatives Ruling Elder Commissioner Frank Stratiff (Hillside), Ruling Elder Commissioner Thomas Wilson (Lebanon), Young Adult Advisory Delegate Matt Pherson (New Castle, Third), Theological Student Advisory Delegate Addie Domske (New Wilmington/San Francisco Seminary), and Teaching Elder Commissioner Chris Weichman (Clen Moore), I had honor of participating in 221<sup>st</sup> meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA in Detroit, MI, from Saturday, June 14 through Saturday, June 21, 2014. We were also accompanied and supported by Shenango pastors Executive Presbyter/Stated Clerk Ralph Hawkins, Rev. Augie Hurst (Lebanon), Rev. Michael Spicuzza (New Castle, Third), and Rev. Sean Hall (Hillside).

We were part of the 654 commissioners, 152 YAADS, and 23 TSADS from our 172 presbyteries who, together with 8 MADS (Mission Advisory Delegates) and 12 EADS (Ecumenical Advisory Delegates) sought to "seek together to find and represent the will of Christ" (F-3.0204) as we went about the business of the Assembly.

Recognizing that many Presbyterians do not understand the work of the General Assembly (some might argue that no one really understands General Assembly), I will begin by trying to briefly clarify. (The following descriptions make use of highly edited excerpts of material from the Office of the General Assembly.)

The General Assembly meeting is made up by commissioners elected by the presbyteries, half of whom are ruling elders, and who are teaching elders. The General Assembly's work includes reviewing the work of synods, resolving controversies in the church, being responsible for matters of common concern for the whole church, and serving as a symbol of unity for the church. It has several specific responsibilities assigned to it by Chapter 3 of the Book of Order: to protect our church from errors in faith and practice; assuring that the expression of our theology remains true to the biblical standards in our historic confessions; presenting a witness for truth and justice in our communities and in the world community; setting priorities for the church; and establishing relationships with other churches or ecumenical bodies.

The day to day business of the Assembly is carried out by its offices and agencies. The Office of the General Assembly, headed by the Stated Clerk, is the ecclesiastical arm of the church. The Stated Clerk and his staff work to ensure that the Presbyterian Church maintains itself as a church. The Office of the General Assembly carries out all constitutional, and most ecumenical functions at the General Assembly. Mission programs are carried out by the Presbyterian Mission Agency which supervises the work directed to be done by the General Assembly, and can make

certain decisions on behalf of the Assembly. Business to be dealt with during meetings of the General Assembly comes from three sources: as reports and recommendations from the various arms of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly; as overtures from synods and presbyteries used to bring recommendations and matters of concern before the whole church; and as commissioners resolutions.

The General Assembly meeting begins with orientation on Saturday afternoon and that evening the plenary (the whole General Assembly), meets together to elect a Moderator from among the commissioners assembled. The Moderator presides over the plenary meetings for the rest of the week. After the moderator is elected, the assembly breaks up into committees to consider a number of items of particular kinds of business and report back to the whole Assembly on their insights, completed actions, and their recommendations. If these are approved, they guide the whole church in the years to come. Fifteen committees made reports to this Assembly: Business Referral, Bills and Overtures, General Assembly Procedures, Middle East Issues, Mid Councils Issues, Church Polity and Ordered Ministry, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Mission Coordination, Social Justice Issues, Civil Union and Marriage Issues, Peacemaking and International Issues, BOP, PILP, PPC, and Foundation, Theological Issues and Institutions and CE, Congregational Vitality, and Immigration and Environmental Issues.

I served on Committee 07, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. Our business included [07-01] On Distinguishing Between Biblical Terms for Israel and Those Applied to the Modern Political State of Israel in Christian Liturgy—From the Presbytery of Chicago; [07-02] The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); [07-03] Review of Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.; [07-04] Invitation to Ecumenical Delegates to the 222nd General Assembly; [07-05] The Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Dialogue; [07-06] World Council of Churches (WCC) Assembly Delegation Report; [07-07] Seventh Day Adventists Dialogue; [07-08] Review of National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A..

