COMMISSION CREATED TO DEAL WITH PC(USA) STRUCTURAL ISSUES
WILL CONSULT WITH ‘2020 VISION TEAM,’ ALL-AGENCY REVIEW PANEL

By Jerry Van Marter
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Several recommendations that would have changed the structure and operation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) were rejected Thursday by the 222nd General Assembly (2016). Commissioners instead adopted a compromise plan that would create a vision team and a separate administrative commission to address those matters.

By a vote of 480-86, commissioners authorized the creation of a 12-member Way Forward Commission, which would have sweeping powers “to study and identify a vision for the structure and function of the General Assembly agencies of the PC(USA).”

PLENARY HALL BECOMES A SEA OF T’S CELEBRATING MISSION
COMMISSIONERS TUCK IN TAILS, PUFF OUT CHESTS, SWAP MEMORIES

By Mike Ferguson
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Lisa Miller wore her church’s welcome in giant letters that commissioners all around the plenary hall could read easily: “Mi Casa Es Su Casa.”

Hans Hallundbaek sported a mission that he cares deeply about – prison ministry – on his chest: a picture of Jesus, with the caption: “What is your prison?”


All around the Oregon Convention Center, people responded to Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons’ call for “Mission T-Shirt Thursday.”

Parsons, who presided informally in his blue OGA mission “toolbox” T-shirt, said he came up with the idea of having the commissioners wear their local mission T-shirts one day when he was taking inventory of his closet and found a surprisingly large number of reminders of a lifetime of mission trips.

“We wanted to show the breadth and depth of mission that goes on nationally and internationally,” he said. “It’s an inspiring thing.”

Miller’s purple T-shirt proclaiming “my house is your house” in Spanish announced that her church, Fairlington Presbyterian in Alexandria, Virginia, has incubator office space available for non-profits. El Salvadorans, in particular, have taken advantage of the offer.

“Our building is outsized,” she said, “and they are our neighbors.”

Hallundbaek, a commissioned ruling elder serving The Chapel at Croton Falls in New York, said prison ministry is important to him because people in prison “know that they’re there, of course, but do we know they’re there?”

By a vote of 480-86, commissioners authorized the creation of a 12-member Way Forward Commission, which would have sweeping powers “to study and identify a vision for the structure and function of the General Assembly agencies of the PC(USA).”

Continued on page 13
GA EXPRESSES ‘REGRET’ FOR HARM TO LGBTQ/Q MEMBERS, ‘SORROW’ TO THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT INCLUSIVE CHURCH

By Erin Cox-Holmes
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Declining a proposal to admit to and apologize for harming the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning community, commissioners to the 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) instead opted to express deep regret for ways that those minorities of “God’s beloved children” have been led to feel that they stand outside the grace of God and are unwelcome in the denomination.

At the same time, the resolution expresses the deep sorrow of all in the PC(USA) who have left the fellowship of the church, and expresses appreciation to those who have maintained relationships despite profound disagreement.

Calling for deeper conversations about theological differences, the resolution adopted Thursday by a 463-51 vote calls upon Presbyterians to seek reconciliation and to reach out to those who have been marginalized across the spectrum of theological understanding.

The resolution was brought by the assembly’s Social Justice Issues Committee as an alternate to an overture from the Presbytery of New York City.

Nancy Young, a teaching elder commissioner from Newton Presbytery, thought the alternate resolution didn’t go far enough, saying: “We have sinned. And until we confess that we cannot be made whole.”

However, Robert Garrett, a Young Adult Advisory Delegate from the Presbytery of the Western Reserve, said the alternate allowed Presbyterians to stay at the table and remain in mutual forbearance. “The original resolution exudes a spirit of exclusion,” he said.

The assembly agreed, turning back an attempt to adopt the original language, opting instead for an approach that was seen as an admission of harms done, but one that leaves

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‘THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO LOSE HOPE’

PREACHER SAYS PC(USA) MUST INSIST THAT DOWN IS NOT OUT

By Bob Sloan
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – As God’s people arrived at the table during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), they were greeted Thursday with a service whose theme was the oft-told parable of the Good Samaritan.

