OB E U R G E S D I V E S T M E N T IN FOSSIL-FUEL COMPANIES

By Mike Ferguson
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – A recommendation that all agencies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) stop investing directly in fossil-fuel companies was approved Monday by the Immigration and Environmental Issues Committee of the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

By a 31-25 vote, the committee recommended that the full assembly approve the overture when it is presented later this week. However, as with all other GA committee action, the recommendation does not become final until the committee submits its report.

The overture from the Presbytery of San Francisco, with the concurrence of 29 other presbyteries, calls on the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation to ensure that within three years, none of their assets are invested in fossil-fuel companies.

PC(USA) IMMIGRATION ADVOCATES MARK WORLD REFUGEE DAY LUNCHEON INCLUDES TRIBUTE TO THE LATE REV. KELLY ALLEN

By Jerry Van Marter
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – A roomful of Presbyterians paid a fitting and moving tribute to the late Kelly Allen, a San Antonio pastor and human-rights advocate, while commemorating World Refugee Day on Monday during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Allen, who was to have been the event’s keynote speaker, died unexpectedly on June 5.

Two years ago, in response to the flood of Central American refugees fleeing violence in their home countries, Allen co-founded the Interfaith Welcome Coalition in San Antonio, Texas, and worked tirelessly until her death to extend hospitality to refugees and advocate for humane treatment of refugees in the United States.

A video honoring Allen was shown during the World Refugee Day Luncheon – which was co-sponsored by the Office of Immigration Issues in the Office of the General Assembly and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, an office of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. In it Allen said, “I am proud of a denomination that is active for just and humane immigration.”

In Allen’s stead, General Assembly Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons and Alison Harrington, the pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, a leader in the new sanctuary movement, outlined the PC(USA)’s efforts to support immigration reform and better treatment of the 75 million refugees...
COMMITTEE VOTES TO APPROVE REPORT ON TWO-STATE SOLUTION FOR ISRAEL/PALESTINE
URGES SUPPORT FOR CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN MIDDLE EAST

By Eva Stimson
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – After several hours of debate Monday, the 222nd General Assembly (2016) Committee on Middle East Issues recommended approval of a lengthy report re-evaluating the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s historic support of a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine.

However, the recommendation of approval of the report from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy came with an added comment affirming a preference for a two-state solution and a desire to stay in conversation with partners in Israel who are working for peace.

The document, “Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace,” says the PC(USA) “should advance those efforts that best accord with its values . . . including but not limited to that of two sovereign states—Israel and Palestine.” It passed 58-18, and will be taken up by the full assembly later this week.

The committee voted down a substitute motion that would have referred the paper to the Presbyterian Mission Agency for further study and editing, to be brought back to the 223rd General Assembly (2018). Also rejected was an amendment that would have stated unequivocally that approval of the report does not mean the PC(USA) is aligned with the so-called Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

The committee approved, unanimously and without debate, an overture urging continuing support for the people of the Middle East. It calls for actions to encourage Christian presence, counter religious radicalism, promote economic development and promote long-term stability in the region.


Overture advocate Katherine Cunningham, of Palisades Presbytery, told the committee that the number of Palestinian children in military detention is the highest it has been since 2008.

Another overture advocate, Nahida Gordon, of the Synod of the Covenant, described a typical scenario of child detention: Israeli soldiers knock on a family’s front door in the middle of the night. They take pictures of each child and ask them, “Have you thrown any stones?” Later they come again in the middle of the night and detain the children using blindfolds and tying their hands behind their backs. The children are separated from their parents for months and denied due process. Sometimes their confessions are coerced.

Time permitted only 10 of the 48 people who signed up to speak during the open hearing on this overture. Opponents said both Israeli and Palestinian children suffer from bombings and violence. Several speakers cited the increasing number of attacks on Israelis by Palestinian children under 18.

In response to these concerns, the committee amended the overture, adding the following recommendation: “Call on the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and Israel to denounce and cease incitement of violence against children or at the hands of children.”

