

On the Future of the Church

Why are we asking about the future of our church and the denomination we are a part of – the Presbyterian Church (USA) – and why now? And what if I'm new to Presbyterianism and am not yet 'fluent' in its terminology and history – are there things I should know? What follows is intended to help old and new get up to speed on where we are right now. We've even included a short Glossary of Terms at the end. We hope this will prove helpful.

First Issue: declining membership or – “What Presbyterian Church?”

Since 1965 the Presbyterian Church (USA) has gone from a membership of 4.5 million in a nation with fewer than 200 million citizens, to a membership today of just under 2 million when the national population is over 300 million. As a denomination we have lost members in every single calendar year. In no year between 1965 and today did our membership rise.

However, the decline can actually be traced further back than 1965. Prior to 1928 every Session was required to submit answers to a questionnaire that asked these two questions: 1) “What are you doing to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” and 2) “What are you doing to minister to the community beyond your walls?” After 1928 Sessions were no longer required to answer those questions. Dr. James Singleton has traced the actual decline in our growth as a denomination to that 1928 date. When we no longer asked the questions, churches no longer focused on the dual tasks of evangelism and social justice. (To hear Dr. Singleton's presentation go to <http://vimeo.com/28987328>)

But the situation is potentially even more dire than these simple statistics suggest. If you examine the demographics of the PC (USA) you discover that we have twice as many 'Builder' generation members (people over the age of 66) than we do 'Baby Boomers' (born between 1946 and 1964). In other words, the oldest generation in our church will be replaced by a group half its size. Of even greater concern, however, is that the generation after the 'Baby Boomers' is largely absent altogether. So, when the 'Baby Boomers' go to their reward, there will be even fewer Presbyterians around to replace them!

This is not encouraging. And what is happening among Presbyterians is happening among all mainline churches.

Second Issue: a perceived shift in orthodoxy, or ‘You believe what?’

As far back as 1967 – or 1929 if you want to go into the split that occurred among the faculty at Princeton Theological Seminary when G. Gresham Machen led a group of conservative scholars to form Westminster Theological Seminary – Presbyterians holding to an historic, orthodox and evangelical understanding of the Christian faith have objected to a perceived shift in theological orthodoxy within the Presbyterian Church.

In 1967 the former northern branch of Presbyterians adopted the Confession of 1967. This was momentous in that it replaced the Westminster Confession of Faith as our sole confessional standard. To ease the blow to 'traditionalists' a number of other reformed confessions and creeds were added to our Book of Confessions. But the perception was still that we were heading down a slippery slope.

It is probably more accurate to say however, with 40 years of hindsight, that the Confession of 1967 brought some new language into the church that was music to the ears of some but dissonant to others. However, it might also be fair to say that as Presbyterians became comfortable within American society – sending their children to schools and universities that no longer held to historic biblical positions (even those colleges founded by Presbyterians) zeal for the gospel began to wane. The tell-tale sign was seen first in our dwindling support for overseas missions. In the 1950s our denomination was sending out close to 1,500 foreign missionaries; today we have fewer than 200 on the field overseas.

Second, further erosion can be seen in the fact that many Presbyterians in the pew no longer believe what we say we believe in our confessions – including the Confession of 1967. Only 40% of Presbyterians believe that the Bible is accurate in all it intends to teach; some 70% believe that salvation is attainable by good works (there goes the Reformation!); astoundingly, just 45% believe Jesus was sinless, and almost a quarter of all Presbyterians do not today believe that God is all-powerful.

Third Issue: a perceived deterioration in our ethics, or **'It's OK to do what?'**

While the issue of homosexual practice has been front and center for many in recent years, the fact is that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has been tracking closely with American ethical mores for a very long time.

The former southern Presbyterian Church acquiesced in legal segregation for over a hundred years. The former northern branch of the church began in the 1970s to turn a sympathetic eye towards adultery and extra-marital sexual relations under certain conditions (e.g. the incapacity of a spouse to engage in intimate relations because of a permanent disability).

