

# Issues before the 217<sup>th</sup> Assembly

G.A. Insert

When the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly meets in Birmingham, Alabama, June 15 to 22, it will have been two years since the last Assembly. During the intervening years, the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity has submitted its report, the church has witnessed the fallout created by the divestiture decision of the 216<sup>th</sup> Assembly, the GAC has dramatically downsized the Louisville and mission co-workers staff, and many are wondering what is likely to happen in Birmingham.

PFR urges all Presbyterians to be in prayer. Below you will find PFR's advice and reasoning on key issues coming before this Assembly. Of course, there are many more topics that commissioners will debate and decide, but these are ones at the heart of PFR's proficiency and calling.

If you are a commissioner in Birmingham, the PFR team is ready to serve you. One or more PFR team members will be observing the work of your assigned committee. Whether you are a commissioner or observer, don't miss the PFR events listed on page 4 of this "G.A. Insert," and please visit our booth in the Exhibit Hall. We look forward to meeting you!

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Please note: Some of the following articles have been excerpted from [www.GA2006.com](http://www.GA2006.com), where you may read the complete text.

## THE TRINITY PAPER

One of the most significant matters before the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly is the paper entitled "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing," a response to a request from the 212<sup>th</sup> G.A. that a study group consider the doctrine of the Trinity, with special attention given to the question of "inclusive language" for references to God in the context of worship. The paper aims to help the PC(USA) reclaim "the doctrine of the Trinity in theology, worship, and life ... that Presbyterians will once again find in this doctrine good and joyful news." (lines 15–16, 23–24).

PFR is encouraged that many in our denomination are beginning to see that spiritual and theological renewal are essential to the future of the church. However, the Trinity paper in its current form is deeply flawed.

While this paper offers many good theological insights, its refusal to heed its own wisdom results in serious problems. The paper wisely indicates that "the historic faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic church risks being set adrift" if we are not anchored by God's revelation of himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—yet it then sets us adrift with its exhortation to seek "creative" and "freshly imaginative" ways of coming up with new "images and names" for God. The apparent, unexplained assumptions are that (a) there are various names for God; (b) we name God; (c) God has not revealed his name to us; and (d) all of the various "names" for God are basically metaphors whose meaning is derived from human experience, which would indicate that a new day with new experiences calls for a new process of "naming God." In this vein, the paper offers an array of three-fold metaphors ("Mother, Beloved Child, and Life-Giving Womb" or "Rainbow, Ark, and Dove") as appropriate alternatives to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Trinity paper needs to be revised to reflect several important traditional Christian teachings:

1. God names God. God is self-revealed as the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who raised him from the dead in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself calls us to address God as "Our Father," and the Apostle Paul notes that we cry out "Abba, Father." Likewise, Jesus commands us to baptize in God's three-fold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. The revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not a metaphor to be put alongside others. God is not merely "like a Father" (a metaphor rooted in human experience); God *is* the Father of Jesus, who is the Son. The name is rooted not in our experience but in the relationship within the Trinity. Furthermore, all saving knowledge of God begins with knowing God through the Son in the power of the Spirit.
3. Our salvation is a participation in the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity. We are united with Christ in the power of the Spirit (see Eph 2:18). Without the three persons (rather than a three-fold metaphor), there is no salvation.
4. Our worship *can and should* reflect the full breadth of biblical metaphors for God, and we can use our imaginations, properly guarded, in our language for worship. In doing so, we are not "naming God," but confessing what God is like. The Trinity paper could be improved by making this distinction clear and employing it consistently.

In sum, the Trinity paper throws us back on our imaginations as our starting point, leaving us to conjure up our own language about God. A better paper would take the revelation of God in Christ, attested in Scripture with all its distinctiveness and clarity, with the utmost seriousness.

PFR ADVISES that this paper be sent back to the Office of Theology and Worship for further revision, so that their efforts to date may not be in vain.

## DIVESTMENT AND THE MIDDLE EAST

During the 216<sup>th</sup> G.A. in 2004, a commissioners' resolution was passed that began a review of the PC(USA)'s financial investments in corporations doing business in Israel, with the intention to consider divestment. Of all the decisions that year, few came close to the firestorm created around those regarding the Middle East.

The response was understandable. The decision for divestment was made without prior study or conversation with the members of the PC(USA) and global community who would be impacted by such a decision. It committed the denomination to an aggressive strategy of foreign relations. The resulting fracture of peace following the Assembly attests to the short-sightedness of the decision to pursue divestment.