The centerpiece was a sermon by Alice Ridgill of New Faith Presbyterian Church in Greenwood, South Carolina, who called on those in attendance to remember that while the denomination may face difficulties, “This is not the time to lose hope. It is a time to keep hope alive.”

Referring to the parable from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Ridgill said it reminds her of the popular reality-TV program, “Naked and Afraid,” on which two individuals are taken to a remote location where they meet for the first time and are left stranded without food, water or clothing. They must survive on their own by their wits, instincts and survival skills.

“Naked and afraid,” Ridgill said. “No better words could be used to describe the predicament of the individuals on that reality show, and no better words could be used to describe the predicament of the wounded traveler in this parable.”

Rather than give our attention to the Good Samaritan, as is often the case, Ridgill said she’d rather focus on the actions of the wounded traveler – because “if the wounded traveler had not done the things that he did, then the Good Samaritan could not have done the things he did.”

“What we have to appreciate about the wounded traveler is that he didn’t let his misfortune muzzle him, nor did he let his predicament paralyze him,” she said. “Rather than give up as he sat by the roadside, naked and afraid, the wounded traveler did four things that made a

Continued on page 6
ASSEMBLY RE-CONFIRMS LEADERS OF PRESBYTERIAN PUBLISHING, PILP

By Bob Sloan
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Recognizing his efforts to make the Presbyterian Publishing Corp., an online bookseller, the 222nd General Assembly (2016) confirmed Marc Lewis for a third term Thursday to lead the agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

“I hope that you find PPC’s offerings as valuable tools for your ministry,” Lewis said. “For those churches that have adopted Glory to God, thank you. For those yet to adopt, I hope you will encourage your church to consider.”

Commissioners also confirmed James G. Rissler to his first term as president and chief executive officer of the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program Inc.

“We often speak of being a connectional church,” Rissler said. “We have come together with different backgrounds, different interests and different passions. What we see here today and have throughout the General Assembly is that we come together – we are connectional.”

During Lewis’ first two terms, he helped PPC become a major online business. He also led the organization during the development and publication of the well-received new hymnal for the denomination, Glory to God, the first new Presbyterian hymnal since 1990.

Lewis urged those in attendance to visit the PPC’s two online retailers, www.pcusastore.com and www.thethoughtfulchristian.com.

He also took the opportunity to praise retiring Linda Lee and Todd Wright deliver the BoP, PILP, PPC and Foundation report during plenary.

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— DELP graduate Carol Taylor
GEORGE W. BAIRD RECEIVES C. FRED JENKINS AWARD
ASSOCIATION OF STATED CLERKS HONORS GUARDIAN OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

By Gregg Brekke
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – George W. Baird, a teaching elder who has served as a pastor and as a stated clerk in a presbytery and a synod, was honored with the C. Fred Jenkins Award Thursday during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The award is presented by the Association of Stated Clerks “to an individual or group that has given wise, prudent, and vigilant support to the Constitution and polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).”

Baird was honored for his work to uphold the Constitution of the PC(USA) as pastor of Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church in Midland, Michigan for more than 30 years, and as stated clerk in the Presbytery of Lake Huron (1968-2001) and the Synod of the Covenant (2003-2011.)

“George has always been that hand of friendship to those new to the world of clerking,” association President Doska Ross said in announcing the nominating committee’s unanimous selection of Baird. Ross thanked Baird personally for assuming her role at the Office of the General Assembly while she cared for her ailing husband.

Baird said he was surprised to learn that he was to receive the award.

“Being surprised is part of my lifelong ministry,” he said, noting that his original call was to pastoral ministry. “It was a wonderful experience,” he said, “and it turned out I could be pastor and stated clerk at the same time.”

“I knew Fred Jenkins well when I was stated clerk in Lake Huron,” Baird said.

Commenting on the “amazing list of people” who have received the award, he said: “God has been a wonderful God. He calls us and prepares us. It’s only by the grace of God that I was able to do what I did. I’m grateful to God, and grateful for all of you here today.”

Ted McCulloch, the current stated clerk of the Presbytery of Lake Huron, said of Baird: “He has the gentlest, kindest heart of any person. He brings the pastor’s soul to the work of the stated clerk. If I can remember that example and bring it to my work, I’ll be really blessed. He’s not only a colleague in ministry, but also a friend, and that means the world.”