And perhaps most damaging of all is Presbyterianism's almost total co-optation by American culture on the issue of abortion. Only in the last 10 years and thanks to the monumental efforts of two women, Dr. Elizabeth Achtemeier and Mrs. Terry Schlossberg, has our denomination adopted a theological position that honors life from conception on – even if we as a church have been unwilling to follow our own theology in our social policy statements. We are, in fact, in the rather odd position of saying that all life, born and unborn, is sacred in God's eyes but that it is still OK to kill the unborn ones.

However today the cause of greatest concern among Presbyterians across the country is the recent removal of language from our Constitution that read:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament. (emphasis added)

As a result one open and avowed, practicing homosexual man has been ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament by the Twin Cities Presbytery. It is assumed that other men and women will be ordained as elders, deacons, and ministers in the days to come.

It is absolutely critical here to say that simply being a homosexual man or woman never did keep a person from being ordained. If in faithful submission to Jesus Christ's lordship they chose the way of celibacy then ordination was open to them just as it would be to a man or woman of a heterosexual orientation who was not married. Practice, not orientation, has always been the issue. And whether heterosexual or homosexual the same standard applied – celibacy in singleness or marriage within the covenant of bond of a man and woman before God.

So, go back to the question of the future of the church and Westminster

Presbyterians love to do all things 'decently and in order.' If a person is a Presbyterian they probably don't have it in their DNA to make abrupt, quick decisions. Instead, they like to ponder. And if it's possible to form a committee to study something, they will. It's who we are!

We believe there are lots of advantages to this slow and careful approach.

However, there can come a time when looking honestly and openly at circumstances within the Presbyterian Church (USA) we begin to sense that we are ships passing in the night. Are we at that point now? Some believe so, others believe not. Confusing the situation for us is the fact that Westminster is such a healthy congregation – and part of that health is our diversity within an orthodox biblical and theological framework.

Yet, speaking frankly, it does appear that many of Westminster's passions are no longer those of our denomination's. However, because we still hold a number of things in common and there are areas of ministry that we want to continue sharing in – like supporting missionaries we have supported for over 30 years whose ministries we believe in – we have chosen at this point in time to both pray and engage in careful study.

We want to be a church '*reformed and constantly reforming under the authority of Scripture*'. As a result we are naturally suspicious of a denomination that appears to be following rather than challenging culture. We take our stand on the truth of God's Word that has stood the tests of time in

preference to the tyranny of the latest cultural movement. We will apply our slow, Presbyterian ways to all such ideas because we remember our history. Movements come and go, but God's Word stands forever.

Where are we right now?

Westminster continues to be a strong, diverse, and caring community. Our first priority is that this not change.

Further, the pastors and Session of Westminster have affirmed our commitment as a congregation to the historic, orthodox standards of Presbyterianism formerly embedded within our Constitution. We affirm with Scripture the high standard for those called to the several offices of leadership in the church. These standards are covenant marriage between a man and a woman, or celibacy. At the same time we recognize and seek to be agents of compassion and healing for all people struggling to meet this high standard.

In the Presbyterian system it is the Session's responsibility to establish such standards. The consciences of individual members are not bound by such decisions, but the church in its operations is. At the same time the Session has also said 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.

In the mean time, regarding our relationship with the PC (USA) we will continue to slowly and deliberately seek God's direction for us. We will do so openly and transparently.

Towards that end the Session has appointed a Task Force on the Future of the Church to look at all options. Already several things have happened or are about to happen.

- We were represented at The Gathering in Minneapolis this past August where some 2000 Presbyterians from over 800 congregations and all 50 states came together to worship, pray, and consider together the state of the Church. This meeting was hosted by a new group called *The Fellowship of Presbyterians* whose web site (<http://www.fellowship-pres.org/> or <http://vimeo.com/28987328>) is well worth spending some time perusing.
- We have scheduled two *Let's Talk* evenings (Thursday, October 27 and Tuesday, November 8) when we will discuss first, options open to congregations within the PC (USA) right now; and second, what the Bible has to say about sexual ethics.
- Other things we hope to do and will ask our Task Force to take the lead on are:

- Consider attending a gathering in Orlando, Florida to observe the formation of a ‘New Reformed Body’
- Investigate all possible ways of staying related to the PC (USA): as a union church ... within a distinct, evangelical Presbytery ... as a continuing congregation within the denomination bearing witness to the positions we have always held ... other
- Investigate all other possible options: gracious separation to another reformed Church body ... dismissal to some other denomination ... other

This is not the first time Presbyterians have been in conflict – some would even say turmoil.