A slew of overtures are coming to the Assembly in response to this controversy, and almost all of them seek various alternatives to the actions of the 216<sup>th</sup> G.A. The most aggressive approach, *Ov 11-01 (Mississippi)*, rescinds the actions of divestment and the statements made against the security wall built by Israel. The least aggressive approaches ask for new policies on the Middle East before considering divestment, a change to the Standing Rules regarding decisions on investments, and a focus on investment strategies that promote peace. Nearly all affirm the historic quest of our denomination for peace in the Middle East. Several overtures, e.g. *Ov 11-04 (New Covenant)*, take a balanced approach to rescind the decision to pursue divestment and call us all to work for peace.

PFR SUPPORTS those overtures that clearly call for rescinding the decision of the 216<sup>th</sup> G.A. to pursue divestment while also affirming our commitment to work for peace in the Middle East.

## ABRAHAMIC HERITAGE OVERTURE

*Ov 7-01 (Newton)* shows the desire to affirm common ground where possible for Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. There is clearly common ground to be found historically, in that all three religions find a common ancestor in Abraham. Many practitioners (though not all) of these religions also seek to live in peace and harmony with their neighbors. Certainly peace and harmony, along with justice, are laudable goals to be pursued both among each faith and between all faiths and people. The Confession of 1967 encourages openness to truths which may be found in other religions (9.42), and a spirit of humility when dealing with people of other faiths. It also compels the church to be about the work of peace and reconciliation in the world.

However, this overture also uses language that is unclear and makes an assertion that is unwarranted. The overture asks the G.A. "to accept the principle of unity and harmony" among these faiths. It is unclear whether "unity and harmony" refer simply to our common Abrahamic heritage or if there is an assertion of a deeper theological unity. Concern about the words "unity and harmony" seems justified when we read that the overture also asks the Assembly to "Accept and proclaim that Muslims, Jews, and Christians worship the same God . . . the one true God."

This is an unwarranted assertion that the Assembly should not make. These three faith traditions make mutually exclusive theological claims, with the biggest stumbling block being Christianity's beliefs about the unique and central significance of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and future return of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the covenant of God with God's people, or is such a fulfillment yet to come, or

has it come with Muhammed and the revelation of the Koran? Our differing answers to this question constitute a significant source of disagreement. Sweeping assertions of our "unity and harmony" are inappropriate.

Despite any and all commonalities, Christianity's insistence that the one true God is Christ's eternal Father, the one who raised Jesus from the dead in the power of the Spirit, and the trinitarian theology that developed in response to this claim (see "The Nicene Creed"), make its core tenets irreconcilable with those of Judaism and Islam. To broadly assert that we all "worship the same God" is to attempt to smooth over enormous differences in a way that undermines honest and healthy dialogue.

PFR ADVISES that commissioners not support this overture.

## NON-GEOGRAPHIC PRESBYTERIES & SYNODS

*Ov 5-23 (Beaver-Butler)*, the "Elink" overture, proposes changes to the Book of Order that would give congregations the freedom to choose presbytery affiliation "based on geographic, theological, missional, or other considerations of importance to those congregations." Forming a new presbytery would require a minimum of twelve congregations, and a minimum of three presbyteries would in turn be free to form a synod.

Of course, no restructuring solution to our present denominational difficulties would be perfect. Having non-geographic presbyteries and synods would institutionalize our divisions, and for some congregations voting on presbytery affiliation could be divisive. On the upside, however, non-geographic presbyteries and synods may be a way to move beyond the gridlock of sexuality debates and paralyzing theological disagreements. Governing bodies brought together by shared conviction and vision would be free to do mission together in a way that is often frustrated in gatherings bound together by geography. This overture offers a way for Presbyterians to stay together while allowing new structures that would be free to focus on ministry and mission.

PFR ADVISES that this revolutionary and creative option for a new way of being Presbyterian together be given thoughtful and open-minded consideration by the Assembly.

## PAYING PER CAPITA

*(The complete article on www.GA2006.com is entitled, "Connectionalism, Cash, and Christ: Taxing the Tithes")*

Alarms should be sounding off in every session! *Ov 3-08 (Baltimore)* asks the 217<sup>th</sup> Assembly to provide an Authoritative Interpretation (AI) of G-9.0404d regarding session responsibility to pay per capita. In its review of this overture, the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC, a supposedly politically neutral but powerful body with direct access to the General Assembly), has gone well beyond its role of advising and is now advocating for a tectonic shift in our historic connectional relationships. In short, the ACC is advocating for presbyteries to have the power to tax churches, in spite of repeated G.A. Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) decisions that have held the following:

1. G-10.0102i grants sessions the express power (i.e. delegated solely to sessions) to distribute the church's benevolences, which includes per capita.
2. Transmission of per capita, while a high moral obligation, is voluntary and may not be compelled directly or indirectly.
3. The last sentence of G-9.0404d, specifically the phrase "may direct," does not give presbyteries a power that would trump the express power of sessions.

The ACC tries to mask its position by seeking to shift the verbiage from “force and compulsion” to “oversight and accountability.” This is not unlike the government declaring that it will not raise taxes but instead levy “user fees.” A tax is a tax no matter what it is called. Therefore, the ACC’s position is odious for the following reasons.

