



What Happened at the 2006 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly?

The 2006 General Assembly was a busy one, with many decisions to make. What were the big issues and decisions?

The 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in Birmingham, Alabama, faced contentious issues but kept coming back to the center. The PC(USA) was meeting concurrently with the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church of America, and all three assemblies worshiped together. Faced with fights over abortion, the ordination of homosexuals, the language of the Trinity, non-geographic presbyteries, phased selective divestment in companies involved with Israel that provide equipment that harms Palestinians, and, most important, the report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, the General Assembly (GA) could have dissolved into acrimony. Instead, on nearly every issue, the GA managed to calm the waters.

Of the hundreds of items on the GA docket, I will lift up only ten, in five pairs. Of the ten, I will treat only the first and last—the election of the moderator and the debate on the Peace, Unity, and Purity (PUP) report—in any detail, to give some flavor of the assembly.

Two Women at the Top: Moderator Joan Gray and GAC Director Linda Valentine

Moderator candidates are nominated by their presbyteries months before the GA. These days they have low-key campaigns, too—standing in front of booths; naming vice-moderator running mates; handing out

stickers, T-shirts, and, in the case of one candidate, cookies. The pattern in recent years has been to have three candidates, one clearly liberal, one clearly conservative, and the third aiming for the middle.

This year, there were four candidates. On paper, one might read Deborah Block as the liberal—a pastor from Milwaukee Presbytery, a board member of the liberal umbrella group the Covenant Network. Likewise, Tim Halverson looked like the main conservative—the pastor of a Florida megachurch, the father of seven children. Joan Gray, an Atlanta interim minister and the author of a well-known polity book, would therefore be in the center. The wild card was Kerry Carson, the pastor of a small church in Iowa.

Yet all four moderatorial candidates ran as centrists. Block's pitch was as a sensitive bridge builder. Carson, as a pastoral uniter. Gray? A healing leader. Halverson, in his published platform, said, "in a left-right world, we have forgotten the center," while in his speech he even said that if elected he would "lead from the center." Each candidate, after a short speech to the assembly, answered questions from the commissioners for an hour. The decisive question, in my view, was bluntly put by a youth delegate: do you favor the ordination of practicing homosexuals? Block said yes; Carson said no. Halverson said yes, but the church isn't ready for it yet. He dreamed of a day when the church would judge officers by the content of their characters, not their sexual orientation. Gray gave

one of the few unexpected answers of the night: that she respects gays and lesbians who want to serve, but that she had “not been able to get my mind around the idea that homosexuality is God’s intention.” The moderator, she went on, is an officer of the church and stands on the constitution. As moderator, she would fully support the constitution and would consider changing her position only if the Holy Spirit moved the church as a whole to change the constitution.

In my opinion, Gray ultimately won election with that answer.

The voting itself was fascinating. Here are the percentages won by each candidate on the first, second, and third ballots:

Block	28	32	31
Carson	22	14	4
Gray	28	41	62
Halverson	22	14	4

The center of the church had spoken. Centrism won.

The church said farewell to John Detterick, who completed two terms as executive director of the denomination’s program agency, the General Assembly Council (GAC). The assembly then confirmed his successor, Linda Bryant Valentine. Elder Valentine, after a successful stint in corporate law for technology firms, had been director of Opportunity International, a Christian nonprofit promoting economic development. There was little suspense in Valentine’s election, as she was approved by 87 percent of the commissioners. Valentine says she brings the skills of an involved wife and mother, as well as a corporate attorney, to the job of building up morale to an agency shell-shocked by a recent downsizing.

Two Big Announcements: Closing the Montreat Historical Center and a \$150 Million Gift for the Church’s Future

After years of financial losses, the assembly made the painful decision to close the Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS) site at Montreat, North Carolina. Feelings ran high, and the committee that heard the recommendation to close the facility initially voted to disapprove.

Upon reconsideration, however, the members concluded that there was no way to make the Montreat history center pay for itself. The committee debate and the recommendation to close were repeated in the whole assembly. The GA vote to close was 70 percent to 30 percent. The records will be moved to the PHS facility in Philadelphia and to Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the assembly came with the opening-day announcement of a \$150 million gift from Denver businessman and church elder Stanley Anderson. The gift, to finance a new Loaves and Fishes Church Growth Fund, will provide matching grants for church growth projects and theological education throughout the denomination. Elder Anderson said he was frustrated after years of decline in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and wanted to help revitalize the church. Anderson, who made his money in financial services such as government procurement cards, has long been active in Presbyterian work, including service as vice chair of the Board of Pensions. A news story late in the week reported that Anderson was in court for debt, but GAC Executive Director John Detterick assured the assembly that Anderson was untangling his finances and would make good on the promised gift.

