



Summer 2010

# The Covenant Connection

A Newsletter of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians (Vol 13 #2)

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## Moving Toward Greater Faithfulness at the 219th General Assembly

A Statement by the Board of Directors of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians

May 2010

The Covenant Network Board of Directors is deeply grateful that the church has discerned ways to live more faithfully together despite differences in recent years. The Board has three primary goals as it looks toward the General Assembly in July:

Resolving the urgent pastoral crisis faced by ministers and Sessions of congregations amid changing structures of family life. Members of congregations in states where same-sex marriage has become legal are seeking to celebrate their marriages in the sight of God and the presence of their church community, with their pastor officiating. Business Items 12-06, 12-08, and 12-09 helpfully urge the Assembly to affirm the rights and responsibilities that ministers and Sessions already have under the Constitution to provide pastoral care to these couples - care which may include performing legal marriage services and permitting them to take place on church property. Other overtures (Items 12-02, 12-03, 12-04, 12-07, and 12-10) would revise the definition of marriage in the Constitution to make it more inclusive. Still others (Items 18-01 and 18-06) would direct the Board of Pensions to provide benefits for all members of families of those its programs cover. All of these overtures address the changing conditions amid which the church is asked to demonstrate the love of Christ to and among its members. They deserve the Assembly's priority attention.

Preserving the actions of previous Assemblies to promote the peace, unity and purity of the Church. The last two Assemblies took actions that affirmed the historic right of presbyteries and Sessions to apply church-wide ordination standards as they were meant to be applied in Presbyterian tradition, with respect for conscience in non-essential matters. These actions mark a path through ordination debates that offers freedom of conscience for all sides, respect for church-wide standards, and the opportunity for the church to grow in unity and love as it discerns the will of God and the teaching of Scripture. The last General Assembly also removed 30-year-old statements that oppressed the conscience of many members. Business Items 06-04, 06-05, and 06-18 would turn back the clock, removing the gains of recent years and fundamentally impeding our life together. The Assembly should affirm the actions of the past two Assemblies, which we believe were guided by the Holy Spirit.

Removing G-6.0106b. This was a founding goal of Covenant Network and remains its high priority. Covenant Network chapters and members were active in urging 21 presbyteries to send overtures to this Assembly. While these overtures (Items 06-06, 06-07, 06-08, 06-09, 06-10, 06-12, 06-13, 06-14, 06-15, 06-16, and 06-17) use somewhat different language, all propose to replace G-6.0106b with statements that preserve high standards for officers but are better aligned with Reformed theology and practice of ordination. As in the past, Covenant Network will work through the General Assembly's process of discernment to bring about the full inclusion of all whom God calls to ordained leadership in the church.

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The church we seek to strengthen is built upon the hospitality of Jesus, who said, "Whoever comes to me I will not cast out." The good news of the gospel is that all—those who are near and those who were far off—are invited; all are members of the household and citizens of the realm of God. No one has a claim on this invitation and none of us becomes worthy, even by sincere effort, to live according to God's will. Grateful for our own inclusion, we carry out the mission of the church to extend God's hospitality to a broken and fearful and lonely world.

From the *Call to Covenant Community*. Please read it in its entirety at [covnetpres.org/resources/call-to-covenant-community/](http://covnetpres.org/resources/call-to-covenant-community/).

## *A Message from our Co-Moderators*

The Board and staff of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians have been busy preparing for the upcoming meeting of the General Assembly in Minneapolis this July 3-10. We are looking forward to seeing many of you there. Minneapolis will be a great venue for the Assembly and we know that Presbyterians in the Twin Cities are eager to welcome us all.

**We invite  
your prayers  
on behalf  
of the  
Assembly.**

Our Board has discussed some of the important business before the Assembly and made recommendations that we feel will move the church toward a more generous and just church. In doing so, we acknowledge that our recommendations are made trusting that the Spirit works in and through individual commissioners as they too discern that same Spirit's leading. We invite you to read our statement and analysis on pages 1, 3 and 4 of this newsletter. Of course our prayer is always that the fresh new spirit experienced two years ago at the San Jose Assembly, a spirit more interested in conversation than combat, a spirit also widely reported as presbyteries voted on amending G.6-0106b, will be evident at this year's Assembly as well.

