

A VIEW FROM THE CLERK'S TABLE – REVISITED - WHERE IN THE WORLD IS THE PCUSA?

Presented to the Presbytery of Grand Canyon at its Stated Meeting of September 16, 2006

Just a little over five years ago I shared a written report, *A View from the Clerk's Table – "Toward the Victory of Peacemaking"* with the Presbytery. It was a report reflecting my observations and thoughts about our life together as a presbytery following the 212th General Assembly (2001) held in Long Beach California.

This report "*A View from the Clerk's Table Revisited – Where in the World is the PCUSA?*" is occasioned by the actions of the most recent 217th General Assembly and particularly the rhetoric that has surrounded Amended Recommendation #5 of the Theological Task Force concerning the Authoritative Interpretation of G-6.0108.

It was at that Assembly in Long Beach that Amendment O by a vote of 268-251, was sent to the presbyteries for the affirmative or negative vote proposing adding a new section, W-4.9007, to The Book of Order, which would have stated:

"Scripture and our Confessions teach that God's intention for all people is to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Church property shall not be used for, and church officers shall not take part in conducting, any ceremony or event that pronounces blessing or gives approval of the church or invokes the blessing of God upon any relationship that is inconsistent with God's intention as expressed in the preceding sentence."

Here is a portion of the editorial titled "A Scared Trust" that appeared in the February 5, 2001 edition of the Presbyterian Outlook:

"So here we are in the first days of a new century, a new millennium, with each side – in fact representing only a minority of Presbyterians – dug in and armed to the teeth, bristling for a fight to end all fights at the upcoming meeting of the General Assembly. The final strategies remain undecided. Some are hoping to drive their opposition out of the church; some wish to buy them off through the gift of title to church property; others are hoping that their opposition will simply get tired of fighting and leave. At all costs, however, the goal is that one side will win and the other side will lose."

Given all of the words that were written and spoken prior to the 217th General Assembly about Recommendation #5 of the Theological Task Force Report you would have thought this editorial had been written in 2006-2007 rather than 2001.

With respect to proposed Amendment O the vote in our presbytery was 104 For; 103 Against with 2 abstentions and the amendment failed to receive an affirmative vote by a majority of the presbyteries.

It was at the same General Assembly meeting in Long Beach that upon recommendation of the Assembly Committee on Peace Unity and Purity by a Vote of 467 to 41 the 213th General Assembly (2001) approved the formation of the Theological Task Force. Here are excerpts from the approved action:

"Because we are baptized and profess our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, gather together at the Lord's table, share in brokenness as well as reconciliation, share a heritage of listening for the way in which Scripture speaks as we struggle with hard issues, share a common although diverse reformed history and confessional heritage, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall enter into a season of theological clarification of our Presbyterian identity by:

- a. Directing the Moderators of the 213th, 212th, 211th General Assemblies (2001, 2000, 1999), in consultation with the General Assembly Nominating Committee, to appoint a theological task force.
- b. The task force is directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity, in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church. This discernment shall include but not be limited to issues of Christology, Biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.
- c. The task force is to develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discuss the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the peace, unity, and purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)."

And we were honored and pleased that our own Martha Sadongei was one of those appointed to serve on the task force.

This brings us then to the Revisited report "Where in the World is the PCUSA?"

The 217th General Assembly was the 18th assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that I have attended. In 1988 and 1989 I attended as an observer. Beginning in 1990 I have attended either as an Interim Executive Presbyter or in my current position as Stated Clerk. In addition for eleven of the past twelve years I have also served the assembly in an appointed position of either Committee Assistant or Parliamentarian/Recorder/Floor Parliamentary Assistant. Thus have assisted commissioner assembly committees in dealing with issues related to the Board of Pensions; *Book of Order*; Polity; Church Orders; Mission Coordination and Budgets; Christology; and Peace, Purity and Unity. In addition for the past several assemblies I have been present on the assembly floor itself during all plenary sessions. It is through this lens of involvement that I offer the following personal reflections on the actions of the 217th General Assembly.