Two Perennial Controversies: Abortion and Ordination of Homosexuals

After years of supporting most overtures maintaining a woman’s right to choice, the GA took a turn to a more centrist position. Late-term abortion was the bone of contention this year, and the assembly broke new ground in support of viable infants. More than three-fourths of the commissioners voted for the idea that all viable babies should be born and that the church should provide “pastoral and tangible support” to women facing difficult late-term pregnancies. At the same time, the assembly turned down two more-extreme measures. One would have opposed abortion in all but a few cases, while the other would have ended church funding to organizations advocating any position on abortion.

Despite the Peace, Unity, and Purity document’s call for a moratorium on amendments to the constitution regarding ordination of homosexuals for the time being,

twenty overtures sent to the General Assembly proposed to “Delete B,” that is, to remove section G 6.0106b from the *Book of Order*. This section reads:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. 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. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.

The vote in committee was close, with the majority voting to keep the provision unchanged. By the time the question got to the assembly as a whole, however, the assembly had already approved the Peace, Unity, and Purity report’s suggestion for a two-year moratorium on any changes to the constitution on contested ordination issues. Consequently, the GA overwhelmingly rejected the attempt to delete the “chastity and fidelity” provision of the constitution, with 81 percent voting against the overture.

Two New Controversies: The Language of the Trinity and a Korean Synod

The Office of Theology and Worship has produced a new paper, “The Trinity: God’s Love Overflowing.” While the document supports the traditional and scriptural language of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” to describe the Trinity, it also explores other metaphors for devotional use. Some commissioners worried that these alternative metaphors would erode the church’s commitment to scriptural language. After strong debate, the assembly nearly sent the whole report back to Theology and Worship for reworking. However, the commissioners added a crucial amendment specifying that the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” formula must be used in baptisms. The assembly then voted, by 56 percent to 42 percent, to receive, though not approve, the report and commended it to the whole church for study. The debate was not without humor: at one point, some commissioners were considering the devotional possibilities of the Trinity as “rock, paper, scissors.”

The Korean-oriented Midwest Hanmi Presbytery proposed a nongeographic Korean synod within the

PC(USA). Many were uneasy at the idea of increasing the racial segregation of the church. Still, all acknowledged that the Korean governing bodies, from the congregations up, are likely to be superseded in future generations and not become permanent features of the denomination. Therefore, the assembly thought it wise for the time being to refer the idea of a Korean synod to denominational leaders for further study. However, a parallel proposal for nongeographic presbyteries, designed to allow them to be more theologically homogeneous, failed, 77 percent to 21 percent. Ideological division, unlike immigrant language difference, is likely to remain a permanent part of the Presbyterian Church; the assembly did not want theological difference translated into a permanent division of the polity.

The Two Greatest Controversies: Phased Selective Divestment and the PUP Report

At the previous General Assembly in 2004, the church charged its Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) unit to engage U.S. companies where the PC(USA) owns stock that are directly involved in supplying the Israeli government with machinery or weapons that harm Palestinian people and property to cease doing so. If conversations with such companies failed, the MRTI agency was authorized to bring back to a future assembly a recommendation to begin selective divestment of stock in such companies. This policy produced a wave of criticism, especially from American Jewish groups aligned with the Israeli regime. Billboards appeared on the highways into Birmingham proclaiming that divestment was not the way to peace, and there was even a picketer outside the Birmingham Jefferson County Convention Center, where the GA was meeting. After much discussion, including a critical speech by former CIA director Admiral James Woolsey, the assembly overwhelmingly approved, by a 94 percent to 5 percent vote, a softer statement. The church’s policy now says that “financial investments of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank, be invested in only peaceful pursuits.”