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Create a Lasting Tribute

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PORTLAND – After an hour-long education session and nearly two hours of debate, the Assembly Committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations overwhelmingly recommended Monday that the full 222nd General Assembly (2016) take the final step to include the Confession of Belhar in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The process for amending the Book of Confessions is significantly more involved than amending the Book of Order. It begins with a proposal to amend the Book of Confessions, which must be approved by a General Assembly. A special committee is appointed to study the proposed change or addition. The study committee’s findings are then reported to the next General Assembly, which considers whether to recommend it to presbyteries for inclusion.

If it is sent for a vote of presbyteries, it must be approved by at least two-thirds of them. The proposal then returns to the General Assembly for a third time, where it must be approved again and enacted.

This is the PC(USA)’s second attempt to adopt the Belhar Confession, which comes from the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa. The previous effort failed in 2010 when the Confession was approved by a majority of the presbyteries, but failed to reach the two-thirds threshold.

The second process began at the 220th General Assembly (2012), then was sent to presbyteries after the 221st General Assembly (2014), receiving 84 percent approval.

The committee vote to recommend approval passed 57-3 with one abstention. The recommendation now heads to the full assembly for vote later this week.

Matilde Moros, co-moderator of the Special Committee on the Confession of Belhar, outlined its three goals: unity, reconciliation and justice.

• Unity (Articles 1&2) as a gift and obligation that “must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin, which Christ has already conquered.”
• Reconciliation (Article 3) rejects any doctrine that “sanctions in the name of the gospel … the forced separation on the grounds of race and color.”
• Justice (Articles 4&5) declares that God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged.

Adopted by the DRMC in South Africa in September 1986, the document is considered a benchmark in Reformed theology for its repudiation of division based on race and class.

Many Presbyterians consider the adoption of Belhar a kairos moment in which the church recognizes that it is once again facing a critical juncture in its history. A letter from the PC(USA) accompanying the study guide on the confession says, “We believe that the Confession of Belhar, a profound statement on unity, reconciliation and justice in the church, comes to us as a word from God for this particular time and place for the PC(USA).”

Dana Wilmot of Kiskiminetas Presbytery in western Pennsylvania suggested that a comment be added to the committee’s approval of the motion: “Out of respect for the origin of the confession, it shall serve as a guide for racial justice and not for issues of human sexuality.”

After much debate, including a secondary objection to theological language in the confession, the motion to add the comment failed by voice vote.

Alonzo Johnson, mission associate for the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, said Belhar “adds a voice from the Global South to the PC(USA) Book of Confessions.”

“America’s most original sin is racism,” Johnson said. “It manifests itself in that we are separate. How do we understand this as a denomination that is 94 percent white? How do we understand this in light of [Charleston shooter] Dylan Roof, who came from this culture of hate?”
NEW APP HELPS MEASURE PARTICIPATION

There is a new tool for measuring participation in General Assembly committees. The Process Observation Web Application (POWA) is in its initial roll out at GA222. Process Observation is measuring who participated, when, and if there are changes when a committee shifts its practice. The GACOR (General Assembly Committee on Representation) began experimenting in 2012 to find ways to measure participation in assembly committees. This new app allows more observers to take part and makes process observation more accessible.

PC(USA) IMMIGRATION ADVOCATES MARK WORLD REFUGEE DAY

Continued from page 1

worldwide.

Harrington decried the U.S. government’s decision two years ago to greatly expand detention-center capacity (from 85 beds to 3,000) in the midst of a flood of more than 100,000 Central Americans across the U.S.-Mexico border. “There is much to do, and we have to do it together,” she said.

Parsons agreed, noting that children as young as 3 years old were rushed into deportation hearings without legal representation. “We can do better,” he said.

(For more information about these efforts, visit www.pcusa.org/familydetention.)

Earlier, PDA’s Susan Krehbiel and OGA’s immigration attorney, Teresa Waggener, introduced Som Nath Subedi, a former refugee from Bhutan – a tiny country between China and India – who told of being forcibly removed from his country by the Chinese government.