Presbyterians have gone through several splits and re-unifications over the years. In the 18th century there was a split over ‘revivalism’, in the 19th century there was a split over slavery, and in the 20th century there was a split over the ordination of women (the Presbyterian Church of America leaving on that count) and a general perception of a shift from historic, orthodox faith (the Evangelical Presbyterian Church left over this issue).

What to expect in the days ahead ...

We will make every effort to keep the congregation informed and up to date on what we learn. If you have a question you think needs to be asked – give it to the Task Force (Dean Warren and Stuart Couch, co-chairs). If you have an opinion – give it to the Session. And in all things pray that God would grant us wisdom and discernment.

Glossary

Denomination – this term refers to different branches of Protestant churches around the world. The largest of these are the Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian and Anglican (or Episcopalian). We here at Westminster happen to be part of the Presbyterian Church (USA). At their best, denominations provide the following for the local congregations: theological education for the training of pastors (seminaries), a network or pool to recruit staff, communal accountability, unified governance, sharing of best practices, collaborative global missions, connectional opportunities among churches, curriculum for Sunday School classes, benefits plans for pastoral staff, and aid for spurring local mission. As with all families we do not always serve one another at our best in which case our affiliation can produce stress and strain.

Session – the Session is made up of ‘active elders’ who serve three year terms. The Session is responsible for the spiritual life of the congregation, the programs we use, and the budget which they adopt on behalf of the congregation. The Session is where all important policy decisions are made.

Presbytery – this is the ‘regional’ group of Presbyterian churches and act as a ‘corporate Bishop’ for the church, responsible for overseeing the training and ordination of new pastors, accepting or rejecting

new pastors moving to a church within its bounds, and disciplining pastors, church officers or churches who fail to comply with their ordination vows. The Presbytery also engages on larger scale ministry than any particular church is capable of.

General Assembly – this body meets every other year and serves as the ‘legislative’ branch of the church in the sense that any changes to our Constitution must go through the committees of the General Assembly.

Constitution – our church operates under a Constitution that is made up of two books, the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. The Book of Order is then divided into three sections, one having to do with worship, a second with matters of discipline, and the third with governance. The Constitution answers the question, “What do Presbyterians believe and how do they govern themselves?”

Overture – whenever a congregation or Presbytery wants to change something in our Constitution they send an ‘overture’, a request for a specific change to the Constitution that must go through a number of votes to adopt or reject it before becoming church law.

The Gathering – this was a meeting held in Minneapolis in August of 2011 where over 800 local congregations were represented by over 1,800 attendees. The overwhelming majority were there out of a deep concern for the future of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in light of its decision to begin ordaining open and avowed, practicing homosexual people. The meeting was sponsored by The Fellowship of Presbyterians. Most of the plenary talks were recorded and may be viewed by going to the web site of The Fellowship, given below.

The Fellowship of Presbyterians – begun by the pastors of 7 of our largest and healthiest evangelical Presbyterian congregations in the country, this organization is more of a ‘movement’ than an organization in that it seeks to foster conversation around a missional agenda that by definition seeks to both bring people into a living faith with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and be a ‘clearing house’ for ways congregations can most effectively reach out into their communities in works of justice and mercy to demonstrate the reality of Christ’s love for all. (<http://www.fellowship-pres.org/>)

New Reformed Body – so new as to not even have a name yet, this is a new legal entity – yet still more a movement than an organization – that might possibly serve as a place for evangelical churches to identify (either as an ‘affiliate’ member, a full-fledged member) who are passionate about wanting to put their time, energy and money into evangelism and social action. This group will be officially formed at a meeting in Orlando, Florida in January of 2012.