There were three particularly important actions/recommendations presented by this committee. The first was a recommendation to amending section G-5.0102 of the Book of Order to include “The Interreligious Stance of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),” to read as follows:

*The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) at all levels will be open to and will seek opportunities for respectful dialogue and mutual relationships with entities and persons from other religious traditions. It does this in the faith that the church of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, is a sign and means of God’s intention for the wholeness of all humankind and all creation.*

The second, Overture 07-01, called for the General Assembly to make a distinction between ancient and modern Israel. The overture, submitted by the Presbytery of Chicago, was prompted by the heading “God’s Covenant with Israel” in the publication of *Glory to God, The Presbyterian Hymnal*. Members of the Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations “wrestled over this for quite some time.” After two extended debates, the committee voted 53-8 to recommend the Assembly not approve the overture with comment: “Though the committee voted not to approve Item 07-01, we take the matter of language, and specifically the tension around the use of the term ‘Israel,’ very seriously. We hope the discussion and education about the use of language continues.”

The third item was a report on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Seventh Day Adventist Dialogue. It appears that while there are some major differences between us, we also have much in common with the Adventists and there may be much we could learn from the seriousness with which they take the practice of their faith, and the fact that they are a highly diverse—racially, economically and socially—world church which has had no major divisions during their 151 year history of effective ministry and missions.

General information on other actions of the Assembly is available from a number of sources, including EP Ralph Hawkins' summaries on [www.shenango.org](http://www.shenango.org). In addition, you can find more information on the work of this assembly at <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga/> (What is General Assembly and what does it do?); <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga221/> (News & Statements); <http://www.pc-biz.org> (specific details and official documents), as well as a number of external sources.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to serve Shenango Presbytery and the PC(USA) as a commissioner, and thanks to my Shenango colleagues at the Assembly for their fellowship, insights, and support.

## **Ruling Elder Tom Wilson (Lebanon)**

Having already thanked my congregation at Lebanon for their faith in me to be faithful in this commission to the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA), I would like to begin this report to Shenango Presbytery by thanking it for its support before, during, and after the entire process.

The other commissioners from our presbytery with whom I served were well prepared, dedicated, and prayerful in all that they undertook, and so I thank them too. (I will tell you that I was tremendously impressed with the work of Matt Pherson, our Young Adult Advisory Delegate, who was wise and engaged in the process far beyond his years.) Having my own pastor (Rev. August P. Hurst) and several pastors from the presbytery in attendance as observers as well as our executive presbyter Dr. Ralph Hawkins was a source of both confidence and information.

We met regularly, both as commissioners and as Shenango Presbytery. We shared insights, information, and advice. However, the process of individual commissioners being left to make their own votes as guided by the Holy Spirit was adhered to and respected.

Long days and high emotional investment made for increasing fatigue as the week progressed.

I served on the Middle East Issues committee. The overtures from that committee and the one on marriage issues were the most hotly contested. While the topics were divisive, I was impressed with the civility of the debates and the constant work of the body of General Assembly to remain unified in our love of Christ.

Like many, most of my emotions surrounding this assembly settle on the headline issue of same-gender marriages. When the vote came down, I was dismayed. My spirit was broken.

I do not say that from a lack of love for anyone in God's kingdom. Be clear – God loves everyone. But in loving us, Scripture proscribes and precludes many things. However, what I perceive to be the undermining of the eternal truth of Scripture is what bothered me. I do not know what the Solid Rock is, if not Scripture.

The vote settled on me. There was silence, well-orchestrated and respectfully called-for decorum by the moderator. There was no dancing in the aisles by the 71% who supported this same-gender initiative, but there was a palpable sorrow surrounding those who opposed it.

Questions raced through my mind. What will this mean for the denomination? Will more churches leave? Will the called-for reconciliation work? I was stunned and numb, but not really surprised. For me it is one thing to see society and its morals turned upside down, but a completely more hopeless concept to view the church as depraved.