Continued on page 8

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“Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (Matthew 13:51)
PORTLAND – Alumni of Presbyterian CREDO, a program of the Presbyterian Board of Pensions, gathered during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) Thursday to recall their shared experiences of revitalization in ministry.

CREDO's purpose is to replenish ministers' spirits and guide them in rediscovering the passion that first animated their calls, through sharing knowledge, experience and compassion, and reflecting prayerfully on their spiritual, physical, financial, and vocational well-being.

BOP President Frank C. Spencer welcomed the nearly 180 alumni who gathered for this first biennial CREDO luncheon.

"We are gathered as a national church, yet CREDO is about personal vocation and spiritual centering," he said. "I believe no program in the church has had such great an impact on the life of the parish as CREDO. Our goal at the Board of Pensions is to see it continue to expand."

Spencer attended a CREDO conference this year with leaders from the PC(USA), the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church, co-creators of CREDO. "Each of us came away with a deeper self-awareness and a mindful commitment to our own individual goals for faithful life and work," he said.

At Thursday's luncheon, Spencer recognized Peter C.S. Sime, CREDO's vice president of assistance and funds development, who is retiring at the end of 2016. Sime received a plaque reading, "In appreciation for your service and dedication to the development, ministry and mission of Presbyterian CREDO."

"Peter was the driving force and had the vision over 10 years ago to bring Episcopal CREDO to the PC(USA)," Spencer said. "But for his efforts, none of us would have had the CREDO experience."

Sime said: "When I am asked … what CREDO is like, I often say it's like an oasis. It's not a beginning and it's not an end, but a resting place in which we find the spiritual, physical and relational resources to carry us forward on the next part of our journey."

John G. McFayden, BOP's vice president of church relations, likened Sime's efforts to those of Peter as recounted in Luke 5:1-11: "When challenged, Peter [the apostle] took us into deeper waters – and CREDO does that for participants."

It has been nearly a dozen years since the inaugural Presbyterian CREDO conference in November 2005. So far, more than 1,800 people have taken part. The program served only mid-career teaching elders until 2014, when it was expanded to include recently ordained pastors.

Today, six eight-day CREDO conferences are scheduled for mid-career pastors each year, and two seven-day sessions are held for recently ordained teaching elders every other year. Participants are selected randomly from the Board of Pensions database.

CREDO has become a major focus of the Board's educational programs, and its principles of wholeness and wellness are foundational to the redesigned 2017 Benefits Plan.
difference in his situation … four things we too can do to make a difference in our present communities.”

The first thing he did, she said, was assess his plight.

“Did you catch it?” Ridgill asked. “The text says that they left him half-dead. Not dead! Half-dead! Half-dead means he was breathing, but barely. Half-dead means he was alive, but scarcely. Half-dead means his heart was beating, but slowly. Half-dead. In other words, he was almost dead, but not quite dead yet.”

Sometimes events in life may leave us feeling half-dead, but we must remember that God is always in control, she said, citing Romans 8:28.

“I don’t know who I’m ministering to today,” she said, “but I came all the way from Greenwood, South Carolina, to tell you that this is not the time to give up, give out, or give in. This is the time to remember that God is your refuge and strength, a present help in the time of trouble.”

The second useful thing the wounded traveler did, she said, was arrest his pride.

“Can you imagine how this must have felt?” she asked, pointing out that the two people you would expect to help, did not. She said it must have left him feeling valueless.

“It’s one thing to be mistreated by adversaries, but it’s another thing to be mistreated by associates,” she said. “It’s one thing to be mistreated by foes, but it’s another thing to be mistreated by friends. It’s one thing to be mistreated by competitors, but it’s another thing to be mistreated by comrades. They should’ve helped him, and they could’ve helped him, but they refused.”

Many of us may have found ourselves in a similar situation and felt betrayed, she said, but don’t despair, because “you may not always be able to count on others, but you can always count on God.”

The wounded traveler’s third action was to accept the person in front of him.

He needed help, and to get help he had to accept this person, this “Samaritan” person, whom he was supposed to revile and hate, by the societal standards of the day.