The General Assembly will be meeting over the Fourth of July. Our country was founded on the principle, *E Pluribus Unum*, "out of many one." That continues to be a wonderful way of understanding the great experiment that is the United States, with all of its diversity and complexity. We'll have a chance on July 4 to celebrate our nation's birth and the powerful symbol that indeed, from many have come one people.

A way of understanding who we are as people of faith, however, is that from the One have come many. This is God's great gift as well as challenge to us. And given the pressures and conflicts in our world and in the Church, we have no doubt that people will be watching this summer's General Assembly with interest. We invite your prayers on behalf of the Assembly, that from our various differences the many may come together and make a bold witness to the one faith, the one hope and the one Lord.

Grace and Peace,



Deborah A. Block  
Pastor, Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Milwaukee, WI



David A. Van Dyke  
Pastor, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, MN

# Covenant Network Urges the General Assembly to Take These Actions

Every item of business on the docket of the 219th General Assembly (2010) will affect the health and ministry of the PCUSA, and as such deserves careful and prayerful consideration by commissioners and advisory delegates.

**The primary goals of the Covenant Network Board, concerning matters related to ordination and marriage, are expressed in the Board Statement on page 1.** In addition, the Board has reflected on several other issues before the GA and offers the following recommendations.

The Covenant Network continues to work and pray for a church that, in the best Reformed tradition, is open to new forms of faithfulness to Christ and strives to live out the “trust and love” that are necessary among the “fellowship of women and men with their children in voluntary covenanted relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ” (G-7.0103). When diverse committees or task forces, having fulfilled their charge to engage in study and discernment as mandated by previous General Assemblies, issue unanimous reports, their recommendations should be accorded a high level of respect as this General Assembly continues the task of discernment. **The Covenant Network Board is grateful to all committee members who have participated in this service to the PCUSA, and in particular commends the following reports for approval by the Assembly:**

## *The Form of Government Task Force*

o Previous General Assemblies have repeatedly affirmed the need to revise the current Form of Government to provide more flexibility for ministry in a wide variety of contexts. The FOG Task Force has unanimously proposed to the church a revision that divides that section of the Book of Order into two parts, “Foundations of Presbyterian Polity” and “Form of Government.” The Task Force was instructed that both G-6.0106b and the “trust clause” in G-8.0201 not be altered, so these remain; the proposal before the church

does not promote any faction's agenda. Instead, it is intended to shift the focus away from a regulatory approach toward an emphasis on broad constitutional principles undergirded by Reformed theology. Functions are mandated, and structures are to be determined largely by those who must make them work efficiently day-to-day.

## *The Special Committee on Correcting Translation Problems of the Heidelberg Catechism*

o The 218th GA (2008) lifted up five specific issues with the translation of the Heidelberg Catechism now in the Book of Confessions. In their work together, the members of this Special Committee identified a number of other problems with our current English text, leading to their unanimous recommendation that they be allowed to continue their work, in cooperation with our ecumenical partners the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church of America. They intend to bring a recommendation for a new translation to the 220th GA (2012).

## *The Special Committee to Consider Amending the Confessional Documents of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to Include the Belhar Confession in the Book of Confessions*

o The Belhar Confession, adopted in 1986 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa in response to the sins of racism and apartheid, would be the first document in the Book of Confessions from the global South, and is unanimously recommended by the Special Committee as an important resource for the multicultural church that the PCUSA is committed to be and become.

**Recommendations continue next page.**



## Recommendations continued...

The church is at its best when it listens to all voices in an attempt to discern together the voice of Christ, placing our trust in the Spirit to lead us. In keeping with the twin goals of inclusion and unity, **the Covenant Network Board urges defeat of several overtures that would restrict Presbyterians' ability to hear and engage with one another**, particularly across differences, and have the effect of impeding faithful dialogue:

o **Item 03-06** proposes to require a super-majority vote at GA and a supermajority of the presbyteries to amend the Book of Order, effectively giving a minority the ability to block any change.

o **Item 03-07** would require a supermajority of the GA even to consider an overture "substantially the same" as one considered by the presbyteries during the previous four years, prohibiting some presbyteries' concerns from being fully heard.

o **Item 03-20** would limit the participation of Young Adult Advisory Delegates during plenary sessions of the General Assembly.

o **Items 04-03 and 04-04** propose the formation of self-selecting, theologically uniform middle governing bodies, removing opportunities for Presbyterians reflecting the rich diversity of the Body of Christ to hear challenges to their preconceptions and increasing the likelihood that we will pursue our own ideas rather than the will of God.

