

Presbytery of Greater Atlanta
February 19, 2011
Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA

By Joe Maltese
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On February 19, 2011 the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta met to consider critical issues facing the denomination. It was clear to me, as a first time participant , that the results of the meeting were and will be both significant, far reaching and historic.

The meeting began by welcoming several new ministers to the Presbytery and our region. It was quite inspiring to see the accomplishments and commitments of the newly ordained ministers and those joining our Presbytery from other regions. I felt honored to be in the presence of these accomplished and committed persons who have so overwhelmingly dedicated their lives to serving God.

The Presbytery then installed a new Moderator for the Presbytery, Elder Ramona Lavender who clearly has great leadership skills and who assumed the responsibility as chair of the meeting. She performed her responsibilities of moderating and walking this large body of over 400 through the flow of difficult and contentious business quite well. The discourse was well organized and managed in a very civil manner that would be an example for most local governments. All were welcomed to speak their sentiments and thoughts and did so in a very structured and orderly manner. There was rigid adherence to rules of order for the meeting, a discipline so welcome in a day and age where public discourse sometimes becomes more of an opportunity to fan flames rather than using the time to get the various important points of view out and on the table for consideration. I saw only a few occasions where I thought statements were "over the top".

The meeting progressed with an important sermon by Reverend Magdalena Garcia of Chicago entitled *Apocalyptic Hope for Today* which opened our eyes and minds to scriptural guidance on the issues of diversity as seen through John's words in the book of Revelation. It was a very thought provoking message and special as the view was developed in an interesting way from Revelation.

The first four items of business dealt with significant and what are clearly emotional issues within the church. These items have stirred quite an undercurrent that is surfacing within the denomination, and they are so contentious, individually and cumulatively we now hear of individuals and congregations that talk of breaking away from the church. I have been a Presbyterian my entire life, and while my exposure to church polity has been somewhat limited, I have never witnessed the emotion and sentiment on any issue that was present in the sanctuary during that meeting and afterwards.

The first significant item on the agenda was consideration of a new form of government for the denomination. Sentiment had evolved that the old section G of the book of order had become a book of rules and less of a constitutional document. The vast majority of the first 4 chapters of the Form of government remain relatively untouched. The new governance section moves our constitution from 14 to 6 chapters. My understanding is that the new approach to governance will seek a more missional nature in church polity. More emphasis would be placed on supporting the work of the congregation in the new approach to governance, and "the work of the church at all levels is organized around the classical reformed marks of the Church: that the Word of God is proclaimed, the sacraments are rightly administered, and the covenant community is nurtured through ecclesiastical discipline."

The following is from the General Assembly's Task Force on the Form of Government:

"The recommended revisions to the *Book of Order* do not change the constitutional standards of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Rather, these revisions return the Form of Government to its original intent—a constitution rather than a manual of operations. By so doing, it establishes a polity that empowers the church to engage effectively in the mission of God in the twenty-first century. This revised polity lifts up and enhances the core values that shape and govern the whole church. This polity enables the councils of the church to establish the processes through which they can effectively serve God's mission in their own contexts. As we the church know, affirm, and live out these overarching standards that shape our life together, the work we do will be clearer, more easily understood, and more united in serving our Lord in mission."

The matter passed the Presbytery by a significant margin.

I urge all members of First Presbyterian to study these changes and understand their relevance to the various institutional elements and structures of PCUSA. Access to comparative information about the old vs. new constitutional language and changes to section G is available on the PCUSA web site or via the Greater Atlanta Presbytery portal.

The Office of the General Assembly offers this guidance: "If a majority of the Presbyteries approve any or all of the proposed amendments, those amendments will be included in the 2011-2013 Book of Order (G-18.0301d)."

As the Session of this church, we do have an obligation to understand and prepare ourselves and for these important changes, and to the extent necessary, relevant and important keep our congregation posted and knowledgeable of the changes should they occur.

The next critical item to be considered was whether the Presbytery should support the adoption of the Confession of Belhar. As you may be aware, this creed speaks to reconciliation, unity and diversity. This confession came out of the situation in South Africa in the mid 1980's. Over time many began to see the benefits and value of a document emanating from Africa that speaks to unity, against racial segregation, and the importance of standing against injustice.

I have spent a great deal of time reading, re-reading, studying and discussing this Confession over the past several months. We have read and discussed within my family and I have discussed it with others outside my family. I have heard the debate at the Presbytery where some spoke that they see dangerous or worrisome language within the creed. After numerous readings of the document I can find nothing that is detrimental or dangerous within this creed unless one attempts to read something of concern into the document. Instead, I find a very significant, guiding and valuable confession that all Christians should embrace, use and adhere to. It is well thought out and seems to me to be well founded on the exact teachings that are revealed in the Bible. I listened intently to the debate- especially those against adoption- and, I just cannot read the perceived concerns or problems into the document- any more than I could read something of concern or disagreement into the Bible. I personally believe there can never be too many professions associated with God's Kingdom, his expectations of us as his children, and of the teachings of Jesus Christ. I believe this document should be considered as a gift from

God, and that we as God's servants should recognize and embrace the message in this confession for our denomination. I do also believe that we as Christians have an obligation to resist and speak against any attempt to utilize the confession for anything other than the words and message as specifically written.

While the Confession was adopted by the Presbytery by a wide margin, there was still significant opposition. The Office of the General Assembly offers the following:

- "If two-thirds of the Presbyteries fail to vote in the affirmative, the proposal is ended. Or if two-thirds of the Presbyteries (116 of 173) vote in the affirmative, the proposed change (inclusion) would go to the 220th GA (2012). (G-18.0201a[2])
- Then the 220th General Assembly would also have to approve the inclusion of the new confession. (G-18.0201a[3]). We are not sure what would actually happen if the 220th GA failed to approve, since we've not seen it happen, but our assumption is that the proposal would end at that stage."

You may recall at the last Session meeting, we received copies of correspondence from a group of larger Presbyterian churches across the US that spoke to the concept of dividing the church using rather ambiguous language. The Presbytery's web site briefly spoke in this context about the letter:

- "...stating that the PC(USA) is "deathly ill" and inviting us to a conference to consider new structures for the future, including [a new fellowship](#)."

That's a brief summary, but my read of the letter shows to me that it is a prelude to opening dialogue and preparing for secession. I was pleased to see that the Council for the Greater Atlanta Presbytery responded quickly, diplomatically, decisively, and firmly in responding to the positions set forth in the letter and, but stood up to the positions outlined in the letter of February 2, 2011. The council calls for the reaffirmation by church members to create space for God's vision coming to pass unity through a variety of principals to the Presbytery and PCUSA . That reaffirmation is worthy of consideration and support. The Council's letter of response can be found at:

http://www.atlpcusa.org/dfc/newsdetail_2/36

The commissioners took up what was clearly the most intense and emotional issue after lunch, the matter of ordination of homosexual members, G-6.0106b. It is also a matter that is not only emotional but is clearly divisive in the denomination. The proposed change would eliminate language barring the ordination of homosexual members. The existing language called for embracing the concepts of fidelity, chastity, and the covenant of marriage. Deacons, elders, and ministers that did not embrace these practices, or who would not repent of violating these standards, could not get to first base in the ordination process. Simply put the door was closed within the entire denomination to ordination of those who practiced and were non-repentant of homosexuality. The new language simply transfers making the determination of a candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination to the applicable governing body responsible for ordination and installation.

What seemed unusual to me was that after lengthy but orderly, pro and con debate from many commissioners, the matter was put to vote using secret ballot. All other amendments were taken up by voice vote or standing (show of hands). This matter passed by a nearly 2-1 margin.

One other matter that is noteworthy was a report on the status of litigation involving the effort by Timberidge Presbyterian Church to sever the relationship with the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta. An Administrative Commission of the Presbytery was assigned the task of seeking to work through the issues and reconcile the matters outside of court. Unfortunately those negotiations appear to be unsuccessful and the matter is in court. The lower courts affirmed that the church property is held in trust by the local congregation for the Presbytery. TPC appealed that ruling to the Court of Appeals. The Court of Appeals reversed the ruling. And the Presbytery has now taken the matter to the Georgia Supreme Court.

There were 14 other amendments to the Book of Order which all passed quickly and with little opposition on voice votes.

I cannot understate the emotion that is running deep and that was observed within the Presbytery meeting and that is now manifesting itself throughout the denomination. I agree with Doug that at the end of the day, very little we saw at the meeting has immediate or significant impacts on First Presbyterian of LaGrange. Sure we may see more responsibility placed on the Session and the Presbytery for decision making. But that may be good. What we are facing is growing unrest, discord and deteriorating harmony within the denomination. Please understand that some churches and individuals within our denomination in their hearts truly believe what is and has been done is very unacceptable.

I have been involved in democratic function throughout my entire adult life. I have witnessed many emotional debates and decisions that impact people's and institution's lives. I have never witnessed the pain and emotion clearly felt by those present at the Presbytery meeting- especially those who saw their position was lost. Those representing Korean congregations were most severely shocked and dismayed by the outcome- especially of G-6.0106b. Their reaction was one of sincere and crushing pain.

So what is our role and responsibility? First I believe we as individuals, a congregation and a church must turn to the scriptures for guidance and instruction. We as a denomination are facing a possible crisis of unity. Individuals and congregations, and some Presbyteries are disheartened and are at the breaking point in their beliefs relative to what is going on in PCUSA. While we must understand, honor and respect the beliefs of all those with concern, we must reach to the higher calling of unity that God has set for us. Doug opened the dialogue on this within our church in his Feb 27, 2011 sermon. As a church we need to understand what God expects of us in Christian unity. He gave us clear instruction. God blessed us with the gift of and specific guidance through Paul's letter to the Ephesians and other passages that can and will help us work through this --- IF WE PREPARE! Getting ahead of a groundswell of disunity is essential now. As a congregation we should study about unity, and prepare for and embrace our differences while being well aware of the expectations of unity given to us through Christ. The Men's Bible Study decided this past week to undertake a study of Ephesians as its next book for this preparation. Why shouldn't we cast a wider net within the church with similar study so we know what is expected of us as Christians using the scriptures as that great resource of knowledge and guidance as to what is expected of us?

I also have to call on my life's experience here. Some of you may have these same thoughts. I am blessed to live in a land where we have a free and open democracy. Our country, state and local governments are not perfect by any means, but its as good as it gets in this day and age. And I thank God for giving me the blessing of living where I do and under these conditions. If as an American I disagree with something I stand up and disagree, I seek change through dialogue, and use the formats

for governance that have been provided for each of us. But I will never “quit” being an American citizen. Yes we are a nation full of faults and problems. And we also have a great success in unity and working to change. Maybe I didn’t agree with something that came out of Washington last year 😊. But I am not going to quit and leave America because of it! No I intend to stay right here and stand up for what I believe in and seek change through the system and processes so many have sacrificed so much to allow me to have. I will listen to and respect what my fellow citizens believe are the directions we will take, and we will find common ground. We will always be changing. It’s all simply worth it and important to me for my country to seek to be unified.

Remember there is a much higher Kingdom than the good old US of A. Its Gods Kingdom. If I am willing to stand by my country for all of its faults, successes and failures I am more than doubly willing to do Christ’s work for him and to stand by his institutions. About 150 years ago our nation saw half a million Americans sacrifice their lives to figure out that we as a people are meant to be unified. From that horrible storm we found out that unity was so important. We are 50 separate political entities bound by a common belief. PCUSA isn’t much different. Remember what Jesus taught as written in Matthew 12: 25?

“And knowing their thoughts he said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand”

We all know change is tough. It’s hard. But with God’s guidance we can figure it out and we can remain united as a denomination. It’s worth the effort.

Some think Thomas Jefferson may have had some odd ideas about religion. But he left us with some brilliant ideas and concepts that still are relevant today. Some of you may be familiar with this passage. It has some bearing to PCUSA and what we as one of God’s institutions on earth face today. Let me end my report with this inscription on the panel of the southeast interior wall of the Jefferson Memorial which is redacted and excerpted from a letter July 12, 1816 from Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval:

“I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions. But laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times. We might as well require a man to wear still the coat which fitted him when a boy as civilized society to remain ever under the regimen of their barbarous ancestors.”