By way of further background, in 2001 while I was serving as President of the Association of Stated Clerks I came to know Beau Weston who is a Presbyterian Elder, Author and Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Anthropology / Sociology Department at Centre College. We invited Beau to speak to our annual conference / retreat held at Clifty Falls Indiana. At the time Beau was doing research on his book *Leading from the Center* which was published in 2003. In the acknowledgments section he says "The Book first took shape as a series of lectures to the Association of Stated Clerks in 2001. I am especially grateful for their hospitality and well-informed questioning."

In *Leading from the Center* Beau states: "Deep disagreements exist in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) today. There have been deep disagreements for a long time. The issues change some, but the parties stay the same, and the fact of disagreement stays the same. Nothing short of the Second Coming is going to change that. We need to find a way to deal with the fact of disagreement that is in keeping with Presbyterian Church faith and practice." He defines the church in this manner: "When we actually look at the church we do not find it divided down the middle into two parties. Instead, we find a small left

wing, a slightly larger right wing, and a large middle. The middle are not wishy-washy moderates, but a different party with a different agenda. The left tends to define the church by its ecumenical actions, while the right tends to define the church by its doctrinal purity. The center party are the loyalists, loyal to the institutional church as it actually is.....They are the defenders of constitutional practices, and mollifiers of all constituencies.” Beau argues that “the best way to contain the deep disagreements that are endemic in the church is to let the opposing extreme parties compete for the central majority. The best way to direct that competition is if all parties adhere to the church’s constitution, both the procedural parts and the substantiate parts.”ⁱ

He goes on to say the loyalist majority is loyal to what is normal in the church, to the church as it is, the normal church, the loyalist church.

So what is the church really like? Using Survey Data from the Presbyterian Panel, we find the characteristics of members and elders who make up the vast majority of Presbyterians that provides a baseline for what is normal in the church.ⁱⁱ

Socially, most laypeople in the church:

- are college graduates or better
- married to their first spouse
- have an executive or professional job (or did if retired)
- have two or three kids
- know many people in their neighborhood
- do volunteer work for their community
- are twice as likely to be Republicans as Democrats
- are political moderates and reject the extremes

In their religious practice, most lay Presbyterians:

- were not raised Presbyterian
- picked their church because it was Presbyterian or because a friend invited them
- joined because they found friendly members and meaningful sermons
- attend church nearly every week or better
- have invited two or more people to come to church with them in the last year
- give 5 percent or more of their gross income to the church
- do volunteer work for their congregation
- pray to find God’s will at least weekly
- are theological moderates and reject the extremes

In their religious beliefs, most:

- say there is nothing more important in their life than their faith
- say the most important belief to them personally is knowing that God loves them and the second most important belief is accepting Jesus Christ as their personal savior
- do not think the Bible is inerrant in every detail, but do think the Bible tells of God’s involvement in creation
- do not think only church members can be saved, but do think God’s ultimate judgment will reward some and punish others

- do not think all religions are equally good paths to truth, but do think the only absolute truth is Christ
- do not think evangelizing those who do not know Christ is “imposing” on them but do think making a better society must start with converting people to Christ
- think Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) affiliation is important to their Christian identity

What most lay Presbyterians want the church to do:

- use church wide offerings for disaster relief and meeting basic needs of the poor, not for “environmental justice” and the National/World Council of Churches
- call national staff to account when they publicly contradict official church positions
- oppose the ordination of practicing homosexuals
- give more attention to membership growth and decline, not to ecumenical issues
- give more attention to biblical faithfulness, not to social issues

What about Presbyterian clergy who make up less than one percent of the total membership of the church? The clergy predominate because they have more training and knowledge about church affairs, have a high investment in their careers in the church and have a permanent vote in the presbytery.

In looking at seminary education we find that students at Presbyterian and non Presbyterian seminaries are remarkably similar. The Students at non-Presbyterian seminaries are more likely to call themselves Evangelical. What is most surprising is that aside from theological differences themselves there are no other significant differences at either kind of seminary among liberals, conservatives and those in the theological middle. The general effect of seminary education is usually to make graduates more liberal. After graduation from seminary, those who change their theological position are more likely to become more conservative.

In other words, most Presbyterians are solid upper-middle class family men and women, a little right of center in their politics, traditional in their piety, a little suspicious of change driven by the church elite and loyal to their local church the way it is.