Please pray for commissioners and advisory delegates, the Committee on Local Arrangements and all other volunteers who enable the GA to do its work, the servants of the church who are employed by General Assembly entities, and all who will gather in Minneapolis seeking to serve Jesus Christ!

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### Keep Up with News from the GA

**PC-BIZ** All Presbyterians are encouraged to learn about the business of the 219th GA and keep apprised of the actions of the assembly by exploring it on PC-biz.

[www.pc-biz.org](http://www.pc-biz.org)

**PRESBYTERIAN LEADER** This recently launched web resource from the Presbyterian Publishing Company is providing free information about the 219th General Assembly to all visitors of the site.

[www.thepresbyterianleader.com](http://www.thepresbyterianleader.com)

### COVENANT NETWORK'S NEW WEBSITE!

[www.covnetpres.org](http://www.covnetpres.org)

Log on to our recently renovated website and click on the GA link to learn more about the business coming before the Assembly, as well as the actions taken in Minneapolis.

## Join Us in Minneapolis!

### Commissioners' Convocation Dinner

Friday, July 2, 6:30 - 8:30 pm

@Westminster Presbyterian Church

Featured Speaker: Mr. Doug Nave

*That's For Sure!*

Attorney and Covenant Network Director

On the eve of GA, plan to gather with the Covenant Network to hear about the challenges before the Assembly. This event is an opportunity for commissioners, advisory delegates and observers to think together about how to make a difference in the coming week.

Order tickets for both events at  
[www.pcusa.org/ga219/registration](http://www.pcusa.org/ga219/registration).

### Covenant Network Luncheon

Monday, July 5, 12:00 - 1:30 pm

@ Hilton Hotel

Minneapolis Ballroom D

Featured Speaker: Dr. Gustav Niebuhr

*Tolerance is a Floor, Not a Ceiling*

Associate Professor of Religion and the Media,  
Syracuse University,

and author of

*Beyond Tolerance: Searching for Interfaith  
Understanding in America*

As committee work continues, plan to enjoy lunch on Monday with the Covenant Network. Hear from Covenant Network leaders who will share our hopes for this GA and from Dr. Niebuhr who will offer an inspiring vision for the broader church.

Visit the Covenant Network Booth

#300 & 302

in the Exhibit Hall.

WE'LL GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP  
FROM OUR FRIENDS!

A Commissioner's Experience

by Mary Jorgenson

In 2008, I had the honor of serving as an elder commissioner to the 218th General Assembly. The reading and preparation leading up to GA, time and debate in the committee meetings and in the lengthy plenaries, are daunting, exhilarating, exhausting and at times very challenging. Fortunately, I had a little help from my friends in the Covenant Network!

I attended the CovNet Commissioners' Dinner the first evening of General Assembly. (Sign up in advance!) This turned out to be my best decision. In addition to starting my GA experience on an affirming and uplifting note, I met a few other members of committee 08 -Church Order and Ministry - and I was cued in on additional CovNet lunches and gatherings that were planned throughout the Assembly. I was now prepared to forge ahead knowing that there were like-minded members on my committee and future opportunities to gather for information and restoration. As the work continued, these CovNet debriefings over meals - the shared joys and concerns as progress in all committees was shared - became the highlight of my time in San Jose.

Thanks to the commitment of fellow committee members and commissioners, with the encouragement of the CovNet staff and volunteers, the 2008 GA marked the elimination of the hostile Authoritative Interpretations, the adoption of a new Authoritative Interpretation, and what I hope is the start of an affirming denomination.

I truly encourage commissioners headed to Minneapolis to connect with the CovNet personnel. The support and encouragement you will receive will only serve to enhance your experience and advance your work as you prepare for General Assembly and as you serve as a commissioner in Minneapolis.



*Mary Jorgenson is clerk of session at Southminster PC, in Heartland Presbytery. She is Mid-America Synod Representative to the Church-wide Coordinating Team of Presbyterian Women and a member of Heartland Presbytery's International Partnership committee.*

Ways you can help!

