

PRESBYTERY OF GRAND CANYON STATED MEETING OF JUNE 9, 2007
STATED CLERK VERBAL REPORT

Advice from the Stated Clerk On the Matter of the Adoption by the 217th General Assembly of Amended Recommendation #5 of the Report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church and the Overture from the Session of Kingman Presbyterian Church

In beginning my report I want to call your attention to Paper C-4 which was included in the Call Papers to this meeting; and to Paper P-4 which is a shorter two-page version included in your packet. I am not going to be going over either document in any detail this morning and trust that you had the opportunity to review C-4. I am of course delighted that our Commissioner from Desert Hills, during the Question and Answer period with Vicky Curtis, thought C-4 was such a learned document.

Also by way of beginning, I want to share with you what a marvelous time I had when I worshipped with the congregation of Kingman Presbyterian Church on Sunday, May 27th. They normally have both an 8:30 a.m. Contemporary and a 10:30 a.m. Traditional Service. Because it was both a holiday weekend and Pentecost Sunday there was a single combined 10:00 a.m. service. My purpose in going to Kingman was to share in worship, meet with the Session to discuss the status of the Overture they have asked the presbytery to adopt, to share and discuss with the Session all of the related papers posted with the Call to this meeting, and finally to have lunch with the Session and their spouses. It seemed important to me and for them that there be this opportunity for personal discussion prior to reading or receiving the presbytery meeting Call documents via the Internet. The people of the Kingman congregation were welcoming, warm and loving and evidence a deep faith in Jesus Christ.

The meeting with the Session provided a good opportunity for a two-way exchange of information. The Session members are articulate and committed members of their church with a strong sense of call to their responsibilities. They expressed concern over members they have lost, believe that their church is one of the best-kept secrets in Kingman, and are deeply concerned about the ordination issue because to them it is also of very high concern to their members. They recognize that among their members there is confusion over the denomination's ordination standards and whether or not it is possible for a practicing homosexual to actually be ordained as an officer in the church following action of the 217th General Assembly. However for the Session it is clearly what might happen in the future that is of most concern. For example they would say – yes, the ordination standards have not changed as a result of the actions of the 217th General Assembly, however in the same breath talk of what position the United Church of Christ took on the matter several years ago, and as well point to the controversy and division now taking place in the Episcopal Denomination.

So their answer to the above concerns was for the Session to adopt the language proposed by one of the PC(USA) related advocacy organizations, and then send that on proposing that Grand Canyon Presbytery adopt that language as well. Therefore to the Kingman Session and apparently some members of the congregation, they see the Presbytery's lack of adopting that Overture at the January meeting, or further at the March meeting, as a delaying tactic – which raises the question for them why will not the Presbytery adopt it?

We covered paper C-4 in detail and the Session was given all the related C papers that were posted on the Internet. I attempted in our discussions to make clear that Grand Canyon Presbytery upholds and is bound by the PC(USA) Constitution and that the Action of the 217th General Assembly in approving Amended Recommendation Five does not give governing bodies leeway in the ordination of a practicing homosexual and that if a governing body did so that both the action itself and content of that action are subject to judicial review.

For our forthcoming meeting the big concern of the Session was what was going to happen to their Overture? Would it ever be acted on directly? Was the motion on C-6 a referral motion or a substitute motion? Do they as a session want to enter in the debate when the motion is before the presbytery for adoption, either in support of or in an attempt to have the Presbytery act directly on their Overture at this specific June 9 meeting?

The Session was very gracious and appreciative of our time together. They thanked me for coming and for my part I had a wonderful day on May 27th with the folks of Kingman Presbyterian Church.

On June 20th of last year, immediately following the approval by the 217th General Assembly (2006) of an amended version of Recommendation #5 (“Authoritative Interpretation”) proposed in the report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church by the 217th General Assembly, the General Assembly News Service distributed a news release to the secular media and internally within the denomination itself. The first paragraph read that:

“...the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today approved an “authoritative interpretation” of the church’s constitution that maintains current ordination standards for church officer but gives ordaining bodies greater leeway in applying those standards to individual candidates for ordination.”

