

WHAT'S THE FUTURE OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)?

BY LESLIE SCANLON, *Outlook* national reporter

When the 2016 General Assembly gathers in Portland June 18-25, commissioners will look inward at how the PC(USA) should configure itself in a time of both declining resources and great opportunity and at what its witness should be out in the world. The assembly's theme: "The Hope in Our Calling," from Ephesians 1:18.

The 222nd General Assembly, with 594 commissioners and 198 advisory delegates, will elect new leadership for the PC(USA), including a new stated clerk for the first time in eight years. What's notable is what's *not* leading the agenda: not the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers, nor same-sex marriages, nor divestment in certain companies doing business in Israel-Palestine, issues on which the PC(USA) took momentous votes in 2012 and 2014. Here's some of what this assembly will take on.

STATED CLERK ELECTION. J. Herbert Nelson, a teaching elder and director of the PC(USA)'s Office of Public Witness in Washington D.C., is the official nominee — chosen by the Stated Clerk Nomination Committee from a pool of 13 candidates to succeed Gradye Parsons, who is retiring. David M. Baker, a teaching elder and stated clerk and director of communications of the Presbytery of Tampa Bay, is challenging Nelson's nomination. The stated clerk is the PC(USA)'s top ecclesiastical officer, in charge of ecumenical relations and constitutional interpretation.

LEADERSHIP. Two teams of candidates are standing for co-moderators of the assembly: T. Denise Anderson of the Washington D.C. area with Jan Edmiston of Chicago, both teaching elders; and Adan Mairena, a teaching elder from Philadelphia, with David P. Parker, a lawyer and ruling elder from Statesville, North Carolina. Because of a rules change, the assembly now can elect co-moderators who will serve together as a team.

THE WAY FORWARD. An assembly committee bearing this name will consider more than a dozen items of business related to the future of the PC(USA) — including proposals regarding a possible merger of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly. The committee will consider feedback from a series of listening sessions that Heath Rada, moderator of the 2014 General Assembly, conducted this spring, along with

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the responses more than 3,400 Presbyterians gave last fall in response to questions posed online about church identity.

Among the questions: With PC(USA) membership dropping — down 741,000 over the last 10 years — and congregations and mid councils facing financial pressure, what’s the role of the national church structure? What do Presbyterians value about the PC(USA), and what needs to change?

FOSSIL FUELS. The Mission Responsibility Through Investment committee is not recommending that the PC(USA) divest its holdings from fossil fuel companies — the 200 publicly traded oil and gas companies from the Carbon Underground list. The assembly also will consider, however, overtures both for and against fossil fuel divestment — meaning commissioners will certainly discuss what responsibility people of faith have to mitigate climate change.

APOLOGIZE? A controversial overture from the Presbytery of New York City has provoked debate about how to bring healing and reconciliation to a denomination that fought fiercely for decades about ordaining gays and lesbians and performing same-sex marriages. The overture asks the assembly to admit that “the PC(USA) has been wrong in the way it has treated the LGBTQ/Q community” and to apologize “as an act of forgiveness, healing, mercy and reconciliation.”

Some say that’s needed, while others contend it would further alienate evangelicals who have so far opted to stay in the denomination.

BELHAR. The assembly will vote on adding the Belhar Confession from South Africa — focused on justice and reconciliation — to the PC(USA)’s Book of Confessions. This would be the final step needed for approval.

MIDDLE EAST. The assembly will consider a report from the Study Team on Prospects for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine — which concludes that the door to a viable Palestinian state is “closing rapidly, if it is still open at all,” but says the PC(USA) should continue to support possibilities that align with its values, including but not limited to a two-state solution and a Jerusalem where Jews, Muslims and Christians have access to sites they consider holy.

MID COUNCILS. The 2014 General Assembly instructed the synods to work together to present to the 2016 assembly a plan for reconfiguring the synod boundaries to reduce the number of synods from the current 16 to between 10 and 12. The synods are asking the assembly to rescind that directive, saying they already collaborate in creative ways. ●

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