As we (perhaps more than a thousand people) were called to stand and sing the doxology as a unifying measure, I felt that I stood in that very moment in a church that either will not define sin or wants to define it in our own terms. And so, I wept. And I mean, I wept! I step you through that so that you can understand the emotions of the moment, but (and listen to me closely) that is not what became important in the time that followed.

The next moments are ones for which I wish each of you could have been in my heart. I walked, slumped, to the back of the assembly among hundreds of people joyful over the very item for which I wept, tears now streaming down my face. And there, waiting for me, walking briskly to me was our pastor, the Rev. August P. Hurst, arms outstretched. He hugged me, cradled my head; he too was tearful and he told me that he loved me.

The arms of comfort and the heart for consolation were not just his own. I felt, and this is what I wish I could place in your hearts, a strange calm and refocused hope that should not appear in moments like this. You know, in moments of complete chaos when you somehow feel calm, times of emergency when you keep your head and keep moving forward, times of sorrow when you chin up and smile, times of complete hopelessness when you feel hope? I know in that moment, and I felt it, around his arms were the arms of my church – the mighty strength of the Cedars of Lebanon, the arms of Shenango Presbytery which has and will continue to hold us together, and around all those embraces were the most unifying, calming, and hope-giving arms of them all – the arms of Jesus Christ, the very head of this church! Wrapped in the arms of Christ, how can you have anything but hope?

Today, I choose to adopt the motto of the 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly – Abound in Hope! That hope was renewed in a breakfast that many from Shenango attended while at General Assembly. It was sponsored by The Fellowship of Presbyterians and Presbyterians for Renewal. The speaker, Mark Labberton, discussed living faithfully as a church in exile. Rev. Hurst and I spoke this Sunday to Lebanon that we believe that is where we are as a church in the church worldwide, in exile. That is the mission that will drive us forward.

We took our moment to be sorrowful, to be dismayed, to allow our spirits to be broken, but that moment is now finished. That moment has passed and we must abound in hope, for there is work to be done. Lebanon, and for that matter Shenango Presbytery, has never and will not now shy away from work and this is the hard work of the faith, to be a missionary church to the church.

We are called to be missionaries. Though we often bemoan “preaching to the choir” we now live in a church that is that choir that needs preached to...and we shall.

Esther 4:14 asks us this question, “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” Who knows?

Rev. Richard Halverson reminds us of the same, and so I will close with his words:

*You go nowhere by accident.*

*Wherever you go, God is sending you there.*

*Wherever you are, God has put you there.*

*He has a purpose in your being there.*

*Christ, who indwells in you, has something He wants to do through you, wherever you are.*

*Believe this, and go in His grace, and love, and power. Amen!*

## **Young Adult Advisory Delegate Matt Pherson (Third, New Castle)**

What does it mean to be a Young Adult Advisory Delegate (YAAD) for the General Assembly? Well, in short it means that you are going to be busy, rushed, confused, and stressed. However, at the same time you will be intrigued, accepted, heard, empowered, and loved. Although many of the issues that were being considered caused many people lots of stress and emotional pain, the community-feel that the YAAD's experienced in our home groups was very helpful in making the trip go smoothly. The YAAD's as a whole were split up into four home groups, and each YAAD advisor is in charge of a group. We were then split up within those groups into smaller groups of two or three. The person or people in your small group became your family and the people that you could talk to about anything that was bothering you. In my experience, I was paired up with one girl and our dyad became friends with another triad comprising our support group for the week. Luckily, I not only had the group of my peers that I could socialize with but I also had a great group of representatives to have conversations with from Shenango Presbytery.

Now, down to the business of the assembly itself. I had both positive and negative experiences in the way that business was handled by the committees. I found that all of the topics discussed were important to the church and to its future. I also found the experience of witnessing the grandness of the entire body of PCUSA was eye-opening. I found a few things to be troubling as well. Really because you only listed one and do the Presbytery members really want to read all about how they paid for unprepared people to go on vacation to Detroit? I found that a majority of my committee did not read the overtures and were not prepared for the debate that was bound to happen. I feel that as a delegate going to a completely paid conference it is of upmost importance for the commissioners, as well as the Advisory Delegates, to be well prepared and ready to discuss and come to the best conclusions for the good of the church. Unfortunately, I felt that way too many of the others in my committee were not prepared. Although this issue led to many of my frustrations, I still found the conference to be a great experience. I would advise anyone that had the opportunity to go to the conference because I feel that it is an experience that can change a person's view of the church and to look at it as the whole body and not just their individual church.