Unfortunately it was not until the last two paragraphs of the third page of the release that there was any mention at all that in fact that the assembly had amended the original language. Finally in those two paragraphs the Rev. Blair Monie of Grace Presbytery – the Ecclesiology Assembly Committee’s Moderator was quoted as follows:

The authoritative interpretation, Monie added,

“includes four important Presbyterian ordination principles: maintaining standards, rigorously examining candidates, protecting individual conscience and protecting the church through judicial review. To reinforce that understanding the Ecclesiology Committee amended the authoritative interpretation to add that ordaining bodies have responsibility to determine ‘whether the examination complies with the constitution of the PC(USA).’ The assembly then voted to include ‘and ordination and installations’ with examinations in the compliance statement.”

Thus most of the press has been on the language of greater leeway rather than the amendment to the original recommendation, which significantly altered that original recommendation and as a practical matter gave no more leeway than existed before the 217th General Assembly - albeit this matter may have to ultimately be adjudicated by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. In the meantime, my counterparts in presbyteries throughout the country have been providing advice to their presbyteries just as I have done in both paper C-4 and abbreviated P-4 that:

The amended (emphasis added) recommendation #5 containing the Authoritative Interpretation of section G-6.0108 of the *Book of Order* approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006) makes clear:

1. That both “belief” and “practice” are subject to judicial review;
2. That the action of the assembly does not give “more leeway” to governing bodies to ordain practicing homosexuals; and
3. That the assembly did not take action that makes any change to ordination standards

As indicated in paper C-4, the Presbytery Council also requested me to address the issue of whether or not adoption of the wording of the Overture from the Session of Kingman Presbyterian Church would be a constitutionally permissible action. My advice in paper C-4 says that the Overture is essentially the same wording that is under judicial consideration in four synods. It is reported that at least two of them have stayed any actions on adoption of the Overture while the cases are pending. One case was decided by the Synod of Alaska-Northwest, upholding the constitutionality of the Overture. If that information is accurate, the decision applies only within that particular synod and there is no word on whether that will be appealed to the GAPJC. I indicated that given the status of these cases, I was not in a position to give advice on whether adoption by Grand Canyon Presbytery of the Kingman Overture would be constitutionally permissible action. Therefore my advice was that the presbytery continue in its discernment process.

Since writing that advice as well as visiting with the Kingman Session however, the Synod of the Trinity has issued its decision in a remedial case as a result of a complaint filed against the Presbytery of Pittsburgh. The history in that case is that at a meeting of the Presbytery of Pittsburgh, on October 12, 2006, the Presbytery adopted in paragraph 2 of their resolution the exact same language proposed to our presbytery by the Kingman Session.

Following this action, the complainants, believing that the adoption of the Pittsburgh Presbytery resolution constituted an irregularity under the constitution, filed a complaint with the Stated Clerk of the Synod of the Trinity and alleged that the presbytery had established a “super standard” that supplants the denominational standards Pittsburgh Presbytery is bound to apply.

The Synod found an irregularity in elevating certain language in the *Book of Order* as “an essential of reformed polity.” Reading now from portions of that decision:

“The presbytery has the authority and duty to examine all candidates individually but does not have the authority to create a ‘super standard’ in so doing. The resolution’s use of the phrase ‘is an essential of reformed polity’ incorrectly equates mandatory ordination standards with the concept of essentials. ‘Essentials of the faith’ and like phrases have extensive historical meanings and understandings (final report of the special commission of 1925; 1927 Swearingen report, p 13-16). It is over simplification and overly broad to make a blanket determination that all mandatory standards are essentials of reformed polity as evidenced by this case and the record of its two day trial. This statement has created confusion when its stated purpose was to remove confusion. As such it is impermissibly vague.

While we commend the Presbytery of Pittsburgh for its desire to clarify perceived confusion in the report of the Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church (PUP) and to be pastoral, the resolution does not meet the respondents’ stated goal. Had the presbytery simply reaffirmed its commitment to enforcing the mandatory standards of the *Book of Order*, we would have found no irregularity.

We find an irregularity as this resolution incorrectly removes presbytery’s right and duty to determine a candidate’s fitness from the actual ordination process. We have no need to remind presbyteries that the determination that there is a departure from mandatory ordination standards or essential tenets is a gravely serious matter with a profound impact on an individual called to ministry. Essentials of the faith must be determined after the candidate has been carefully examined by the ordaining body as to doctrine and behavior and cannot be predetermined. We therefore set aside and declare void paragraph two (2) of the resolution and hold that departures from ordination standards, and departures from essential tenets, must be determined on a case by case basis within the ordination process.”

Further the decision went on to say:

“We see no confusion in the *Book of Order*, the 2006 report of the Special Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church and its authoritative interpretation or the decisions of the general assembly permanent judicial commission. We understand that no presbytery may grant an exception to any mandatory church wide behavioral ordination standard. Under our polity, violations of behavioral standards are to be addressed through repentance and reconciliation, not by exception or exemption. The freedom of conscience granted in G-6.0108 allows candidates to express disagreement with the wording or meaning of provisions of the constitution, but does not permit disobedience to those behavioral standards. G-6.0106b provides in part ‘among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness.’ This is a behaviorally measured standard which applies to all ordained officers of the church. It is clear. It is mandatory.”

As a result of this decision, while it technically applies only in the Synod of the Trinity, it is now my advice to the presbytery that if it were to adopt the current wording of the Overture presented by the Kingman Session it would open itself to a possible remedial action against the Presbytery of Grand Canyon with the Synod of the Southwest, alleging that such adoption constituted an irregularity under the constitution. My advice therefore continues to be that Grand Canyon Presbytery continue in the discernment process, and in addition that the Presbytery give consideration to alternatives rather than move to a direct vote on the current wording of the Overture itself.

Note #1 - Paper C-4 “Presbytery of Grand Canyon June 9, 2007 Stated Meeting, Advice from the Stated Clerk of Grand Canyon Presbytery“ included with the Call Papers to the June 9, 2007 Stated Meeting [is available by clicking on the following link...](#)

Note #2 – Following lunch at the June 9, 2007 Stated Meeting, the Chair of Presbytery Council during the Council Report moved the following Motion on behalf of the Presbytery Council:

Motion: In response to the Overture from the Session of Kingman Presbyterian Church and as the Presbytery continues discernment and dialogue on how best to respond in the matter of Ordination Standards and Presbytery Membership the Presbytery requests that the Committee on Ministry do the following for consideration of the Presbytery and report back at the September 14-15, 2007 Meeting:

1. Provide a summary of what takes place now and what our policies/practices are on the examination of both Candidates for Ministry and those already ordained who are transferring to the presbytery; and
2. Recommend changes to our policies, guidelines, practices, and processes designed to assist the presbytery in its obligation to gain a broader vision of each candidate’s or minister’s faith and manner of life and the presbytery’s responsibility to conduct such examinations reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully and deliberately.

Rev. Gale Watkins proposed the following amendment:

Motion to amend Main Motion in Paper C-6 by adding the following wording at the end:

In approving this Motion, the presbytery understands and affirms that:

1. we are not bringing the dialogue and discernment process to an end at this time;
2. nor are we presuming that the process will lead to a particular consensus or conclusion;
3. nor are we precluding a vote on the Kingman Overture itself should the presbytery wish to pursue it.

After opportunity for discussion, the Amendment to the Motion was APPROVED. After further discussion on the Motion, the Amended Motion was APPROVED. The Amended Motion approved by the Presbytery of Grand Canyon at its June 9, 2007 now reads:

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