Yes, taking more than that proverbial leaf from Beau Weston’s book, the day following adjournment of the Assembly I drafted and finished a few days later a reflection paper titled “The Loyalist Center of the Church Spoke at the 217th General Assembly (2006)”. The paper was shared with many of my long standing Stated Clerk Colleagues, others colleagues who had been at the assembly including Beau Weston and with the Presbytery Council. Yes indeed, it was the “Loyalist Center” that spoke at the 217th General Assembly.

Here are some of the actions of the 217th General Assembly (2006) upon which I based my reflections that “The Loyalist Center of the Church” spoke:

- Election of Rev. Joan Gray as Moderator of the 217th General Assembly

On the opening night of the assembly Rev. Joan Gray, a pastor in Greater Atlanta Presbytery who said she doesn’t have many answers for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s problems but is willing to let God lead the way was elected Moderator on the third ballot. During questioning by the Assembly she was asked about the ordination of non-celibate gays and lesbians. She said, “I have great respect for gay and lesbian people who want to be accepted for who they are and who want to do the work to which they feel called. But I don’t feel homosexuality is God’s will for

creation. It's uncomfortable feeling that way, but I'm comfortable being uncomfortable until the 'still small voice' speaks to my soul and I'm convicted otherwise."

- Approval of Recommendations 1 through 4 of the Report of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity by a vote of 459 to 41 with 7 abstentions.
- Approval of Recommendation 5 with Amendment (emphasis added) of the PUP report. I will have more to say on the importance of the amendment made by the Assembly.
- Action to keep the provisions found in G-6.0106b in the Constitution as the ordination standard for church officers
- Approval of an Alternate Resolution in the matter of Rescinding and Modifying Certain Actions of the 216th General Assembly (2004) Regarding the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, which also addressed the controversial action of the 216th GA on the matter of Israel/Palestine by acknowledging the "hurt and misunderstanding among many members of the Jewish community and within our Presbyterian communion" that resulted from the action in 2004.
- Other actions of the Assembly that support Recommendation 1 of the Task Force on Peace, Purity and Unity include:
 - On Amending G-13.01034 Regarding Authoritative Interpretations
The Assembly by way of approval of the Consent Agenda of the Assembly Committee on Polity voted to disapprove a recommendation from the Presbytery of Mississippi that would have amended G-13.0103r on authoritative interpretations and would have required *the consent of a majority of all the presbyteries*.
 - On Amending G-8.0201 "Property Held in Trust"
By a vote of 76% the Assembly disapproved the Overture from the Presbytery of Stockton proposing that G-8.0201 be amended to provide that all church property would be the sole property of that church rather than being held in trust for the denomination,
 - On Amending the Book of Order to Provide Flexibility in Presbytery and Synod Members
By a vote of 391 affirmative and 106 negative the Assembly disapproved an Overture from the Presbytery of Beaver-Butler that would have allowed Congregations to choose membership in a particular presbytery and Presbyteries to choose membership in a particular Synod based on geographic, theological, missional, or other considerations of importance to those congregations and presbyteries.

A few moments ago I indicated that I would have more to say on the Amendments made to recommendation #5 of the Task Force. The original language of sub-paragraph (c) (2) (d) on the matter of ordaining bodies, their responsibility and judicial review said:

"whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies."

There was an amendment made to this paragraph. The assembly committee proposed this amendment “Whether the examination comply with the constitution of the PCUSA” and the Assembly itself amended to add “and ordination and installation decision” so that the approved amended action reads as follows:

Whether the examination [assembly amendment: and ordination and installation decision] comply with the constitution of the PCUSA, and whether the ordaining/installing body has conducted its examination reasonably, responsibly, prayerfully, and deliberately in deciding to ordain a candidate for church office is subject to review by higher governing bodies.

This is a substantial amendment for it makes clear that judicial process could address the substance as well as the procedure, of local examinations.

Almost no mention is ever made to these amendments when affinity or advocacy groups express their viewpoints. In fact the press release at the assembly itself never even mentioned it. Rather the headline was:

BIRMINGHAM, June 20 — By a vote of 298-221 (57% to 43%), 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 officers but gives ordaining bodies greater leeway in applying those standards to individual candidates for ordination.

