

Westminster Presbyterian Church

"LIFTING HIGH THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST"

The Reverend Trevor H. G. Smith, Pastor
The Reverend Leslie S. Dibble, Pastor

August 23, 2011

Dear Members and Friends of the Westminster Presbyterian Church,

Since last we wrote to you in May your pastors and Session have continued to meet and discuss the current state of affairs in our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). As you know the wording in our Book of Order has been changed by removing language that specifically restricted ordination to the offices of pastor, elder and deacon to people who were either married or celibate. You will also remember that the new language neither condones nor approves other kinds of partnerships. In its silence, however, the assumption is that some Presbyteries and some congregations will begin to ordain open and avowed practicing gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual people, as well as heterosexual couples living outside the covenant bond of marriage. Rather than ordaining for the entire denomination, Presbyteries and congregations will effectively ordain only for themselves. Your Session has already voted, as we reported to you in our last letter, to continue to adhere to the historic standard which we believe reflects biblical truth. And we affirm that the biblical truth of the Gospel is both God's desire and our best hope for living life to the full.

We would like now to share with you two important developments along with the actions your Session has decided to take at this time.

Before doing so, however, we want to assure you that it is our intent as a Session *not to let this issue unduly consume Westminster's time, energy, or monies*. God has called us to an important work in this community and we intend to keep that Kingdom-building-work at the center of our corporate life. Further it is our intent to do everything within our power to maintain the peace and unity of Westminster's congregation. We will be tested. Many of us have strong feelings and firm convictions on this issue. As your Session we intend to lead by showing patience and grace and we invite you, the congregation, to follow us in this. How we speak to one another, especially as we differ, will speak loudly to the watching world about the truth of the Gospel we proclaim.

So then, the first development to mention is that Westminster will be represented at a meeting of over 1900 pastors, elders and members from over 800 churches in Minneapolis this week where a number of options will be presented – up to and including the formation of a new Reformed body. This is the largest such gathering of Evangelical churches in our denomination in over a decade. What might result from such a meeting is always hard to predict, but we can be fairly sure that many options will be discussed including but not restricted to staying as a prophetic witness to biblical truth within the PC (USA) on the one hand, to seeking dismissal to other reformed churches that better reflect who we are as evangelicals.

The second development has to do with two court cases that have just been decided by the Permanent Judicial Commission of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This commission is

the equivalent of the United States Supreme Court in church legal matters. In the first case, the ordination of a non-celibate lesbian pastor in California was challenged on the grounds that the new wording in our Book of Order, because it still uses Scripture and our church's Confessions as the standard, has not changed our historic position of ordaining only married men and women or people living a celibate life. The court agreed that this issue needs to be settled and has sent the case back to the lower court, the Synod Permanent Judicial Commission. That court has now been instructed to re-examine the case and render a decision on the confessional and biblical data. In the second court case, a non-celibate gay man in Minnesota was approved for ordination because the challenge to his ordination was based solely on the former wording of the Book of Order. Because that wording has been removed – and no appeal was made to Scripture and the Confessions – the court declared the case moot. It is expected that this man's ordination will proceed.

As we stated to you back in May the Session and your pastors are following these developments very closely. And we believe the time has come to do the following three things. First, the following motion was approved at our August Session meeting, that:

the pastors in conjunction with the nominating committee put together an ad-hoc committee of Session to develop a process that would enable Westminster to come to a God-honoring decision regarding Westminster's future.

Work on putting this committee together will begin immediately. We will ask this committee to report back as soon as is reasonably possible on what they are able to discover regarding every possible option that Westminster might consider. Only then, and only after the congregation is fully informed and has had a chance to express itself fully, will the Session proceed to a decision regarding Westminster's future.

Second, we will hold at least two open meetings of the congregation focusing on biblical and polity issues surrounding where we as a denomination find ourselves. We are looking tentatively at the last Thursday in October and the first in November for these forums. The intent is that anyone interested may come to listen and speak their heart.

Third, we will begin communicating on a regular basis to the congregation where we are in this process so that people will not be in the dark regarding these important issues.

Finally, we are attaching a short article by Dr. Kenneth Bailey, a long-time career missionary of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the middle east and a New Testament scholar, on the global impact of our denomination's recent actions. We are learning more and more what it means that the church in Europe and North America no longer define the shape of the world-wide church. Dr. Bailey's article is as much a lament as anything else and is, in its own way, a prophetic word to us today.

We, your pastors and Session, continue to ask for your prayers, especially that we would be wise and attentive to God's leading in the days ahead. And we remain, as always

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Trevor H.G. Smith & Leslie S. Dibble, Pastors

Dr. Kent Moore, Clerk of Session