## FAQs – Same-Gender Marriage

(Detroit—June 19, 2014)—The 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today approved a measure giving pastors the discretion to perform same-gender marriages in states where it is legal. It offers the same discretion for churches with regard to the use of church property. The measure takes effect upon the conclusion of the General Assembly on Saturday, June 21, 2014. A proposed amendment to change the Constitution to include same-gender marriages in the church's Constitution passed the General Assembly but must be ratified by a majority of the church's 172 regional presbyteries. Presbyteries have one year to vote on the proposed amendment. If a majority ratifies the amendment, it would take effect June 21, 2015.

1. Are congregations and/or pastors required to participate in/host such weddings?

“In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit.” No pastor is compelled to perform a service of marriage nor a session compelled to use church property for a service of marriage.

2. Can a pastor in a state where it is not permitted perform a wedding in a state where it is?

The teaching elder has freedom of conscience. Beyond that, it would depend on whether the teaching elder is authorized under civil law to perform a wedding in the state where the wedding is to take place

3. Will sessions have the authority to permit (or not) same-gender marriage services in the church?

Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of sessions in the way church property is used.

4. If a pastor is willing to preside at the marriage of a same-gender couple, can the session prohibit the pastor from doing so?

No. The session cannot compel the pastor nor can the pastor compel the session.

The pastor has the freedom of his or her own conscience and the session has the responsibility for providing for worship and making decisions about the use of church property.

5. Can the session make a categorical prohibition of same-gender weddings in its building?

Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of the session with regard to the use of the church building.

6. What process did the General Assembly use to make this happen?

The General Assembly made an authoritative interpretation of the Constitution and proposed an amendment to the Constitution.

7. What is an authoritative interpretation (AI)?

An AI is an interpretation of the Constitution by the General Assembly or the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. It is binding on all councils.

8. What is permitted according to the AI at the adjournment of the assembly?

Pastors may conduct a marriage service for same-gender couples and may do so where the community gathers for worship with the permission of the session. “In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit.”

9. What is an amendment to the Constitution?

An amendment to the Constitution is determined by the General Assembly, but must be confirmed by a majority of the presbyteries. All councils are under the authority of the Constitution.

## FAQs – Same-Gender Marriage

### 10. What if the presbyteries refuse to vote on the amendment?

A majority of the presbyteries must vote for the amendment in order for it to become part of the Constitution. A non-vote has the effect of a “no” vote.

### 11. If the presbyteries do not approve changes to the Constitution, what is the effect on the authoritative interpretation (“AI”)?

The AI remains in place until it is superseded by another.

### 12. What is the timeline?

The same-gender marriage measure (the AI) takes effect upon the conclusion of the General Assembly on Saturday, June 21, 2014. The proposed amendment must be ratified by a majority of the church’s 172 presbyteries, which have one year to vote. If ratified, the amendment would take effect on June 21, 2015.

### 13. What shall we tell the media?

Please see the official press release, or refer calls to PC(USA) offices.

## **What is the actual language of the authoritative interpretation?**

“Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God (W-6.3001, W-6.3010) in which a teaching elder’s discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. The necessity of ensuring the exercise of freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) in the planning and leadership of worship has deep roots in our Reformed tradition and theology. Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders\* have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married (W-4.9002), and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.

“Exercising such discretion and freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage service for any such couple in the place where the community gathers for worship, so long as it is approved by the session; or in such other place as may be suitable for a service of Christian worship. In no case shall any teaching elder’s conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The authoritative interpretation of this section by the 203rd General Assembly (1991) (*Minutes*, 1991, Part I, p. 395, paragraphs 21.124–128), and the subsequent authoritative interpretations of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission relying upon it, are withdrawn and replaced with this authoritative interpretation.”