1. The ACC misread and mischaracterized the Minihan decision by (a) ignoring the history of how G-9.0404d was developed and (b) stating that the GAPJC did not explain what “may direct” means. The decision clearly indicates that “may direct” cannot mean “may require.” Rather, it is read according to historical Presbyterian practice as voluntary.
2. If G-9.0404d were originally intended to grant presbyteries the power of taxation, then why was there no explicit language of compunction added to the duties of sessions in G-10.0102? Further, the G.A. has consistently resisted any changes in making per capita compulsory.
3. While the GAPJC decisions speak of shared power and mutuality, the ACC slips in language about hierarchy and how higher governing bodies can “bind” lower ones. The subtle fault of the ACC’s position is that they state half-truths. While it is true that higher governing bodies can compel lower governing bodies, that power is limited. For example, no one can force a presbytery or session to accept someone as a member, because that is an express power reserved for presbyteries and sessions. The point is that G-10.0102i gives a session an express power that cannot be seized by any higher governing body.

It is no small irony that the originator of this overture is a presbytery that has vigorously resisted polity police but now is cheering for tax collectors.

PFR STRONGLY ADVISES that this overture be defeated.

## ABORTION ISSUES

Several overtures concerning abortion will come before the Assembly. *Ov 10-01 (Redstone)* on late-term abortion affirms that viable unborn babies “ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted,” encourages churches to support women in problem pregnancies, affirms adoption, and recommends that this overture supersede and replace “all other statements on late-term pregnancies and abortion.” *Ov 10-02 (Beaver-Butler)* calls the PC(USA) to cease funding of “any group that advocates either for or against abortion,” and instead encourages individuals and congregations to voluntarily support organizations and ministries that best reflect their convictions. It recommends that per capita funds not be used to promote either side of this divisive issue. *Ov 10-03 (Mississippi)* would move the church toward a more pro-life position on abortion (including an exception for the life of the mother and for rape and incest under certain circumstances) and recommends overriding the current policy.

PFR ADVISES that commissioners always stand for life.

## THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATION IN MONTREAT

The Office of the General Assembly has voted to close the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in Montreat, North Carolina, and redistribute its collections. Much of the material would go to Philadelphia, and some possibly to the Columbia Seminary archives. Overtures from twenty-one presbyteries have asked that this decision be postponed.

Founded in 1927, the Montreat facility became the place where correspondence from missionaries, records of the newly established partnership churches abroad, congregational histories, and the papers of individuals and families were brought together. Local church histories include stories of missionaries and supportive efforts in partnership with young churches far away in countries such as Korea, Brazil and the Republic of Congo. Each segment of the collection is interdependent on the others for its meaning and purpose.

PFR ADVISES that the decision to close this facility be postponed and encourages the church to see the value in revitalizing this center for mission and history.

## ORDINATION ISSUES

(See [www.GA2006.com](http://www.GA2006.com) for the full text of this article, information on the “PUP” report, and related links.)

For about 30 years the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been debating an issue that has plagued all the mainline Protestant denominations: whether or not to ordain as officers in the church those who do not (and do not intend to) limit their sexual activity to the context of marriage between a man and a woman.

Because a very vocal minority and several special-interest groups began insisting that the church condone their extra-marital sexual practices, the church found it wise to spell out standards for ordination that reflect the biblical and historic Christian understanding of appropriate sexual behavior. Those standards are spelled out in the 1993 AI (Authoritative Interpretation) and G-6.0106b in the Book of Order (the “Fidelity and Chastity” clause).

The 217th General Assembly will deal with numerous overtures in favor of or in opposition to the church’s enduring ordination standards. In addition, the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity (PUP) has asked the G.A. to approve its own controversial recommendation on ordination standards. These items are briefly explained below.

Two constitutional items are important for the maintenance of our denomination’s standards, the 1993 AI and the “Fidelity and Chastity” standard of G-6.0106b.

1. The 1993 AI (a.k.a. “1978 Definitive Guidance”) states: “unrepentant homosexual practice does not accord with the requirements for ordination set forth in Form of Government.” As an AI, it has “constitutional force”—that is, it tells us what the standards in our Constitution do and do not mean. But because it is only an AI and not actually a part of the Constitution, *it could be removed by one vote of one General Assembly.*
2. G-6.0106b in the Form of Government of the Constitution (the “Fidelity and Chastity” standard) states that those who are called to ordained office in the church must abide by the requirement “to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness.” Two things should be mentioned about this standard.
  - a. First, because it does not mention homosexuality explicitly, some have claimed that this does not actually prohibit homosexual sex acts. Therefore, it is important for the church to maintain both the standard and the AI.
  - b. Second, because this standard is a part of the Constitution, changing or removing it would require not only the approval of the General Assembly but also ratification by a majority of the 173 presbyteries of the PC(USA).