**...AT THE ASSEMBLY**

If you'll be in Minneapolis, Covenant Network would love your help! From hospitality to running errands to supporting commissioners and advisory delegates; whether for an hour or a day or for the whole week -- we have a number of opportunities for you to serve, learn, make new friends, and make a difference in the church's witness.

To find out more or to sign up, contact National Organizer Tricia Dykers Koenig at 216-658-1770 or [triciadk@covenantnetwork.org](mailto:triciadk@covenantnetwork.org).

**... OR FROM HOME**

If you can't attend GA, you can still take part.

Support your presbytery's commissioners, or an advisory delegate or two, by offering to buy their tickets to attend the Friday night Convocation Dinner and/or the CovNet Luncheon.

Contact Program Coordinator Lou East at 336-643-9424 or [loueast@covenantnetwork.org](mailto:loueast@covenantnetwork.org) to hear how CovNet Chapters can make this happen in their presbyteries!

And keep the Assembly in your prayers!

# How might Reformed theologies of ordination inform our current debates about ordination and sexuality?

By Dawn DeVries

## *From Frequently Asked Questions about Sexuality, the Bible, and the Church\**

The theology of the Reformation fundamentally reshaped the doctrine of ministry, and the practices surrounding ordination in Reformed churches. In the Roman Catholic as well as the Eastern Orthodox Churches, ordination as a sacrament ritually distinguished one group of people from another within the church. Priests, it was argued, by virtue of an “indelible character” conferred on them through valid ordination in the apostolic succession, were elevated to the role of mediators on behalf of the laity. Especially in their consecration and offering of the sacrifice of the Mass, which was said to “represent” the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, those holding ordained office were viewed as a special class of members within the Body of Christ.

For the Roman Catholic Church, the unity of the church's whole ministry is secured by the Bishop of Rome - the Pope - who is the ruler over the whole Church, standing in the place of Christ, and as the successor to St. Peter. Under the Pope, the entire leadership of the church is hierarchically organized, with metropolitans over bishops, bishops over priests, priests over deacons.

A quick glance through our Book of Confessions will confirm just how completely the Reformed churches rejected this theology of the ministry. In the first place, they did not recognize a fundamental distinction between priests and the laity. On the contrary, they saw the church as a communion of the faithful who have all been made priests and kings in Christ and are therefore able to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ. Thus understood, the priesthood includes all believers. This was a crucial insight, because it undercut the hierarchical understanding of ministry inherited from patristic and medieval times. The priestly work of interceding before God on behalf of others is a common work of the people of God.

If every believer can function as a priest before God, then ordained ministry must not be primarily about such priestly mediation performed by a special class of hierarchs. In the Reformed understanding, ministry is conceived rather as service. Ministers are servants of the Word of God, stewards of the mysteries of God, and shepherds or pastors of the people of God. They are not a separate class of citizens in God's Kingdom, set apart by an indelible mark. They are those who receive a call and are set apart for a special work of leadership in the church, of which they too are simply members. They are set apart for the sake of good order in the church, and no one minister stands “over” another.

Our confessions also explicitly reject the claim of any person to stand in the place of Christ in the church. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, “Christ the Lord is, and remains, the only universal pastor, the highest Pontiff before God the Father; and . . . in the Church he himself performs all the duties of a bishop or pastor, even to the world's end; and therefore does not need a substitute for one who is absent. For Christ is present with his Church, and is its life-giving Head” (5.131).

In Reformed understandings of ministry, the notion of a call to ministry is crucial. John Calvin and the Reformed Confessions speak of two parts of a call to ministry: the “internal call” or “secret call” that the individual receives from God in his or her conscience, and the “external call” that the candidate receives from the church. In general, far more emphasis is placed on the importance of this latter external call.

That is because the Reformers rejected the notion that anyone could simply appoint himself or herself to leadership in the church. The call to leadership ultimately comes from God the Holy Spirit. It comes in recognition of the fact that a particular individual is blessed with certain gifts that could be used for the benefit of the broader community and for the glory of God.

“Hearing” a call to ministry, therefore, is a complex process of discernment.