\*“As in other places in the Directory for Worship, the use of ‘teaching elders’ in this paragraph should be understood to include ruling elders commissioned to pastoral service.”

## **What is the actual language of the proposed amendment?**

Amend W-4.9000 by striking the current text and replacing it with the following:

“Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people (traditionally a man and a woman) to love and support each other for the rest of their lives. The sacrificial love that unites the couple sustains them as faithful and responsible members of the church and the wider community.

## FAQs – Same-Gender Marriage

“In civil law, marriage is a contract that recognizes the rights and obligations of the married couple in society. In the Reformed tradition, marriage is also a covenant in which God has an active part, and which the community of faith publicly witnesses and acknowledges.

“If they meet the requirements of the civil jurisdiction in which they intend to marry, a couple may request that a service of Christian marriage be conducted by a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), who is authorized, though not required, to act as an agent of the civil jurisdiction in recording the marriage contract. A couple requesting a service of Christian marriage shall receive instruction from the teaching elder, who may agree to the couple’s request only if, in the judgment of the teaching elder, the couple demonstrate sufficient understanding of the nature of the marriage covenant and commitment to living their lives together according to its values. In making this decision, the teaching elder may seek the counsel of the session, which has authority to permit or deny the use of church property for a marriage service.

“The marriage service shall be conducted in a manner appropriate to this covenant and to the forms of Reformed worship, under the direction of the teaching elder and the supervision of the session (W-1.4004–.4006). In a service of marriage, the couple marry each other by exchanging mutual promises. The teaching elder witnesses the couple’s promises and pronounces God’s blessing upon their union. The community of faith pledges to support the couple in upholding their promises; prayers may be offered for the couple, for the communities that support them, and for all who seek to live in faithfulness.

“A service of worship recognizing a civil marriage and confirming it in the community of faith may be appropriate when requested by the couple. The service will be similar to the marriage service except that the statements made shall reflect the fact that the couple is already married to one another according to the laws of the civil jurisdiction.

“Nothing herein shall compel a teaching elder to perform nor compel a session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service that the teaching elder or the session believes is contrary to the teaching elder’s or the session’s discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.”

# A Pastoral Letter from PFR and the Fellowship of Presbyterians

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Meeting in Detroit, our 221st General Assembly has taken two significant actions on the teaching and practice of marriage according to the PC(USA)'s Book of Order. First, the GA approved an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) that now permits PC(USA) pastors to conduct same-sex weddings, and allows sessions to approve the use of church property for such ceremonies. Secondly, the GA approved a proposed amendment to the Book of Order that would replace current language with a description of marriage as a relationship between “two people, traditionally a man and a woman.”

While the AI goes into effect immediately, the proposed amendment requires ratification by a majority of the presbyteries before any change could be made, a process that takes about one year. Both measures are designed to allow pastors and congregations to participate in same-sex weddings, in states where gay marriage is legal.

We grieve these actions by the General Assembly. We believe we will look back on this day and see the error of these decisions. But an Assembly of our denomination has spoken, and now we must move ahead without compromising compassion or conviction.

It is extremely important to understand that while the AI and the constitutional amendment broaden the denomination's interpretation of marriage, they do not require any pastor to officiate or any session to authorize the use of church property for a marriage service with which they disagree. It remains up to each pastor and each session to determine what is and is not appropriate for their congregation.

Proponents of these two actions have made great effort to invite and welcome those who hold unwaveringly to a traditional interpretation of marriage to remain engaged in the mission and ministry of the PC(USA) with full integrity. Some will resolve to do this—others may not. Those of us who do remain in the PC(USA) will, no doubt, encounter other decisions and actions with which we will disagree. We are not here to fight and divide, but to continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and to testify to the transforming

power of his love that is available to everyone. We urge you in the strongest possible way to refrain from actions, attitudes, and language that would mar the image of Christ in your response to the Assembly's actions.

Let us commit to one another, and to Almighty God, that we will seek to embody the grace and love of our Savior across our theological differences, and in personal and congregational deliberations about our future in the PC(USA).