

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

A LETTER FROM YOUR SESSION

September 12, 2014

Dear NPC members and friends,

In June the 2014 General Assembly of our Presbyterian Church (USA) denomination took two actions that have created widespread controversy within our congregation, denomination, and beyond. One action pertains to the Middle East, and one pertains to marriage. As a Session, we want to share with the congregation our response which emerged from two meetings in late August.

First, regarding the Middle East: our formal response is attached on the next page.

Second, regarding marriage: Our response is necessarily more pastoral.

First, some information. The issue of *ordination standards* as it relates to sexually active gay and lesbian persons has been at the forefront of church controversy since the '70s. More recently, the debate has shifted to *same-sex marriage*. The 2014 General Assembly:

- Granted individual clergy authority to perform same-sex weddings in states where it is legal.
- Proposed a change to the denomination's constitution by redefining marriage as between two persons (rather than between a man and a woman). This proposal must still be ratified by a majority of presbyteries. (Details can be found online at <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga221/ga221-marriage/>)
- Did not place any requirement on any church or pastor to hold same-sex marriage ceremonies.

We cannot address such matters without first sharing the following beliefs:

- All of us stand under the truth that, "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23)
- All people are welcome in the fellowship of our church who seek to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. (Matthew 11:28)
- All people are to hold their convictions with both courage and humility, knowing that in the church there always have been and always will be deeply held but varying beliefs on many matters of faith. (Romans 14:1-10)

Also, we acknowledge the diversity of people in our congregation. As we address issues of same-sex marriage, we recognize that this is but one in a broad range of social issues facing the church today. When dealing with marriage, we must also address such issues as the epidemic of infidelity and divorce among *heterosexual* couples, and widespread sexual experimentation among young persons. In particular, families with children need clear guidance on Christian biblical standards for sexual intimacy.

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The Session's discussion reflected the diversity of views found among Christians today. It also considered the complexities involved in understanding marriage as an institution governed both by the civil legal authority of the state (that serves Christians as well as non-Christians) and the ecclesiastical standards governed by Scripture and our Confessions of Faith (for Christians in the church). These are discussions that will continue.

In the church, as elders we agreed to live by the teaching of our Confessions and NPC's Biblical Standards for Christian Leaders. Our Confessions teach that sexual intimacy is a gift of God to be expressed fully only within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman. Each elder and deacon who is ordained to ministry in our church is asked to affirm and live by these standards. (The Biblical Standards document and the relevant Confessional statements are attached to this letter.)

Two declarations emerge from our discussion:

- First, as your Session, we affirm our non-negotiable calling from Jesus Christ to be a church that welcomes people of all orientations and backgrounds, even as we explicitly maintain our commitment to the teachings of Jesus Christ and Presbyterian confessional practice that marriage in the church is between one man and one woman.
- Second, although this most recent General Assembly action saddens many on our Session, and while some in the congregation have expressed concern about our affiliation with our denomination, we remain committed to maintaining our witness to historic Christian faith within the Presbyterian Church (USA).

We are reminded that the unity of NPC is in Christ rather than in any particular perspective on these subjects – and we call upon all to pray for the church as we seek to hold in balance the peace, unity, and purity of Christ's church.

Indeed, these are wonderful times for our congregation. Our sense of call and mission is being renewed. At our next Session meeting we will vote on a new strategic plan as we pursue Christ's will for our future. May God bless our common ministry together.

On Behalf of the Session,



David Renwick,
Moderator of Session



John Gregg
Clerk of Session

Attachments (3)

**NPC SESSION RESPONSE
TO THE 2014 GENERAL ASSEMBLY DECISION
REGARDING ISRAEL, PALESTINE AND DIVESTMENT**

Following considerable debate, the 2014 General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) by a vote of 310-303 approved an overture calling for divestment from Caterpillar Inc., Hewlett-Packard and Motorola Solutions, companies alleged to be engaged in “non-peaceful pursuits” in the region. A similar overture failed 333-331 at the 220th Assembly (2012). After extensive discussion at the August 25, 2014 Session meeting, Session makes the following observations and recommendations:

The Text of the General Assembly recommendations is immediately below and is followed by Session comments and recommendations. Please read the full text carefully:

The PC(USA) has a long standing commitment to peace in Israel and Palestine. We recognize the complexity of the issues, the decades-long struggle, the pain suffered and inflicted by policies and practices of both the Israeli government and Palestinian entities. We further acknowledge and confess our own complicity in both the historic and current suffering of Israeli and Palestinian. Yearning for justice and reconciliation, the 221st General Assembly (2014) recommends the following:

1. Reaffirm Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign nation within secure and internationally recognized borders in accordance with the United Nations resolutions.
2. Declare its commitment to a negotiated two-state solution (two states for two peoples) in which a secure and universally recognized State of Israel lives alongside a free, viable, and secure state for the Palestinian people.
3. Instruct the Presbyterian Foundation and the Board of Pensions of the PC(U.S.A.), to divest from Caterpillar, Inc., Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions, in accord with our church’s decades-long socially responsible investment (SRI) history, and not to reinvest in these companies until the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee of the PC(USA) is fully satisfied that product sales and services by these companies are no longer in conflict with our church investment policy. This action on divestment is not to be construed or represented by any organization of the PC(USA) as divestment from the State of Israel, or an alignment with or endorsement of the global BDS (Boycott, Divest and Sanctions) movement.
4. Reaffirm PC(USA)’s commitment to interfaith dialog and partnerships with the American Jewish, Muslim friends and Palestinian Christians and call for all presbyteries and congregations within the PC(USA) to include interfaith dialogue and relationship-building as part of their own engagement in working for a just peace.
5. Call for all foreign aid given by the U.S. government—including aid to Israel and the Palestinian Authority—to be comprehensively and transparently accounted to the American people and held to the same standards of compliance with all applicable laws.
6. Call for church advocacy for foreign-aid accountability to be directed toward its universal adherence rather than targeted for selective application to some recipients and not others.
7. Encourage Presbyterians to travel to the Holy Land, and give broad support to the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities throughout the Middle East.
8. Affirm the importance of economic measures and cooperation between Israelis and Palestinians that support and advance a negotiated two-state solution.
9. Urge all church institutions to give careful consideration to possible investments in Israel-Palestine that advance peace and improve the lives of Palestinians and Israelis.

Jesus said, "Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning *"made them male and female,"* and said, *"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"?* So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

Matthew 19:4–6

PC(USA) BOOK OF CONFESSIONS: EXCERPTS ON MARRIAGE

Confession of 1967

Man's perennial confusion about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day

- by the availability of new means for birth control and the treatment of infection,
- by the pressures of urbanization,
- by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication,
- and by world overpopulation.

The church, as the household of God, is called to lead men out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ.

Reconciled to God, each person has joy in and respect for his own humanity and that of other persons; a man and woman are enabled to marry, to commit themselves to a mutually shared life, and to respond to each other in sensitive and lifelong concern; parents receive the grace to care for children in love and to nurture their individuality.

The church comes under the judgment of God and invites rejection by man

- when it fails to lead men and women into the full meaning of life together,
- or withholds the compassion of Christ from those caught in the moral confusion of our time.

Westminster Confession (1600s)

6.131. Christian marriage is an institution ordained of God, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, established and sanctified for the happiness and welfare of mankind, into which spiritual and physical union one man and one woman enter, cherishing a mutual esteem and love, bearing with each other's infirmities and weaknesses, comforting each other in trouble, providing in honesty and industry for each other and for their household, praying for each other, and living together the length of their days as heirs of the grace of life.

6.133 Marriage is a union between one man and one woman, designed of God to last so long as they both shall live.¹

NOTE: Westminster Confession 1647 edition, Chapter XXIV

- I. Marriage is to be between one Man and one Woman: neither is it lawful for any Man to have more then one Wife, nor for any Woman to have more then one Husband, at the same time.
- II. Marriage was ordained for the mutuall help of Husband and Wife, for the increase of mankinde with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed and, for preventing of uncleannesse.
- III. It is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgement, to give their consent. Yet, is it the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord . . .

BIBLICAL STANDARDS FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

“It is a true saying that if someone wants to be a church leader they have a good ambition. For a leader must be a good person whose life cannot be spoken against...Those who do well as leaders will be well rewarded both by respect from others and also by developing their own confidence and bold trust in the Lord.” (1 Timothy 3:1-2a, 13)

Leadership in the church is a responsibility and not a right. It is extended to those who come under the authority of the church’s teaching as expounded in the Bible and Book of Confessions. It has always been a demanding calling. Today, the gap between Christian and societal values makes this particularly challenging. As we serve Christ in leadership, we model what we really believe about our faith. Both our beliefs and our lifestyles are critical to the way we serve Christ and project Christian leadership.

The lack of clear moral guidelines in our society leaves many confused; this confusion extends often to church life. In an effort to bring some clarity, we have distilled some Biblical principles for the selection, training and development of those who serve the church as leaders. We want to be faithful to Biblical standards yet avoid being judgmental. All of us have sinned, with failings both public and private. At the same time, believing that our leadership and lifestyles must demonstrate our beliefs, we should be able to say with Paul, “follow me, as I follow Christ.”

There are three principal passages in the New Testament that explicitly discuss the guidelines for Christian church leaders. They are: 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; and 1 Peter 5:1-5. Christian life standards are described well in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 and Ephesians 5:1-5 and instruction on Christian service is found at Ephesians 4:11-13, 15-16 and Philippians 2:1-4. The Christian leader should continually seek the Lord’s help in achieving the standards set forth in these passages. We have drawn from them the following guidelines. We encourage you to consider them, praying that God will honor your desire to model Christian beliefs and lifestyle. All who seek to lead in the Christian community will strive with the help of the Holy Spirit to exemplify the following Biblical standards of Christian living:

Personal Standards

- *Integrity:* The Christian leader shall be committed to the highest ethical standards in both personal and professional conduct.
- *Speech:* Christian leaders speak the truth in love and are not quarrelsome. Their speech should reflect their commitment to Christ.
- *Self Control:* The Christian leader exercises self-control in speech and action and is free from substance abuse (alcohol, drugs and other dependencies).
- *Sexual Behavior:* The Christian leader is committed to fidelity in the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, and chastity in singleness.
- *Distinctive Lifestyle:* The Christian leader will demonstrate in lifestyle what is desirable in all believers—the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Our leaders seek to illustrate a ministry of grace in their own lives.

Spiritual Standards

- *Personal Faith:* The Christian leader requires a mature, vibrant and Christ-centered faith. That faith includes a personal grasp of basic Christian beliefs; an active, ongoing relationship with God, rooted in prayer; obedience to Scripture; and a commitment to growth in love, holiness, service and fellowship. Christian leaders should not be recent converts.
- *Lordship of Christ:* In short, the Christian leader is one who desires Jesus Christ to be Lord in all areas of life.
- *Servants:* Christian leaders are to be the servants of others, and be willing to help those in need.
- *Christian Growth:* Christian leaders make spiritual growth a continuing priority, reflected in Bible study, fellowship with other Christians, worship and involvement in Christian community.
- *Confession:* Christian leaders are able to confess and repent of their sins. They lead the church in demonstrating humility and the need for God's grace.
- *True to the Word of God:* Those who lead are teachers in the Christian community. They must teach with doctrine faithful to the Scriptures and the guidance of the Book of Confessions. They come under the authority of the Bible in their own lives.
- *Commitment to Local Church:* Christian leaders at NPC are to be members of the congregation, regular in attendance of worship and faithful to the extra commitments their positions require.
- *Stewardship:* Christian leaders are to have a growing commitment to progressive and disciplined giving, proportional to resources. They are to be generous in giving of their time, talents and financial resources.

Leadership Standards

- *Balance:* The Christian leader makes an ongoing effort to balance quality relationships among family, occupation and church responsibilities.
- *Concern for Others:* Christian leaders have a heart for seeing people come to know Christ and develop their Christian walk; they cultivate an ability to share their faith.
- *Commitment to Training Leaders:* The Christian leader is committed to training others, encouraging them, and giving them opportunities to use their gifts.

Second Helvetic Confession (1500s)

5.246 MARRIAGE. For marriage (which is the medicine of incontinency, and continency itself) was instituted by the Lord God himself, who blessed it most bountifully, and willed man and woman to cleave one to the other inseparably, and to live together in complete love and concord (Matt. 19:4 ff). Whereupon we know that the apostle said: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). And again: “If a girl marries, she does not sin” (I Cor. 7:28). THE SECTS. We therefore condemn polygamy, and those who condemn second marriages.

5.247 HOW MARRIAGES ARE TO BE CONTRACTED. We teach that marriages are to be lawfully contracted in the fear of the Lord, and not against the laws which forbid certain degrees of consanguinity, lest the marriages should be incestuous. Let marriages be made with consent of the parents, or of those who take the place of parents, and above all for that purpose for which the Lord instituted marriages. Moreover, let them be kept holy with the utmost faithfulness, piety, love and purity of those joined together. Therefore let them guard against quarrels, dissensions, lust and adultery.

5.248 MATRIMONIAL FORUM. Let lawful courts be established in the Church, and holy judges who may care for marriages, and may repress all unchastity and shamefulness, and before whom matrimonial disputes may be settled.

5.249 THE REARING OF CHILDREN. Children are to be brought up by the parents in the fear of the Lord; and parents are to provide for their children, remembering the saying of the apostle: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (I Tim. 5:8). But especially they should teach their children honest trades or professions by which they may support themselves. They should keep them from idleness and in all these things instill in them true faith in God, lest through a lack of confidence or too much security or filthy greed they become dissolute and achieve no success.

5.250 And it is most certain that those works which are done by parents in true faith by way of domestic duties and the management of their households are in God’s sight holy and truly good works. They are no less pleasing to God than prayers, fasting and almsgiving. For thus the apostle has taught in his epistles, especially in those to Timothy and Titus. And with the same apostle we account the doctrine of those who forbid marriage or openly castigate or indirectly discredit it, as if it were not holy and pure, among the doctrine of demons.

5.251 We also detest an impure single life, the secret and open lusts and fornications of hypocrites pretending to be continent when they are the most incontinent of all. All these God will judge.

Session Notes

These nine recommendations included a commitment to a secure and universally recognized state of Israel. The final text reaffirms the longstanding commitment of the PC(USA) to a just peace in Israel and Palestine. The overall recommendation urges interfaith dialogue with American Jewish and American Muslim friends and with Palestinian Christians as part of our engagement in working for a just peace.

Public controversy has focused, however, on a narrow recommendation for divestment from stocks in three companies – Caterpillar, Hewett Packard and Motorola Solutions – which provide equipment used by Israel to carry out its occupation policies in the West Bank. Note that the order to divest

- is not an order to divest from Israel.
- nor is it an order to divest from all U.S.companies doing business in Israel.
- is not an alignment or endorsement of the global Boycott, Divest and Sanctions movement, commonly known as BDS.

Session Recommendations

1. Since it attracted often-misleading media coverage, Session recommends that members of the congregation read the final text of the overture in its entirety.
2. NPC's teaching and ruling elders recognize that the foundations for trust, and for a lasting and just peace are built, not on broad political statements, but on relationships of mutual understanding and respect. As children of a relational God we should work to connect people on both sides of this divisive issue. We have existing associations with Christian ministries of reconciliation within Palestine and Israel. NPC members on the 2014 Holy Land Pilgrimage had opportunities to meet with and learn from these and other ministries working in the West Bank and Israel. Session recommends that NPC continue to build on these international partnerships.
3. Session will consider ways to encourage understanding and interfaith dialogue within the Washington, DC region. This may include work with Jewish rabbis and synagogues, as well as Muslim faith leaders. In addition, NPC will continue its long-standing partnership with Christian organizations that aid Palestinian Christians.
4. Regarding NPC's own endowment funds: NPC may have investments that hold one or more of the three stocks in the General Assembly decision. The NPC Finance committee periodically reviews its own policy on socially responsible investing. Session recommends that NPC not take any action to divest in response to the 2014 General Assembly action.