Even advisory opinion # 18 “Discernment in Examining Bodies – G-6.0108 issued by the Stated Clerk’s Office of the General Assembly begins: “Since the 217th General Assembly adopted the authoritative interpretation proposed by the Theological Task force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, the stated clerk’s office.....” When I read this I immediately e-mailed my colleagues in Constitutional Service saying that: “This is not an accurate statement and misleads a whole bunch of folks who never read #5 in the first place and certainly have not read it since the assembly acted. Essentially those who have continued to express dismay over the approval of amended recommendation #5 were already predisposed to be against the authoritative interpretation.”

It has been my view since the final Assembly Action on the Task Force Report that the amendment made by the Assembly significantly altered the original recommendation number five. And I have consistently taken the position that the AI does not authorize “local option” and frankly does not give ordaining bodies any greater leeway than existed in the past in applying current ordination standards.

Two of my colleague Stated Clerks have written on this as well in Guest Column Viewpoints in *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

Ed Koster, Stated Clerk of Detroit Presbytery was the first in his article “*How It Is That the General Assembly Did Not Authorize “Local Option”*”ⁱⁱⁱ and said in part:

“Since the General Assembly approved the Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force report, some of the press have been reporting that it has approved the ordination of non-celibate homosexual persons at the discretion of local ordaining bodies. The press have it wrong, and in fact the Authoritative Interpretation approved by the General Assembly has probably made it less likely that such ordinations will be allowed.”

Clark Cowden, Evangelist Presbyter/Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of San Joaquin, in his article “*What the Amended PUP Report Actually Means*”^{iv} wrote:

“Most of the uproar around the PUP report centers around how it affects G-6.0106b So, what does this now mean? It means this:

“A candidate can declare a scruple versus fidelity and chastity, saying they don’t believe it. The governing body cannot excuse compliance with the standard, since it is a mandatory requirement. The candidate must still obey it. The candidate may be ordained and installed, even if they don’t believe in the requirement, as long as they are willing to abide and live by the requirement. Governing bodies still do not have the option of ordaining self-affirming, practicing homosexuals, or any others who are actively engaged in sexual behavior outside of a one man/one woman marriage. “

“The General Assembly did not remove G-6.0106b, but instead re-affirmed it with an 81% vote. The General Assembly did not remove the 1993 Authoritative Interpretation on homosexuality, which reiterated the 1978 prohibition of ordaining sexually active gay persons, but instead voted to send it out to the presbyteries for study and discussion. Therefore, these continue to be mandatory requirements that all elders, deacons, and pastors must agree to live by. The approval of the amended PUP report does not change any of this, and does not give governing bodies “wiggle room” to allow disobedience of the requirements.”

So where does all of this lead us? Now almost 3 months since the adjournment of the Assembly – Where in the World is the PCUSA? To get some sense of this I have spent a good deal of time reading various publications that cover these matters and in checking into the websites of PCUSA and its organizational links, presbyteries, churches and a host of organizations related to the PCUSA. Just to give you a sense of my “surfing” endeavors I checked into the websites of:

All sixteen synods; 62 of the 173 presbyteries; 24 of the 42 listed Presbyterian Advocacy groups including The Confessing Church Movement, Covenant Network, More Light Presbyterians, New Wine Skins Initiative, One by One. Presbyterian Bloggers, Presbyterian Coalition, Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, *The Layman*, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, Presbyterians for Renewal, the Witherspoon Society; the U.S and World Mission links including Presbyterian Disaster Assistance; Presbyterians at work around the world, International Evangelism; and Validated Mission Support Groups.

And here is what I learned:

A lot of neat stuff on exciting and interactive websites - some of the ones from PCUSA congregations knock your socks off - folks it is more than the wave of the future.

Some of the original furor immediately following the assembly expressed this way:

The assembly “has abandoned its Presbyterian heritage and opened the door to blatant disregard of biblical standards”.

Or

“The consequences of the decision of this General Assembly throw our denomination into crisis”

Have given way to:

The joint statement from Renewal Organizations:

“We prayerfully ask that every governing body consider adopting this resolution:

In its discernment of the essentials of Reformed polity and for the sake of the peace, unity, and purity of the church, this governing body adopts the principle that compliance with the standards for ordination adopted by the whole church in the *Book of Order* is an essential of Reformed polity. Therefore, any departure from the standards for ordination expressed in the *Book of Order* will bar a candidate from ordination and/or installation by this governing body. Provisions of the *Book of Order* are signified as being standards by use of the term "shall," "is/are to be," "requirement," or equivalent expression.

Finally, we encourage you not to be distracted from being the church. Are we in troubled times? Absolutely! When has the Church not been? You are not alone. Let's be the church together. The Triune God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--has freed us to be faithful. The recently adopted AI does not remove our opportunities. But today is the time for action. Questions and resources can be addressed to the renewal leaders who are listed below as those who have sent this letter. Also, look for more resources in the days to come.

May God be with you and with the PC(USA)! Amen.”

From the Covenant Network:

“Despite our disappointment that the Assembly chose not to remove G.-6.0106b from the Book of Order, the Covenant Network embraces the General Assembly’s mandate to live faithfully with all seven of the actions recommended by the report of the Theological Task Force. We are committed to staying in the church and supporting its wider mission. We are thankful that many who find the Assembly’s actions difficult to accept have also declared their intention to remain part of this denomination. The Covenant Network will continue to look for ways that Presbyterians with different, even opposing, perspectives can learn from each other and strengthen each others’ faith. It will take many years to live into the vision of peace, unity, and purity in the church articulated by the General Assembly. More dialogue, understanding, and trust must be established if the church is to fulfill this high calling.”

And on August 17-19 in Atlanta the Presbyterian Global Fellowship held its first meeting with more than 800 from 42 states gathering. This group says they are not planning to leave the denomination but want to encourage a new way of connecting congregations that are committed to mission work and are trying to demonstrate a hopeful way of being Presbyterian in the 21st century.

So here is what I sense about where in the world is the PCUSA?

- Without trying to minimize the impact that organizations such as the Presbyterian Global Fellowship might have on mission and funding and the way the denomination does business today - the rumors of the demise of the PCUSA are highly exaggerated.
- Much of the rhetoric coming from advocacy and affinity groups is below the noise level of most Presbyterians in the pew.
- Congregations of the PCUSA are continuing to do ministry and hands on mission in their local communities, throughout the U.S. and the world.
- It is exciting to see how congregations Through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance have responded to Katrina and how individual Presbyterians are responding to a host of other world situations such as in Lebanon and Iraq.

And vital ministry in congregations continues following GA as Jack Haberer, Editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook* wrote in the *Why Stay* issue ^v:

“Fortunately, just three days later, about 11,000 Presbyterian churches gathered throughout the land, and in each, a particular pastor or elder faced particular people who were dealing with their own particular issues—that member undergoing chemotherapy, those smiling parents and grandparents presenting their newborn for baptism, that first-time visitor whose husband just announced that he wants a divorce and now she showed up at church to try to reconnect with the God she once knew, the church school teacher whispering in the pastor’s ear just before worship “The ladies’ room toilet is plugged and overflowing onto the floor.”

Every person gathering for worship on the Sunday following the adjournment of the 217th General Assembly needed to hear not a word of exclamation, nor a word of condemnation about the denominational politic. They needed to hear the gospel. Most of them, I trust, did hear that very thing.”

And finally things cannot be all that bad when you find out that:

In 2005, 28 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ministers were dismissed to other denominations and 76 were received from others

and

In the period 2001-2005, a total of 118 have been dismissed while 416 have transferred from other denominations into the PC(U.S.A.)^{vi}

FOLKS LET US REMEMBER THAT GOD IS IN CHARGE

Dick Coffelt, Stated Clerk
September 16, 2006

ⁱ Introduction “The Competitive Constitutional Church” *Leading from the Center* William J. Weston, Published by Geneva Press, Louisville Kentucky 2003

ⁱⁱ Chapter 5 “What Is Normal in the Presbyterian Church Today?” *Leading from the Center* William J. Weston, Published by Geneva Press, Louisville Kentucky 2003

ⁱⁱⁱ “How It Is That the General Assembly Did Not Authorize “Local Option” Guest Viewpoint by Edward Koster *The Presbyterian Outlook* June 22, 2006

^{iv} “What the amended PUP report actually means” Guest Viewpoint by Clark D. Cowden *The Presbyterian Outlook* September 4, 2006

^v Editorial “Why Stay” *The Presbyterian Outlook* Special Edition

^{vi} “Who Would-A Thought?” Page 7 *The Presbyterian Outlook* September 11, 2006