“Friends, God would have us to remember that beyond every label is a person,” Ridgill said. “…Regardless of our differences, the one thing we all have in common is our personhood. The individual beside you is a person. The individual behind you is a person. The individual preaching to you is a person. And, while we don’t all act the same way, think the same way, process things the same way, or want things the same way, the common link for all of us is that we are people: people created in the imago dei, the very image of God.”

The wounded traveler didn’t see a Samaritan, and the Samaritan didn’t see a Jew, she said. They both saw a person. They did not see theological differences, they saw a person.

Finally, the wounded traveler aligned his passion with that of the other.

“While their theological underpinnings were different, their passion was the same,” she said. “While one worshipped in Jerusalem and the other on Mt. Gerizim, their passion was the same. While their backgrounds were different, their passion was the same. While their perspectives were different, their passion was the same.”

The wounded traveler needed help, and the Samaritan wanted to help, she said – and they both were passionate about getting off of the dangerous Jericho road.

Ridgill said we must take our cue from John Calvin and remind ourselves that we are knit together with a holy knot. And we must take our cue from the wounded traveler – by assessing our situation, arresting our pride, accepting those with whom we have differences, and align our passions with those of the other.

“The plight of our denomination is different than it was years ago,” she said. “Membership is declining, congregations are dissolving, resources are dwindling, and many are leaving.

“In assessing our plight, some have compared our beloved denomination to the wounded traveler, suggesting that we are half-dead, that we are dying, but not quite dead yet. I am a practical realist, and I admit that we may be wounded; but I am also a faith-filled optimist, and I declare that we will not die. Our best days are not behind us; our best days are still with us.”

She said we must ask ourselves: “What kind of footprint do we want to leave behind, so that when we are gone, future generations of Christians will know we were here?”

“Like the wounded traveler and the Good Samaritan, I want to leave behind the footprint of a difference-maker,” said Ridgill. “What about you?”

Before she organized New Faith church in 2010, Ridgill was pastor of the former Washington Street Presbyterian Church in Abbeville, South Carolina. She also has served as an adjunct professor of pastoral care at Erskine College; the campus pastor of Thornwell Home for Children in Clinton, South Carolina; and a chaplain candidate in the United States Air Force Reserves.
Lisa Miller shows her support for Mission T-Shirt Day. Photo: Danny Bolin

PLENARY HALL BECOMES A SEA OF T’S CELEBRATING MISSION

Continued from page 1

Anderson pointed out her own T-shirt and its “Black Lives Matter” message, and told the commissioners, “I look forward to collecting stories about what your T-shirt says.”

She defined mission as “leaving our own comfort and showing up for our neighbor.”

Jo Nelson’s T-shirt commemorated a mission journey her church, Lawrenceville (Georgia) Presbyterian, took to Guatemala earlier this month, where members planted 1,000 trees and built stoves to make cooking more efficient.

Her friend Karen Turney, a ruling elder from the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, said she thought the sea of T-shirts at the plenary “shows God’s work in the world.”

“We Presbyterians pray and read scriptures, but these T-shirts show our theology in action,” she said.

Henry Woodall, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Wasilla, Arkansas, wore a T-shirt celebrating a mission his church has often hosted – Upward Challenge, which seeks to deepen attendees’ spirituality.

“The thing for me is, it has shaped a lot of our youth,” Woodall said. “Its mission is to bring the Holy Spirit on the same level as God and Christ.”

Christian Boyd, the stated clerk of the Presbytery of Milwaukee, accompanied a group of young Presbyterians to an urban-mission camp at Chicago’s Fourth Presbyterian Church, where participants spent time with homeless people and learned how churches and non-profits aid people in need.

The T-shirt chosen by Ron Fike, pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oklahoma City, celebrated his church’s free Tuesday dinners, which typically attract about 60 people, many from outside the church.

“They’re for people who need help with their budgets,” he said.

“We enjoy doing local mission.”

Cheyanna Losey, pastor of the United Church of Woodhull in Illinois, wore a T-shirt announcing an important annual event in her community – Vacation Bible School. Every year the town of 800 welcomes more than 100 children to a VBS co-sponsored by the local Lutheran church.

She said she had another, more practical reason for donning that T-shirt Thursday morning: “All my other T-shirts were too dirty to wear.”

Lisa Miller shows her support for Mission T-Shirt Day. Photo: Danny Bolin

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Welcome Home
GEORGE W. BAIRED RECEIVES C. FRED JENKINS AWARD

Continued from page 4

“If you have a chance to get to the Office of the General Assembly to see your name on that plaque, with all those other people’s names, [and] the great cloud of witnesses in this church to be honored in the line of Fred Jenkins, it’s unimaginable,” said Alyson Janke, stated clerk of John Knox Presbytery, a previous Jenkins recipient. “Thank God for that grace.”

“You were the first person who showed me you could be a stated clerk with joy,” Stated Clerk of the General Assembly Gradye Parsons told Baird. “You don’t have to be a grouchy clerk, and I appreciate your example. I’ve been a stated clerk of over 20 years, and I’m glad to see the new faces that are taking these positions. The polity [of the PC(USA)] doesn’t work unless we have you here. Thank you for the ways you’ve been supportive of the office.”

Jenkins served as associate stated clerk from 1990 until his death in 2000 and previously as the stated clerk of the Presbytery of the Western Reserve. He was regarded as an authority on the denomination’s constitution and appreciated for his kindness and his love of the church.

The award is presented at each General Assembly. A permanent award is also placed in the Stated Clerks Library in the Office of the General Assembly in Louisville.

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AFTER 3-DAY BUS ODYSSEY, WOMAN ‘ON FIRE’ TO ATTEND GA IS INSPIRED TO LIGHT MISSION FUSE IN HOME CONGREGATION

By Erin Cox-Holmes
General News Service

PORTLAND – Meet Loretta Baker-Yates. Many here at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) hope to do so. She's somewhat famous now, as the lady who rode a bus for three days to get here from Sumter, South Carolina.

“When I found out about the General Assembly,” she says, “I was on fire to get here.” The story of how she made it across the country is an example of the efforts one small congregation will make to be connected to the larger church.

Here's the story:

When Baker-Yates and her husband married, two years ago, they returned to their Presbyterian roots and joined New Covenant Presbyterian Church in Sumter, a small congregation that soon tapped her to be a deacon.

Then the church secretary quit, and she became the church secretary.

A year later, the congregation elected her as a ruling elder. Then, almost immediately, it elected her as clerk of session.

“The first thing I did was go home, phone up the Presbytery of New Harmony office and ask for a handbook, since I didn't know one thing about it,” she said. “The presbytery staff has been incredibly helpful.”

Next she enrolled in a Presbyterian Lay Ministry Academy, where mentors encouraged her to get more involved by witnessing a General Assembly. “Being in that class and learning about the governing of the church started my quest to get here and learn more,” Baker-Yates says.

The presbytery gave her a scholarship. The congregation said it would cover her meals.

She got on the bus.

“The General Assembly is absolutely awesome,” she says, her face lighting up with joy, and awe. “Heath Rada (Moderator of the 221st General Assembly) came to our presbytery in May. When I got here, he was the first person I saw. He remembered me. I met someone named Gradye Parsons on an elevator. He asked all about me. And then I found out he’s the Stated Clerk. It is like a big family here.”

She says she thinks all ruling elders and clerks of session should attend a GA, when possible, to get a better understanding of their responsibilities.

Now, Baker-Yates says, she can't wait to go back home: “I feel like everything has changed for me by being here. I am on an all-time high to get my church to get out of their box and expand their mission.”

She says she won't mind the bus ride back home at all. Already she has embarked on a new quest – to make it to the 223rd GA in St. Louis in 2018.

Loretta Baker-Yates rode a bus across the country to GA. Photo: Danny Bolin

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.

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PORTLAND – It was like stumbling through the coats and falling into Narnia. That’s how Maryanne McKibben Dana felt when she sent her first blog post out into the world 13 years ago.

Dana, who was awarded the David Steele Distinguished Writer Award at the Presbyterian Writers Guild Luncheon on Thursday at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), has been blogging ever since.

She now writes from a site called The Blue Room, ruminating about life, culture, the church and writing itself. She also is the author of Sabbah in the Suburbs and has another book in the works, but it is blogging that has changed her writing, and her life.

“We publish books because we want to produce something that will last,” she said. “We want to leave an artifact. We have an eye to longevity and legacy.”

She explained that, in this age of burgeoning social-media platforms, new writers will likely be doing most of their writing online, in short bursts, rather than publishing books designed to last.

“The fact is that we are awash in words, she said. "More ways to deliver words to one another than ever before in time. Words dissolve into the ether, drowned in the noise of 24/7 news and entertainment.

“So we have a choice. We can despair, or we can see every word we write as opportunity. We get to decide whether Twitter is this noisy place, or a place to craft our own carefully written modern day haiku. Facebook can be the den of banality, or the modern day way to write letters to the church.”

Dana told the moving story of Grace Episcopal Church in Randolph, New York, whose congregation discovered one morning that someone had spray-painted a question on the walls of their building: “Can I still get to heaven if I kill myself?”

After some heart-searching, the members of the church spray-painted a response: “God loves you with no exceptions!” They answered in the medium of the message they had received, and the picture went viral all around the world.

“The truth is, writing is never gone,” Dana said. “It goes into the spiritual cells of people who read it and take it to heart. It’s the alchemy of the Holy Spirit working through us.”

The Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, which funds the award presented by the Presbyterian Writers Guild, gave its First Book Award to Jeanne Bishop, author Change of Heart: Justice, Mercy, and Making Peace with My Sister’s Killer.

“Love is stronger than hate or death,” Bishop said. “Forgiveness is stronger than retribution.”

Bishop’s book tells the story of the brutal murder of her sister, her sister’s husband, and their unborn baby by a teenage assailant in 1990, and the long journey since to mercy and forgiveness.

The Guild also joyfully awarded dual lifetime achievement awards to Houston Hodges and Jerry Van Marter.

Van Marter retired in December 2014 as coordinator and editor of the Presbyterian News Service after a 26-year career in which he flew more than 2 million miles, visited 49 of the 50 states and attended 40 General Assemblies. "Jerry was – and still is – unparalleled in his ability as a writer to make complex issues both understandable and relevant to Presbyterians in the pews,” Emily Enders Odom said in introducing him.

Hodges (who was unable to be present due to health concerns) also had a prolific career, including campus ministry, pastoral leadership and presbytery leadership. He served in the General Assembly newsroom, as editor of Monday Morning magazine and is author of Circle of Years: a Caretaker’s Journal.

Van Marter devoted his time to singing Hodges’ praises. “I was misfit as a pastor,” he said. “Houston nurtured my writing. Houston was the one who encouraged me the most to take on this craft. I am just tickled that the Writer’s Guild has chosen to honor us both at the same time.”

Both Van Marter and Hodges (in the remarks he sent), said together: “It is glorious to be companions in the grand quest to recount the exploits of Almighty God.”

**Racial Categories in Reports to OGA Will Be Changing**

**Idea is to Better Reflect PC(USA) Diversity**

**By Erin Cox-Holmes**

General Assembly News

PORTLAND – The annual statistical reports Presbyterian congregations file with the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) will be changing, primarily in the racial classifications used.

The Presbytery of Elizabeth submitted an overture asking for the revisions, but the 222nd General Assembly (2016) voted Thursday to refer the request to OGA, which is already reviewing the classifications.

The referral specifically asks OGA to work with the General Assembly Committee on Representation to determine the best way to make the changes before the 223rd General Assembly (2018).

Refining the categories is significant, and needs to more clearly reflect the denomination’s diversity, said Mary Lou Cox, chair of the General Assembly Procedures Committee.

“This is about privilege,” Cox said. “It is about what we say, and who gets to say it.”

The Assembly also approved benchmarks for diversity in employment and in choice of suppliers.

Other assembly actions on the committee’s recommendations are available on PC-Biz at https://www.pc-biz.org/#/committee/557/business.
COMMITTEE REVERSES 2014 ACTION TO REDUCE SYNODS

By Eva Stimson
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – A decision two years ago that would have reconfigured and reduced the number of synods in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was rescinded Thursday by a 421-158 vote of the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

The 221st General Assembly (2014) directed synods and presbyteries to work together on a new configuration of synod boundaries that would reduce their number to between 10 and 12.

By a 380-196 vote, commissioners rejected a minority report calling for the appointment of a special committee to move the synod-reconfiguration process.

Mary Dahs, a commissioner from Scioto Valley Presbytery, one of the authors of the minority report, said its intent was “to preserve the hard work two commissions have done to create vibrant synods for the church.”

Others supporting the minority report argued that synods should not be exempt from wrestling with adjustments going on at all other levels of the church to deal with the realities of declining membership and resources.

However, Todd Freeman, moderator of the GA committee on Mid Councils, said his committee heard evidence that synods are already actively exploring mission partnerships and shared functions. “What we discovered is that the second Mid Council Commission’s report was like a big swift kick in the pants for synods.”

Of all the recommendations from the committee, several related to women, children, and families generated the lengthiest debate.

These included a resolution on dependent care, the first item brought to the assembly by the committee. Rather than adding language to the Book of Order calling for all church councils to develop dependent-care policies, the committee recommended directing the Presbyterian Mission Agency “to develop resources for councils at all levels to provide for dependent-care policies.”

Some commissioners expressed frustration over the lack of a

Continued on page 12
ASSEMBLY AFFIRMS PAY-RATIO TARGETS FOR PMA

By Gregg Brekke
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Commissioners to the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on Thursday instructed the denomination’s mission agency to close the pay gap between its highest- and lowest-paid employees.

The current ratio is 6.04:1, moving to 5.8:1 next year. Commissioners approved, 406-133, an overture from the Presbytery of Newton instructing the Presbyterian Mission Agency to move the ratio to 5:1, beginning with new positions, in "a reasonable amount of time."

The presbytery, noting that highest-to-lowest PMA salary ratios in recent years have approached 7.5:1, said a move to 5:1 would be a “partial return to earlier policy, and a practical embodiment of missional solidarity.”

The assembly also approved a recommendation from the Special Offerings Review Task Force to extend from 2020 to 2025 its fund-raising goal of $20 million a year; to maintain status quo distributions to ministries for 2018-2021; and to maintain funding to the remaining

COMMITTEE REVERSES 2014 ACTION TO REDUCE SYNODS
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comprehensive church-wide policy on dependent care.

"We have been discussing dependent care for too long without concrete actions from this body,” said Lisa Miller, a commissioner from National Capital Presbytery. She tried unsuccessfully to amend the action to call for the creation of a task force to develop sample policies and bring recommendations to the 223rd General Assembly (2018).

Ultimately, commissioners voted to approve the committee’s recommendation.

In response to a resolution from the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns, commissioners approved an amended resolution urging "the six agencies of the General Assembly to evaluate leaves of absence, considering at least six weeks paid leave as a minimum” for various types of care-giving needs. It also urges all synods, presbyteries, and sessions to evaluate their leave policies.

The action followed several unsuccessful attempts to strengthen the recommendation to require that the six agencies provide at least six weeks of paid leave and an additional six weeks of unpaid leave.

An amended version of another resolution from ACWC, adding language to the Book of Order requiring councils to adopt and implement both a child-and-youth protection policy and a sexual-misconduct policy, was approved.

Commissioners declined to approve an overture urging development of a national child protection policy manual and training resources for presbyteries and congregations, noting that such resources are already available.

A report recommending efforts to strengthen Korean-American congregations sailed through the assembly with no debate. The report, submitted by the Task Force for Korean-speaking Congregations, was amended to ask 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.

Task force members told the committee that non-geographic presbyteries would help Korean-speaking Presbyterians feel more empowered and freer to talk about church issues.

However, commissioners retained a 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. By doing so, they heeded the advice of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution: “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.”

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

Other assembly actions on the committee’s recommendations are available on PC-Biz at https://www.pc-biz.org/#!/committee/561/business.
COMMISSION CREATED TO DEAL WITH PC(USA) STRUCTURAL ISSUES

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The commission would have authority to “describe and implement a General Assembly-level staffing pattern that will accomplish its vision,” and be authorized “to engage a qualified examination team to assess institutional performance both internally among the agencies and externally as they interface with the congregations.”

Ruling Elder Commissioner Steve Aeschbacher of Seattle Presbytery, the moderator of the assembly committee on The Way Forward, praised the work and commitment of national staff, who he said “are doing phenomenal work with ever-decreasing resources.”

However, Aeschbacher continued, recent reviews of the Office of the General Assembly and particularly the Presbyterian Mission Agency persuaded the committee that urgent action is needed to address “expressed concern for the culture and administration of the PMA and OGA bodies, and posited a hope for change that will make us a more efficient, inclusive, culturally sensitive and visionary denomination.”

Prompted particularly by the PMA review, which was harshly critical of the processes and management culture of that agency, Aeschbacher said: “There is an urgency about getting on with our life together in a new way, to look past current crises to God’s future … It’s clear that more needs to be done to help PMA.”

Way Forward Committee Vice-Moderator Cynthia Jarvis of Philadelphia Presbytery agreed, saying, “These are systemic issues that cannot be kicked down the road until the next assembly.”

Two Young Adult Advisory Delegates – Justin Botejue of Los Ranchos Presbytery and Adam Allmer of Northern Plains Presbytery – reinforced the committee’s call for an administrative commission.

“We heard about systemic issues in the PMA,” Botejue said. “We believe this commission will lead to healing.” Allmer said a commission “will allow actions to be taken without having to wait for the next General Assembly.”

The Assembly also created, by a vote of 547-27, a 15-member 2020 Vision Team to “develop a guiding statement for the denomination and make a plan for its implementation.” The hope, Aeschbacher said, “is that the team will help us establish and reclaim our identity as the PC(USA).”

Jarvis described the Vision Team as “a foot in the water, a first step in the hope that is before us because Jesus has gone ahead.” She urged the assembly to create the Vision Team “to help us enter the future God is giving us anew with trust and love. We urge you in love and trust to take this first step.”

The immediate future-oriented administrative commission and the longer-range vision team will interact with the previously scheduled All-Agency Review Committee, which on a regular basis looks at the roles and interrelatedness of all six PC(USA) national agencies as well as mid councils (synods and presbyteries) and congregations.

“These three groups [commission, vision team and all-agency review] all have distinct responsibilities,” Aeschbacher told the commissioners, “but we hope they will interact with each other regularly.”

The assembly disapproved a package of seven overtures from Foothills Presbytery, and similar overtures from de Cristo and Grand Canyon presbyteries, that would change the way business is brought to the General Assembly and the frequency with which the assembly deals with social-witness policy proposals. They also would have set stricter requirements for bringing business to the assembly and for amending The Book of Order. That vote was 505-35.

“The committee was impressed by the motivation behind the Foothills overtures, and wishes to express its profound appreciation for the ideas they advanced,” Aeschbacher said.

Despite the disapproval, Teaching Elder Commissioner Deborah Foster of Foothills Presbytery expressed her presbytery’s “profound gratitude for the way The Way Forward Committee considered these overtures, and for hearing our concerns.”
GA EXPRESSES ‘REGRET’ FOR HARM TO LGBTQ/Q MEMBERS, ‘SORROW’ TO THOSE WHO HAVE LEFT INCLUSIVE CHURCH

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space for those who disagree with the changes in ordination and marriage standards.

By the end of the night, the commissioners had dealt with a total of 16 overtures on sweeping social-justice issues.

They adopted a call for a church-wide conversation on race, racism, ethnicity and ethnocentrism, with broad range of recommendations.

“Our whole denomination needs to engage in conversations about race,” said Julie Cox, one of the presenters. “I am convinced and convicted that it can wait no longer.”

The provisions include repudiating the “Doctrine of Discovery,” a church-wide engagement in anti-racism training and a call to settle upon more appropriate language than “racial-ethnic” in official church documents, parlance and programs.

The assembly, committed itself to continued development of a church that serves the urban poor, in a document called Gospel from Detroit: Renewing the Church's Urban Vision. Kevin Johnson, a member of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy said: “We’re talking about a Presbyterian church that has had a diminished capacity to do city-based urban ministry. We need to be taking the church out onto the streets, where the non-white peoples are.”

The full range of policy and statements adopted by the Assembly from the Social Justice Issues Committee may be found at https://www.pc-biz.org/#/committee/573/business.