“My family lived in a bamboo hut in a refugee camp in Nepal for 20 years, until I was able to come to the United States in 2008 with ten dollars in my pocket and my possessions in a plastic bag,” Subedi said, adding that he was soon confronted with a painful reality: “If I got a job I would be accused of taking it away from an ‘American,’ and if I didn’t get a job I would be accused of being a welfare freeloader.”

Subedi worked a series of minimum-wage jobs while looking for ways to serve other refugees and “give back to the city of Portland.” In 2010, he created “Parks for New Portlanders” – a city agency that provides recreational and other social activities for Portland’s immigrant communities. Subedi still manages the program.
PORTLAND – The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s efforts against human trafficking in the nation and in the world were highlighted Monday by a panel assembled by the denomination’s Human Trafficking Roundtable.

The roundtable came into existence after the church had adopted policies against human trafficking, beginning in 2006, and after its ongoing partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers raised awareness of domestic labor trafficking, said Ryan Smith of the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations.

More than 100 people gathered to hear Bethany Karbowski, Equal Exchange interfaith and community program coordinator; Doug Tilton, mission co-worker in South Africa and regional liaison for Southern Africa and Madagascar; and Jill Bolander Cohen, founder of the Greater Orlando Human Trafficking Task Force.

Karbowski said Equal Exchange is trying to eliminate trafficking by attacking its causes. “Poverty is one of the root causes of trafficking,” she said. “When there aren’t better alternatives for people in rural areas, human trafficking increases – especially in agricultural areas … Having a stable price allows farmers to stay on their land, allows for better education opportunities and a better quality of life to keep families together.”

Tilton described the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s efforts, including the addition of Cathy Chang, a new mission co-worker for Southeast Asia, who will work together with the United Church of Christ in the Philippines to oppose exploitation of vulnerable people. In Africa, he said, the PC(USA) has two co-workers advancing the interests of women and children: Christi Boyd in the Congo and Janet Guyer in Malawi.

Bolander Cohen joined the fight against human trafficking...
SPEAKER AT INTERCULTURAL LUNCHEON TELLS DINERS TO LEAVE MOM’S KITCHEN AND ENCOUNTER THE WORLD

By Mike Ferguson
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – The Bantu people of Cameroon have a proverb: Those who never visit think mother is the only cook.

“That implies that people who never leave their familiar culture have difficulty connecting with a culture other than their own,” Victor Aloyo Jr., director of multicultural relations at Princeton Theological Seminary, told about 80 people at the Presbyterian Intercultural Luncheon on Monday.

Aloyo said Presbyterians would be wise to agree with Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf, who wrote, “I cannot be completely me unless I know the complete you.” That can take time and effort, he acknowledged, but Christians’ clear call is to walk with one another.

The luncheon, part of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was co-sponsored by the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s Office of Intercultural Ministries and the Presbyterian Intercultural Network to celebrate intercultural ministries, renew commitments to racial justice, and join in a hopeful vision that inspires, equips and connects Presbyterians for the church’s changing landscape.

Aloyo said his ministry was built on the foundation of a joint walk. He said his first call was at a church in East Brooklyn, New York, that was riddled with BB pellets and used duct tape to hold its stained glass together.

“You could smell the years of bird droppings,” he recalled. “I could spiritualize this and say they were doves, but they were New York City-born and -bred pigeons, who would fly at you for no reason.”

After accepting an invitation from its pastor nominating committee, he said, he learned later that its 12 members were the entire congregation.

“They told me, ‘Victor, we don’t want you to come here with solutions. We want you to come and to walk with us,’” Aloyo said. “They allowed me to realize the nature of the call to ministry – to walk with those who find themselves without a voice, who had thought themselves oppressed but had later found a new understanding in Christ.”

He recalled one Sunday service when a mother with two children described their arduous, months-long trek from India through South America to New York. The three were anxiously waiting for word from their husband and father, who’d come by a different, even more difficult route.

“By the grace of God, during her testimony and through her tears, in walks the husband and father,” Aloyo said. “The woman stopped talking. She and her husband ran to each other and embraced for about 10 minutes. The entire congregation “was broken with tears,” he said, adding, “This moment had a huge impact.”