The major event of the 2006 General Assembly was the long-awaited report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. The Task Force,

approved by the 2001 General Assembly, was appointed by former moderators Synghman Rhee, Freda Gardner, and Jack Rogers. The PUP Task Force, as it became known, was charged with finding an instrument and a method through which the church could deal with the contentious issues that have divided us. The particular issues that the Task Force was to deal with were Christ's uniqueness, biblical authority, ordination standards, and power in the church. The Task Force released its report, "A Season of Discernment," in August 2005 and spent the next nine months meeting with 11 synods, 135 presbyteries, many congregations, and other agencies of the church. The Task Force members stressed that, though they still disagreed with one another on important points of faith and practice, they were united in believing that the church should stay together to work out its differences.

The report set out a theological foundation for staying together in the church despite theological controversy. The Task Force also recommended that in reaching decisions, especially in small groups, the church should try methods of discernment beyond Robert's Rules of Order. The assembly overwhelmingly approved the report's first four recommendations, promoting this theological foundation and advocating for alternative discernment methods.

The most controversial recommendations of the report are numbers 5 and 6.

Recommendation 5 proposed a new "authoritative interpretation" (AI) of the church's constitution. The AI stated that the constitution sets the ordination standards for the whole church, but that local ordaining bodies "have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards to those elected to office." The decisions of local ordaining bodies would still be subject to review by the higher governing bodies.

Recommendation 6 built on 5. If the assembly adopted the proposed authoritative interpretation, the Task Force asked the assembly to make no further changes in the constitution or its interpretation "on any of the major issues in the task force's report, including Christology, biblical interpretation, essential tenets, and sexuality and ordination."

The PUP report attempts to return the church to the great centrist principle of the Adopting Act of 1729. The Adopting Act requires all officers to subscribe to

the church's standards, explaining any "scruples" they might have about particular parts of the constitution. If the ordaining body judges that those scruples do not touch essential matters, then the officer is okay. This judgment by the locals is subject to review by the higher bodies. But everyone is better off if, in the words of the PUP report, all parts of the church "outdo one another in honoring" the judgments of the other parts of the church. The authoritative interpretation says that the church does not have to change its constitution to adopt this standard of judgment, because it has been there in the constitution all along.

Prior to the assembly, the "establishment" of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) came out in favor of the Task Force report. All of the theological seminary presidents, and nearly all of the living former moderators, issued statements in support of the report. Four seminary presidents and four former moderators spoke in favor of the report at the assembly. The tandem of former moderators Marj Carpenter and John Buchanan, well known for their opposing views on ordination of homosexuals, appeared together in several venues to promote PUP, including an impassioned statement to the whole assembly.

Most of the liberal advocacy groups in the church opposed recommendation 6, insisting instead that any moratorium on removing the "chastity and fidelity" provision from the church's constitution was a delay of justice.

Conservative advocacy groups, by contrast, were adamantly opposed to recommendation 5. They feared that if the authoritative interpretation were adopted, "local application" of national standards would turn into "local option"—in effect allowing local ordaining bodies to make up their own standards. Conservative leaders remained vocally opposed to this part of the PUP report throughout the assembly, and they coordinated opposition to it in committee and on the assembly floor.

Conservative opponents of PUP did succeed in forcing one significant amendment to the report. Perhaps the weakest point of the report was the language about judicial review of local decisions. The relevant section of recommendation 5 originally read:

Ordaining and installing bodies, acting as corporate expressions of the church, have the responsibility to determine their membership by applying these standards to those elected to office. These determinations include:

d. 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 last point disturbed some people, who read section d as limiting judicial review of local decisions to the process that the locals used but not the substance of the decision. If, for example, a presbytery ordained an atheist, the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission (the "supreme court") could only look at whether the presbytery used proper process but could not stop the ordination because the candidate was an atheist.

The Ecclesiology Committee amended section d to read:

d. Whether the examination complies 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 change seemed to make the whole report more acceptable to the broad middle of the church.

When conservative attempts to remove recommendation 5 from the PUP report failed, the conservatives then moved to refer both the authoritative interpretation and the moratorium on amending the constitution to the presbyteries for comment. This move likewise failed, though by a smaller margin.

In the end, after a serious, civil debate, "A Season of Discernment," the Report of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, was passed by the General Assembly, 57 percent to 43 percent.

Now the challenging work of application begins.

About the Writer

William (Beau) Weston is professor of sociology at Centre College and author of the daily blog The Gruntled Center. He previously wrote "Peace, Unity, and Purity: Summary and Response" for The Thoughtful Christian.