***Dawn DeVries***

Faithful discernment involves prayer and obedient discipleship from the candidate, but also thorough examination of that person by the broader church - examination that can culminate in the public recognition of the candidate as a deacon, elder, or minister in ordination. This is why our Book of Order outlines such a long and complex process of candidacy - especially for those who are to be ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The many steps in this process allow ample opportunities for both the candidate and the church members who know him or her best to "discern the call."

It is clear in our confessions that ministry is not a sort of "civil right" of baptism. Not all members of the church are blessed with the particular gifts needed for ordained office. On the other hand, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers would seem to overrule any attempt to consider a particular group of people categorically ineligible for ordained ministry simply because of some aspect of their human identity (such as age, disability, gender, or sexual orientation). If all believers are called into the Body of Christ through baptism, and joined in the royal priesthood, then surely it is possible that the Holy Spirit can raise up ordained leadership from anyone within the Body. In the process of candidacy and examination that all ordained officers go through, the church's judicatories rightly consider whether individuals appear to possess gifts for the particular office to which they are to be ordained, and the right kind of educational preparation and formation to use their gifts wisely and effectively. The session and presbytery also rightly examine candidates on their moral integrity. We are all aware that scandals involving the church's leadership can seriously damage its ability to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ in the world. So church leaders must be persons seeking to live lives of earnest and exemplary faithfulness.

Finally, the judicatories examine candidates on their understanding of the faith, since they will be entrusted with the task of instructing others in the faith, and ordained leaders maintain the church's identity through their use and application of Scripture and the liturgical, confessional, and theological resources handed down from our forebears.

Given the Reformed tradition's great emphasis on thorough examination and its complex process of discerning God's call to ministry, it is not surprising that our church order has traditionally entrusted this task to the closest relevant judicatory

- to the session in the case of deacons and elders, and to the presbytery in the case of ministers. This makes very good sense, because only those who are closely familiar with a candidate will be in a good position to make sound judgments about the subtler qualities necessary for effective leadership. While church-wide standards for ordination are also demanded and upheld (for example, an M.Div. degree, knowledge of biblical languages, knowledge of the church's constitution and liturgy as demonstrated in ordination exams), it is hard to judge from a test (or from a great distance) things like a person's holiness of life or earnest obedience to the call of God. These equally important standards require the kind of knowledge that only close and long-term acquaintance can afford.

The Reformed churches slowly came to recognize that the Holy Spirit's call went out to a wider group of people than they originally imagined in the 16th century. Our Scots Confession strongly rejects any kind of ordination of women. In the Scots Confession's view, the mere fact that women are allowed to baptize (under certain very special circumstances) by the Roman Catholic Church provides sufficient proof of the total corruption of the ministries of that church (3.22). But our most recent confession, the Brief Statement of Faith, explicitly affirms that God calls both women and men to all the ministries of the church (10.4).

This expansion of who might be considered for ordination may be an important lesson to remember from our own history. As the Westminster Confession states, "the Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (6.010). As Reformed churches, we have had the experience - always somehow surprising - that the Holy Spirit may have a new thing to say to the church, if only we will listen attentively.

*The priestly work of interceding before God on behalf of others is a common work of the people of God.*

*Dawn DeVries is the John Newton Thomas Professor of Systematic Theology at Union-PSCE in Richmond. Her books include Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher. She has served the church as a member of the General Assembly's Special Committee on Catechism, from 1994-1998, and as a representative at ecumenical gatherings such as the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993, and the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1998.*

*\*Frequently Asked Questions, edited by Ted Smith, is available through the Covenant Network e-store.*

*Toward a Church as Generous and Just as God's Grace*



**2010 Covenant Conference**

November 4-6  
St. Philip Presbyterian Church, Houston , Texas

*Plenary Speakers:* **Dr. Margaret Aymer**  
Professor of New Testament  
Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta

**Dr. Robert Dykstra**  
Professor of Pastoral Theology  
Princeton Theological Seminary

**Dr. David Myers**  
Professor of Psychology, Hope College  
Co-Author with Letha Scanzoni of  
*What God has Joined Together:  
the Christian Case for Gay Marriage*

*Preachers:* **Rev. Katie Morrison**  
United Church of Christ

**Rev. David Van Dyke**  
Pastor of House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, MN

**Rev. Cliff Kirkpatrick**  
President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches