

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Moderator's Conference

Processing Amendments to the Constitution

A workshop was held at the Moderator's Conference on how presbyteries are processing the amendments to the Book of Order and the ecumenical statements approved by the 218th General Assembly. 62 church leaders participated in this workshop held on November 22, 2008.

Issues and Challenges

When asked what issues and challenges are presented by the amendments, workshop participants identified the following:

- The church's living together into the future.
- Congregations and individuals who say they'll leave the denomination.
- Complexity (i.e. authoritative interpretations and catechisms).
- The need to listen and hear all sides of issues.
- The relevance to the entire denomination (i.e. urban v. rural churches).
- Minds being made up and intolerance to differing viewpoints.
- Opening old sores by once again raising contentious issues.
- Some of the amendments are controversial while others are not.
- Outside lobbying.

Processes

Small and large group discussion was held on the question of how presbyteries are addressing, discussing and debating the proposed amendments. About half of the participants said that their presbytery had plans for addressing the constitutional changes.

Promoting dialogue. Virtually all workshop participants agreed that it is vital to promote open, balanced, healthy and respectful dialogue within presbyteries before parliamentary action. Among the comments were:

- How the amendments are processed may be more important than the theology questions.
- It would be useful to divide into regional clusters and/or small group discussion to discuss and discern the amendments.
- Consider facilitated informal meetings and/or using expert speakers.
- Apply the principles of spiritual discernment (Curtiss or Standish).
- Use mutual invitation or World Café to enhance small group dialogue.
- Give voice to all including minority viewpoints and those with "middle-of-the-road" perspectives.
- Ideas for small group discussions included asking participants (1) "What frightens you if the vote passes? If it fails?" or (2) persons repeating what their neighbor said or (3) passing a talking stick or (4) covenants for persons with differing views to reach out to each other in the future.

Processing Amendments to the Constitution – Page 2

All Amendments or One? While a majority of presbyteries plan to vote on all 8 amendments and 45 ecumenical statements at the same time, several plan to isolate 08-B for separate voting.

- Several participants said that considering all amendments together would honor the entire work of the General Assembly, and create perspective and a non-anxious approach regarding Amendment 08-B.
- Others said that separating consideration of 08-B and possibly other amendments is seen as a way to “warm up” for difficult decisions.
- A participant from Los Ranchos Presbytery reported on a negative vote on Amendment 08-B within the past week.

Debating and Voting. Several comments were made ways to conduct parliamentary discussion, debate and voting on the amendments.

- It is important to continually remind presbytery commissioners that their charge is to *seek the will of Christ*.
- Presbyteries might consider a called special meeting.
- Set limits on debate (# of speakers, time, alternate for& against).
- Make use of prayer and song; pray 1 hour for every 5 min of debate.
- Put debate and vote as last item on meeting agenda.
- Use colored name tags/ballots to assure that only commissioners vote.
- Insist on factual, straight forward presentations.
- Print the ground rules in the meeting docket.
- Make a late announcement of votes.
- Celebrate communion and/or have a meal as a break from debate.
- Have Moderator and Vice Moderator share the gavel over major issues.

Other Thoughts and Comments. Workshop participants had a number of other observations, including the following:

- Presenting transient commissioners (1 meeting only) with complex and challenging issues is a major problem for our denomination.
- Assess the implications for sessions and presbytery committees (COM, CPM, etc) and perform education in this regard.
- Consider discussion of amendments to be an educational process.
- Refer complex and/or controversial issues to a committee.
- The Westminster Catechism is another issue to be considered.
- Concerning Amendment 08-B, participants emphasized that it (1) would impact the ordination of deacons, elders and ministers and (2) would impact a variety of sexuality issues (i.e. homosexuality, cohabitation by senior citizens in view of Medicaid rules, etc.).

Processing Amendments to the Constitution – Page 3

Resources

Workshop participants received the attached listing of resources dealing, the current voting tally (from pcusa.org/generalassembly/vote08.htm) and an analysis prepared by the Association of Stated Clerks.

Suggestion

Workshop participants suggested that the Office of General Assembly be asked to write a letter to congregations inviting all Presbyterians to become involved in dialogue about the amendments and ecumenical Statements.

Workshop Leader - Elder Hitch Learned, Whitewater Valley Presbytery

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be encouraged by each other's faith. **Romans 1:11-12**