“My friends, I don’t want to be part of that legacy where we ostracize people,” he said. “Once we realize the plethora of experiences in our midst, imagine the power of witness in the church!”

“I have a story to share,” he concluded. “Don’t you? It’s time to break the mold and rise up with a prophetic voice, because I know and I’m assured that as we go beyond mother’s kitchen, there is much more to experience.”
MID-COUNCIL LEADERS DISCUSS BEST WAYS OF HELPING CHURCHES WITH NEW-PASTOR SEARCHES

By Erin Cox-Holmes
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Recognizing that helping congregations find new pastors is one of the most important responsibilities they face, mid-council leaders in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), gathered during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to talk about the best ways to accomplish that task.

“The health of pastoral relationships starts with the work we do with congregations during leadership transitions,” said Sara Dingman, transitional executive for the Synod of Lincoln Trails.

She joined three other mid-council executives on a panel hosted by SanDawna Ashley, manager of Call Process Support for the Office of the General Assembly.

“A basis of our connectional system is that every call is a covenant between the congregation, the pastor, and the presbytery,” said Susan McGhee, executive presbyter for Ohio Valley Presbytery.

The other two panel members were Jackie Taylor, associate executive presbyter for New Castle Presbytery, and Warner Durnell, executive presbyter for Middle Tennessee Presbytery.

Discussing the leadership qualities of pastoral candidates that are most important, Dingman said: “I look for shining eyes and energy. Capacity for leadership more than experience. Cultural humility.”

Durnell said he looks for candidates who are risk-takers and are entrepreneurial.

Adaptability, paired with passion and enthusiasm, is important to Taylor. “I’m looking for someone with zing, not someone who apologizes for looking for a position,” she said.

All agreed that, in assessing the “fit” between the potential pastor and the position, it is essential to encourage members of search committees to listen deeply to each other and encourage candidates to join them in frank conversations.

Durnell pointed out that it is the responsibility of the presbytery to conduct thorough reference and background checks, but the results are not always welcome. “Sometimes these conversations

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MID-COUNCIL LEADERS DISCUSS BEST WAYS OF HELPING CHURCHES WITH NEW-PASTOR SEARCHES

Continued from page 7

get rather dicey,” he said, “but it is our job to be up-front and make sure everything is on the table.”

Taylor said she relies on Committee on Ministry liaisons to build relationships of trust with search committees.

Difficulty in a previous pastorate is not necessarily a deal-breaker, McGhee said: What really matters is what a candidate has learned and how her leadership capacities have grown. When all the blame is on the system or something else, that is a huge red flag.”

Members of the panel also talked about how mid-councils can help sustain healthy pastoral relationships, emphasizing support and comradeship. “I don’t need to tell you that ministry is lonely,” Dingman said.

Financial counseling is often a critical need, and it can be arranged or provided by a mid-council leader or oversight committee. “Good support means calls that are healthier,” Taylor said.

“Our work supporting pastors and congregations sometimes leaves them feeling like there are so many hoops to jump through,” McGhee said, “but remember how generative it can be.”

“We’re a connectional system,” Dingman pointed out, adding, “It’s a blessing, not a curse.”

PANEL VOTES TO APPROVE REPORT ON TWO-STATE SOLUTION FOR ISRAEL/PALESTINE

Continued from page 2

The day’s business session began on a positive note, with a report on the Presbyterian Foundation's positive investments in Israel/Palestine. Foundation President and CEO Tom Taylor said a Transformational Investment Program was developed as directed by the 2012 General Assembly.

Taylor said the Foundation is investing in five areas:

1. A solar energy facility outside Jericho
2. Microfinance through a bank in Ramallah that provides low-interest loans to entrepreneurs, 76 percent of them women
3. New Generation Technologies, a firm in Nazareth
4. An effort to expand tourism at the site of Jesus’ baptism in Jordan
5. Education, through support of Dar Al-Kalima College in Bethlehem

Taylor said these investments are advancing peace and making a difference in the region. “This is probably the most meaningful work I’ve done in my entire life,” he said. “It really makes me proud to be Presbyterian.”

