

## Commentary

# 219th GA: The after math

By Carmen Fowler, *The Layman*, Posted Monday, July 12, 2010

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is over. So, let's do the math.

During the week, the assembly approved items of business with financial implications for the denomination's two budgets – the mission budget and per-capita budget. Additions to the mission budget were: \$52,087 for 2010, \$295,861 for 2011 and \$207,683 for 2012. Those increases in the mission budget mean that staff is now tasked with identifying new sources of income, re-allocating staff time or adjusting the budget for programs in other efforts. The GAMC budget now stands as \$82,097,234 for 2011 and \$80,550,613 for 2012.

If you're wondering where a denomination that receives less and less money from fewer and fewer members plans to get all that funding, remember that the mission budget receives a minimum of \$60 million a year from the Presbyterian Foundation.

Assembly business also held financial implications for the per-capita budget.

Per-capita budget increases will be matched with increases in the GA per capita assessment. Increases to the per-capita budget have a direct effect on the monies available for congregations to do local ministry and mission. As one commissioner quipped, "If we're sending it to Louisville we can't spend it in Potterstown."

The GA per capita increases result in per member assessments of: \$6.50 for 2011 and \$6.63 for 2012. Just a few additional pennies per person, right? Wait, there's more.

### **Unfunded mandates**

Additionally, every Presbyterian entity that participates in the Board of Pensions (BOP) for medical, disability and pension benefits, will see an increase in their bills beginning Jan. 1, 2012.

That 1-percent increase (based on effective salary) for all plan members will yield an additional \$7 million to \$10 million a year to fund same-sex partner benefits. Everyone's BOP bill will rise to 32.5 percent of effective salary while the beneficiaries of that increase will exclusively be Presbyterian employees in same-sex relationships.

As homosexual practice is prohibited by the PCUSA constitution for those who are ordained, benefits will only be extended to non-ordained plan members. That class will potentially include non-ordained staff members of PCUSA congregations, presbyteries, synods the GA, Presbyterian-related seminaries, colleges, homes, institutions and other related entities that participate in the BOP plan.

No constitutional change is required to affect this increase so no ratifying vote in presbyteries will take place. Further, as participation in the BOP is mandatory for PCUSA congregations this increase functions like a tax.

### **Relief of conscience shell game**

The BOP was "highly urged" to seek to identify a way to relieve the conscience of those who do not want to fund a lifestyle they believe is contrary to God's Word. It is called a relief of conscience provision and it is currently available for those who do not want their BOP contributions to fund abortions.

Here's the difference: There is actually a relief of conscience possible with abortion funding. That portion of a congregation's contribution is directed to adoption services. What could be imagined as a relief of conscience for funding homosexual benefits? Pre-marital and marital counseling that is offered exclusively to heterosexual couples? Remember, it has to be something that would fall under the purview of the BOP, so funding ministries like One by One with those dollars would not likely be accepted.

Further, the per capita that every congregation sends to support the GA per-capita budget goes to pay GA staff salaries. Part of that goes on to pay for their benefits with the BOP. So, how will a congregation's relief of conscience be preserved as per-capita dollars are passed along?

"We'll just withhold our voluntary GA per capita" you say. Here's the kicker. Many congregations who resist paying per capita to the GA still pay their presbytery per capita, not wanting to damage local relationships nor punish their presbytery for what they see as the failure of the GA. When it comes to the BOP, however, those payments are mandatory, since they are used to pay salaries and benefits. Any relief of conscience the BOP will create will ultimately be a shell game.

By its own admission, the BOP estimates of a maximum 1 percent increase in dues was based on funding benefits for non-ordained plan members to the exclusion of ordained clergy. If G-6.0106b, the fidelity-chastity standard for ordination, is changed to allow for such the BOP anticipates additional dues increases. The BOP also acknowledged that the 1 percent increase was based on the expectation that everyone currently paying in would continue to pay in and that no one would exercise a relief of conscience on this issue. If half the churches ask for a relief of conscience then the increase would logically become 2 percent. Although the numbers are huge, the math is not difficult.

#### **Was there not another way?**

Another way was offered to commissioners to address the concern. As the only mandate for participation is for ordained clergy serving in installed positions, there is no mandate for BOP coverage for non-ordained employees. Congregations and other Presbyterian-related entities are free to provide for medical, disability, pension and other benefits through a myriad of available programs.

Our social witness policy encourages just that method for congregations who cannot afford full-time installed pastors and for those whose employees do not meet PCUSA constitutional requirements. That was not deemed good enough in this case. The goal seemed to be to force the hand and bind the conscience of every Presbyterian in regard to the funding of benefits for those involved in the gay lifestyle.

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