### Meet the PFR G.A. Team

(If you are a commissioner, please introduce yourself to the team member who is following the work of your assigned committee.)

Jim Cahalan ..... Edmond, OK  
Fairlight and Scott Collins-Jones .....  
Philadelphia, PA  
Denn Denning ..... Palm Desert, CA  
Dave Freehling ..... Canon City, CO  
James Harper ..... Houston, TX  
Anne Hilborn ..... Charlotte, NC  
James Kim ..... The Colony, TX  
Nancy Maffett ..... Colorado Springs, CO  
Phil Moran ..... Boise, ID  
Mary and Andy Naegeli ..... Concord, CA  
Mark Patterson ..... Ventura, CA  
Matt Robbins ..... Pasadena, CA  
Tracie and Brian Stewart.. Statesville, NC  
Bill Teng ..... Alexandria, VA  
Gale Watkins ..... Phoenix, AZ  
Jennifer Wilcox ..... Tucson, AZ  
Dave Wilkinson ..... Moorpark, CA

#### PFR Staff:

Michael Walker, Executive Director  
“Gutty” Gutridge, Associate Director for  
Congregational Ministries  
Becca Bettridge, NPWL Director  
Judy Theriault, PFR Board member

## Please Join PFR at these Assembly Events

### PFR Get-Acquainted Reception: Sheraton Ballroom I

**Wednesday, June 14, 7:00 – 10:00 p.m.**

Commissioners and visitors are invited to a time of fellowship with PFR. Candidates for Moderator of the General Assembly have been invited to address and interact with this gathering. Refreshments will be provided.

### PFR General Assembly Overview: BJCC North F and G

**Thursday, June 15, 7:00 – 8:45 a.m.**

Commissioners and visitors are invited to hear brief presentations about the major issues before the Assembly. This is also an invaluable introduction on how the Assembly works. Commissioners will have an opportunity to meet the PFR team member who has been studying the business before each committee. Danish and coffee will be served. There is no charge for commissioners; all others \$5.

### PFR Lunch Briefings: Sheraton Ballroom IX

**Friday–Wednesday, June 16 – 21 (except Sunday)**

Commissioners and observers will benefit from these daily updates and progress reports on the committees and emerging issues for the plenary sessions. \$12 per person. Lunch will correspond to the Assembly lunch break, from noon to 1:15 p.m.

### PFR Breakfast: Sheraton Ballrooms I – V

**Monday, June 19, 6:30 – 8:30 a.m.**

This gathering is a highlight of each G.A., with inspirational speakers and special presentations. Richard Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary, is keynote speaker. The Bell Mackay Prize for outstanding missionary service will be awarded to Woody and Barbara Busse for their 47 years of missionary service, most recently in Central Asia. And the 2006 Lydia Scholar for a woman in seminary will be announced. Tickets, \$20, may be purchased in advance from the Office of General Assembly. Remaining tickets will be available from the OGA at the Assembly.

## ORDINATION ISSUES *(continued from page 3)*

In the last decade, the 1993 AI has been narrowly maintained by the G.A., and the G-6.0106b standard has been soundly maintained by the presbyteries through two constitutional votes after its establishment. Yet many presbyteries have sent overtures to this G.A. requesting the removal of both the 1993 AI and the G-6.0106b standard, while several presbyteries have sent overtures recommending that we maintain and strengthen the AI and that we disallow amendments to the Fidelity and Chastity standard.

### “PUP” Recommendation #5

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity (PUP) has proposed a new AI. If passed, it would have an impact on the way in which all of our ordination standards are applied (or not applied) by sessions and presbyteries. The PUP Task Force has recommended that the G.A. pass an AI that would allow sessions and presbyteries to overlook clear violations of the existing standards on a case-by-case basis. Their proposed AI, which presents itself as an interpretation of G-6.0108, would accomplish this by allowing presbyteries and sessions to consider some ordination standards “inessential,” even if they are mandates in the Book of Order, including the Fidelity and Chastity standard and the prohibition of the ordination of unrepentant practicing homosexuals.

While the church has gone to great lengths through the votes of presbyteries to establish and maintain its standards, the PUP AI, which could be passed by one vote of the 2006 G.A., would severely weaken those standards, effectively making them optional

at the discretion of the session or presbytery. Objections to the PUP AI are legion, both from theological and polity perspectives.

Four presbyteries have passed an overture entitled “On Being Called to Covenant Community” that faithfully interprets G-6.0108 and is a direct response to the PUP AI. Several other presbyteries have passed overtures that would remove or modify the PUP AI.

PFR ADVISES the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly to maintain the Fidelity and Chastity standard (G-6.0106b) and the 1993 AI, and to reject recommendation #5 of the “PUP” report.

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for human sexuality?**

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