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Tuesday, June 21, 7:00–8:30 p.m. Downtown Hilton.
HUMAN TRAFFICKING ROUNDTABLE SPEAKERS URGE PC(USA) TO WAGE WAR ON MODERN SLAVERY
Continued from page 5

after taking a role in justice and peace advocacy with Presbyterian Women of Central Florida in 2010. She said attending Ecumenical Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C., led to her becoming an activist when she learned that Florida’s Interstate 4 corridor is one of the most heavily trafficked areas in the country.

“I engaged the church by educating myself about human trafficking,” she said. “… The Human Trafficking Roundtable has great resources for the church.”

Cohen, the founder of the LifeBoat project and of the group Awareness Combats Trafficking, said: “It’s never too late to get involved. I’m so proud of the work the PC(USA) does and the support we’ve received.”

In her closing remarks, Karbowski said, “Many people would do the right thing if they had the right information; education is really important.” To that end, she suggested the books “Everyday Justice” by Julie Clawson and “The True Cost of Low Prices” by Vincent Gallagher.

“This is a global issue,” Tilton said. “From Global Ministries’ perspective, it’s always good to recall the power of prayer. Remember those who are affected or involved in trafficking, and especially partners working to combat trafficking in their areas.”

Cohen spoke about the power of collaboration, urging attendees to partner with knowledgeable people. “Get involved on the presbytery level and you will be amazed at where God will lead you and bring awareness,” she said. “If you see something, say something. Someone’s life may depend on it.”

The Human Trafficking Roundtable is a multi-agency effort of the PC(USA), comprising representatives from the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, the Presbyterian Hunger Program, the Presbyterian Ministry at the UN, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, the Office of Public Witness, World Mission, Presbyterian Women, Presbyterian Men and the Office of the General Assembly Office of Immigration.

Ann Hayman, a Presbyterian pastor who is program director of the Mary Magdalene Project, announced that the Social Justice Issues Committee of the 222nd General Assembly (2016) approved the report “Human Trafficking and Human Rights” minutes before the luncheon began.

The 40-page report includes current statistics about trafficking and points out that human trafficking and modern-day slavery have become lucrative businesses. “We’ve been good [about] understanding women and children,” she said, “but we also need to attend to men in mining, construction and agriculture, living at a subsistence existence.”

Participants at the Young Adult Ice Cream Social. Photo: Michael Whitman

JUSTICE TAKES CENTER STAGE IN PORTLAND

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- Presbyterian Peacemaking Program
- Presbyterian Health, Education and Welfare Association (PHEWA)
- Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI)

SPIRIT OF GA VIDEOS ON VIMEO

The special Spirit of GA video series being shown in plenary at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also is available online. The five videos, airing June 18, 19, 22, 23, and 24, can be viewed at vimeo.com/pcusaoga.

The videos take up the themes of leadership, eco-justice, discernment, social justice and identity. They are being produced by Randy Hobson and Brelin Tilford through the General Assembly Communications Center.
OVERTURE URGES DIVESTMENT IN FOSSIL-FUEL COMPANIES
Continued from page 1

are invested in fossil-fuel companies.
It calls for development of fossil-fuel-free investment options for fund participants, and for investing in securities of companies in the fields of renewable energy and energy efficiency.

It also calls upon church agencies to provide instructional materials to help Presbyterians at all levels – local, regional and national – to take action to slow climate change.

The committee considered and rejected a number of substitute motions before taking up the divestment overture. It heard from dozens of people on both sides of the issue.

Stuart Ours, who identified himself as an investor from Newton Presbytery, said the efforts of the denomination’s Mission Responsibility Through Investments “has made good efforts” to pressure corporations to change some of their practices “but to no avail.”

“For the sake of the good earth and pastors’ pensions,” he said, “we must divest with all deliberate speed.”

Others recommended a go-slow or selective-divestment approach.

“We need to identify those companies who are not complying, and be prepared to divest from them,” said Mike Cole, general presbyter of the Presbytery of New Covenant.

Derek Browning of the Church of Scotland said: “Your mother church is waiting for you to join us” [in divesting]. Mother Nature is telling us something, too.”

Ron Sutto, general presbyter at the Presbytery of South Louisiana, argued that the church “must raise its pastoral voice and speak to those most affected by divestment.”

“You guys are killing me,” said committee member David Green of the Presbytery of the New Covenant, who lives in a region of the country – the greater Houston area – where millions of people make their living in fossil-fuel and related industries. “Please, please, please help me have something that says to them they have a place in the PC(USA).”

Nathan Lamb of the Des Moines Presbytery said the overture “sends a powerful statement, especially to our youth. This motion refers to the act of doing it right now.”

Doug Early of Seattle Presbytery said he favors the overture because “in my liberal city, it’s an evangelistic tool.”

Committee Moderator Peter Hulac of Denver Presbytery said that although the committee struggled for hours with “this serious overture, it was a creative struggle that I think got us where we needed to go.” He added, “It was good to know that the minority viewpoint was honored.”

Well into the evening, the committee considered overtures from the Presbytery of New Covenant affirming the denomination’s faithful response to climate change and its call to repent for Presbyterians’ “inadequate stewardship of God’s creation.”

Those overtures were approved with amendments.

Committee members decided that the MRTI report on divestment was answered by its action on this related overture.

The committee also approved, by a vote of 57-2, an overture from the Presbytery of Santa Fe urging the church to communicate its gratitude to Pope Francis I for his Encyclical, “Laudato Si’, mi’ Signore,” (“Praise be to you, my Lord”) which addresses the world’s ecological crisis. The overture also recommends that Presbyterians study the document.
NATIONAL BLACK PRESBYTERIAN CAUCUS
SPEAKER ENVISIONS A MORE INCLUSIVE PC(USA)

By Bob Sloan
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – As the National Black Presbyterian Caucus prepares for its 50th year, President David L. Wallace said Monday that he expects it to continue to be a voice drawing attention to social-justice issues, equality, and inclusion in the church and in society.

“God wants us to dispel the hellish notion that we should not love everybody and work to reconcile differences within the family,” Wallace said during the caucus’ dinner at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Wallace, a retired dean of Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary in Atlanta, said he hopes to advocate for the growth, development and enhancement of black congregations, with a special emphasis on changing the church culture to build intergenerational congregations including all age groups in the life of the church.

Wallace said one of the major obstacles the church faces is the refusal of some members to support inclusion. He said the differences we allow to divide us are both visible and invisible.

“They are afraid of diversity,” he said. “They fear that if we do come together despite all these differences, the fires of fear, suspicion and conflict will consume us.”

Wallace said the barriers that separate us – racial, social, gender, economical, physical and cultural – are more powerful than ever. He cited recent controversy over gender identity and fear of the Muslim faith as prominent examples.

He closed his remarks by citing a need for all people to embrace ethno-relativism, which he said “is the belief that God is inclusive of everybody. God loves all people, all races and colors.”

During the event, Arlene Gordon and Lonnie Oliver were recognized for “their tireless work in advancing the efforts of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus.”
GA PROCEDURES COMMITTEE VOTES DOWN TIME CHANGE IN MODERATOR’S ELECTION

By Erin Cox-Holmes

PORTLAND – Proposals to move the election of General Assembly moderators from the beginning to the end of the biennial meeting and to permit assembly committees to begin meeting electronically before it begins were both rejected Monday by the Committee on General Assembly Procedures of the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

The change in the election schedule was defeated 30-13; the early committee meeting proposal failed 35-6.

A number of committee members expressed concern that holding an election at the end would turn an assembly into a campaign-based meeting and politicize the moderator’s role.

“The concept that I would know someone so well by the end of the week when there are one thousand people here doesn't make sense to me,” said Jeanie Murphy, a teaching elder commissioner from Heartland Presbytery.

The suggestion to create a system to use technology to convene General Assembly committees at least six months prior to the assembly was rejected in part because of doubts that a $2,000 financial implication estimate was realistic.

