

Here we stand, so to speak:

THE 221ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)
DETROIT, MICHIGAN — JUNE 14-21, 2014

BY LESLIE SCANLON, *Outlook* national reporter and **JACK HABERER**, *Outlook* editor

Following years of debate, the 2014 General Assembly decided to act — choosing to divest from three American companies whose products support Israel’s occupation of Palestine, and granting PC(USA) ministers permission to perform same-sex marriages in civil jurisdictions where such marriages are legal.

Realizing that their actions would please some and alienate others both in the United States and overseas, commissioners also pleaded for reconciliation with those who would disagree. “In no way is this a reflection of a lack of love for our Jewish brothers and sisters,” moderator Heath Rada said immediately after the divestment vote, one of the first by an American mainline Protestant denomination.

Asked after the votes on same-sex marriage how much it would cost to send representatives to each presbytery for conversations about unity, Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons said he wasn’t sure, but “the cost of not doing this is higher.”

SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ASSEMBLY:

MODERATOR. The committee chose as its moderator Heath Rada (christened #modeRada on Twitter), the only ruling elder among three candidates, and a hearty North Carolinian who selected as his vice-moderator his demographic opposite: Larissa Kwong Abazia, a young Chinese-American pastor from New York. From the start, the young adult advisory delegates (YAADs) resonated with the white-haired Rada, who passed out Heath bars and danced during breaks on the platform.

DIVESTMENT. Two years after a GA rejected a similar proposal by just two votes, commissioners gasped when the divestment vote result was posted – 310-303 – for a proposal that the PC(USA) begin phased divestment of about \$16.5 million from three companies that provide equipment used by the Israeli military in the occupation of Palestine: Caterpillar, Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions. The assembly did specify that its action was “not to be construed” as support of the global Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE. In response to the contention that the denomination’s restrictions were impeding pastors’ ability to provide pastoral care to committed same-sex couples in their churches, the GA approved two measures to permit ministers to perform same-gender marriages in jurisdictions where legal (at present, 19 states plus the District of Columbia).

An authoritative interpretation, approved 371-238 (61 percent in favor), took effect immediately after the assembly adjourned, giving PC(USA) ministers freedom of conscience to perform same-sex marriages. The assembly also voted 421-175 (71 percent in favor) to recommend for ratification by the presbyteries a constitutional amendment adjusting the

definition of Christian marriage, changing the phrase “a man and a woman” to “two people, traditionally a man and a woman.”

Both actions support freedom of conscience. The proposed amendment says explicitly, “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 either of them “believes is contrary” to their “discernment of the Holy Spirit and their understanding of the Word of God.”

Adoption of the amendment requires ratification by 87 of the 172 presbyteries, the votes to be taken over the next 12 months.

BELHAR CONFESSION. The assembly approved recommending for presbyteries’ ratification (by two-thirds vote) adding the Belhar Confession, written in South Africa and focused on justice and reconciliation, to the PC(USA)’s Book of Confession.

BROKEN PRESBYTERIAN RELATIONS. Already 350 churches have left the PC(USA) for other denominations over the past four years. Now more departures are expected. Also, Hunter Farrell, director of World Mission, said preliminary inquiries indicate 17 of the denomination’s 54 global-partner denominations may break relations with the PC(USA) over the same-sex marriage decision.

LANGUAGE ABOUT ISRAEL. The assembly disavowed a controversial study guide, “Zionism Unsettled,” produced by the Israel Palestine Mission Network. The commissioners overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to trim back references to Israel in liturgical materials published by the church.

GUN VIOLENCE. The assembly appealed to fellow Presbyterians to work to reduce gun violence by advocating for stricter background checks and a ban on semi-automatic assault rifles.

FOSSIL FUELS. Despite pleas from the YAADs that “we can’t wait” to protect the earth, the assembly voted not to divest from fossil fuel companies, choosing instead to explore related issues that might lead to action by a future assembly.

DRONES. The assembly passed a resolution criticizing secrecy in the U.S. military’s use of drones for surveillance and targeted attacks, calling for legislation governing the use of military drones.

YOUNG ADULT COMMISSIONERS? A proposal to turn YAADs into voting YACs failed, given that the new title would not require them to be ordained elders.

MID COUNCILS. The assembly approved consolidating the number of synods from the current 16 to somewhere between 10 and 12 reconfigured synods.

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