The committee approved Columbus as the site of the 225th General Assembly (2022) from June 25-July 2, 2022. This followed a discussion on the implications of a later date for Young Adult Advisory Delegates who need to work during the summer, and the possible advantage to parents who might still have children in school earlier. Noting that the financial implications are advantageous for Columbus, the committee voted 43-3 to approve the site.

The committee also:

• Clarified the status of General Assembly committee moderators when they are not also commissioners to the General Assembly.

• Added the moderator of Presbyterian Women to the list of corresponding members to the General Assembly.

• Elected Teaching Elder Beth Hessel to a four-year term as associate stated clerk of the General Assembly.

COMMITTEE APPROVES OVERTURE URGING PC(USA) TO CREATE NON-GEOGRAPHICAL KOREAN PRESBYTERY

By Eva Stimson

PORTLAND – A report recommending efforts to strengthen Korean-American congregations was approved Monday by the General Assembly Committee of Mid Councils.

The committee voted overwhelmingly during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to approve a report submitted by the Task Force for Korean-speaking Congregations, with an amendment to one of the report’s recommendations.

The amendment asks the synods of the western United States (Alaska-Northwest, Pacific, Southern California/Hawaii, Southwest, Rocky Mountain, and Sun) to consider creating a new Korean non-geographic presbytery in the western United States.

Before the vote, Irene Pak Lee, a task force member, told the committee that non-geographic presbyteries would help Korean-speaking Presbyterians feel more empowered and freer to talk about church issues.

Responding to comments that synods in the West probably would not be willing to create a non-geographic presbytery, Conrad Rocha, executive and stated clerk of the Synod of the Southwest, said that if the assembly recommended it, “we would be compelled to have this conversation.”

The committee also approved an amended recommendation in an overture that says “no presbytery shall start ministries within the geographic bounds of other presbyteries and synods without the approval of those councils.”

Heeding advice from the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC), the committee recommended disapproval of a part of the overture that would have eliminated the requirement that a congregation that seeks dismissal to a non-geographic presbytery must be dismissed to one within its own synod or a synod with contiguous boundaries.

In its advice, the ACC said: “Wider distances between congregations and the presbyteries of which they are members increase the potential for isolation of the congregation. It makes more difficult development and maintenance of relationships of accountability and nurture.”
PEACEMAKING COMMITTEE APPROVES
OVERTURES ON KOREA, DR CONGO AND CUBA

By Bob Sloan
General Assembly News

PORTLAND -- On the heels of a resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, a report calling on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to celebrate and strengthen its ecclesial relationship with the Iglesia Presbiteriana-Reformada en Cuba was overwhelmingly recommended for approval Monday by a committee of the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

By a 46-2 vote, the Committee on Peacemaking and International Issues recommended for approval “New Hopes and Realities in Cuban-American Relations: A ‘Nuevo Momento,’” a report from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy that calls the PC(USA) and IPRC “sister churches” and highlights their shared history, faith tradition and participation in ecumenical bodies.

The measure would update a partnership agreement between the PC(USA) and IPRC in light of new hopes and realities and assess new opportunities for mutual mission.

In other action, the committee:

- Approved an overture from the Presbytery of Muskingum Valley calling for the affirming of non-violent means of resistance against human oppression in American society and throughout the world.
- After lengthy debate, the committee approved an overture from the Presbytery of Cayuga-Syracuse that urges the denomination to ask the United States government to acknowledge its role in the killing of nearly 300 Korean civilians near the village of No Gun Ri in July 1950. It also instructs the Stated Clerk to communicate to the president and members of Congress the denomination’s desire that the nation consider compensating the surviving victims and the families of the victims. The committee rejected sections calling for a meeting between surviving U.S. troops involved in the incident and surviving Koreans or relatives of the deceased, as well as the creation of a memorial.
- Approved an overture from the Presbytery of Chicago recommending that the General Assembly call on the United States government and other international bodies to join together to promote credible, fair and transparent elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The overture, which also calls for the United States and other nations to offer encouragement and financial and technical support to the Congolese government to provide quality education for its children and youth, passed by a vote of 48-1.

COMMITTEE PONDSERS WHETHER PMA-OGA MERGER IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD

By Jerry Van Marter
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – The Assembly Committee on the Way Forward – after hearing one review report harshly critical of the Presbyterian Mission Agency and another largely supportive of the Office of the General Assembly – on Monday started deliberating on proposals from both review panels that a special committee be appointed “to explore the possibility of a merger between the PMA and the OGA.”

The boards exercising oversight of the two agencies disagreed.

Margaret Elliott, chair of the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, expressed worry that a merger of the two agencies might compromise the independence of the Stated Clerk, the PC(USA)’s top ecclesiastical officer.

Marcia Anson, the incoming vice-chair of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board, argued that the review of the PMA came at a particularly difficult time – a huge cost-overrun for the 2013 Presbyterian Youth Triennium, special offerings promotional materials that were scrapped after being called overtly racist, and the unauthorized creation of an independent corporation outside PMA control that resulted in four staff terminations and two still-active lawsuits – and that the situation within PMA has improved since that “snapshot” was taken.

But Eliana Maxim, co-chair of the PMA Review Committee, said the panel “decided to look at systemic issues rather than that series of events. We spoke to about 70 people, mostly face-to-face,” she said, “and focused on two questions: how is the agency serving the church? and what is the role of a denominational mission agency in the 21st century?”

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She said the review committee found, among other things, that the PMA:

- Has an unclear sense of identity and purpose.
- Lacks a theological foundation.
- Lacks collaboration with OGA.
- Is confused about where the locus of ministry is – “it’s not Louisville,” she said.
- Is driven in its decision-making by resources rather than vision and strategy.
- The role of the PMAB is unclear, a holdover from the old General Assembly Council (which acted between assemblies rather than an independent board).
- Is a stressful place to work, with a silo mentality, conflict avoidance for fear of retribution, an unwieldy structure and a rigid hierarchy.

Maxim and review committee member Eric Beene praised the dedication and hard work of PMA staff, and said the agency’s dysfunction is not the fault of Interim Executive Director Tony De la Rosa, who began work last December. “The culture was created by previous leadership, and that mindset has seeped down through time,” she said.

The situation is so acute, Maxim said, that the next review in the cycle – an All-Agency Review that would take in the entire church, including all six General Assembly agencies plus synods, presbyteries and congregations, and assess how they all work together – should be delayed to accommodate the OGA-PMA exploratory talks.

“The All-Agency Review is a good idea, but is not urgent in the way PMA dysfunction is,” she told The Way Forward Committee. “An all-agency review would dilute the immediate issues around PMA and OGA.”

PMA Board member Melissa Sanders said the board agrees with a second review committee recommendation to create a group to “review the responsibilities of the PMAB and provide a plan for restructuring the Board so it can be better able to do the adaptive work necessary to provide leadership.”

The PMAB already has created a task force “to review our model and propose changes,” Sanders said, “and it has already proposed substantial changes. The crux of the matter is that when you have a clearly defined problem and a clear vision, you have the way forward,” she said. “We have that with PMA but not with a merger. This proposal seems like ‘let’s just change everything and hope that it works.’”

De la Rosa agreed. “While you may hear defensiveness, we are taking the review findings to heart,” he said. “It’s my to-do list as interim [executive director].” He added that he “doesn’t know what the goal of consolidation is.”

Cliff Lyda, chair of the OGA Review Committee noted that “our report is far different in tone than the PMA Review Committee.” He said his review committee found that the OGA is “fulfilling its mandate with staff deeply committed to the church,” but in the wake of a downsizing and restructuring of OGA in 2013, “we now have too much work with too few people.” As mid-councils shrink, more and more work is devolving to OGA, he said.

Lyda said the OGA Review Committee has taken no position on merger itself, “but exploration is essential.”

“We’re moving into a new time when the church’s corporate life might have to look much different than it is now. That conversation needs to take place and it needs to take place now.”