

# The Presbytery of Donegal

May 11, 2011

Dear Friends in Christ,

At its meeting on Tuesday, May 10, 2011, the Presbytery of Twin Cities Area became the 87th presbytery to approve an amendment that will remove the constitutional requirement that all ministers, elders, and deacons live in “*fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness*” (G-6.0106b in the church’s Book of Order).

The new language reads, “*Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.*”

The new provision reaffirms the long-held right and responsibility of ordaining bodies (local church sessions for deacons and elders or presbyteries for ministers) to determine the suitability of each candidate for ordination. The effect of the new language also opens up the possibility that persons in same-gender relationships can be considered for ordination.

The 219th General Assembly (2010) of the PC(USA) approved Amendment 10-A last summer, but required a majority of presbyteries to ratify the provision for it to become part of the church’s Constitution. The change will take effect July 10, 2011, one year after the adjournment of last summer’s assembly.

My dear friends, this is a day that many in our denomination – and our presbytery – will remember. But what it is remembered *for* will vary dramatically.

Writing for Covenant Network, when just one vote was needed, Tricia Dykers Koenig rejoiced: “we are within one step of reaching the goal for which many have worked and prayed for decades. “

Responding to someone grappling with natural disaster in the South, Carmen Fowler, Executive Editor of the Layman, lamented: “yes, I actually do grieve as deeply for the status of the denomination as I do for people affected by natural disasters. “

Here in Donegal Presbytery, where our vote on 10-A was close, emotions are riding high. Some of us are jubilant; some grieving. Some think they may need to leave the PC (USA); others have found a reason to stay. The leadership team has met with many pastors and sessions, rejoicing with some, grieving with others. We are divided.

And some of us are confused. What does this vote actually mean? What changes? What stays the same?








The sheer scope of resources already produced is overwhelming. I am including the links to a few important

ones here in this letter. The brief FAQ from the Office of the General Assembly is helpful, of a length suitable for inclusion in a bulletin or newsletter. I would then encourage you to follow up by reading closely the extensive FAQ provided by Paul Hooker, Executive Presbyter of St. Augustine Presbytery, and one of the pre-eminent polity experts in the PC (USA). Also included by link from this letter are the churchwide letter sent by the PC(USA) Moderator, Elder Cynthia Bolbach, Executive Director of the GAMC, Elder Linda Valentine, and the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, the Rev. Gradye Parsons, and a letter from the Rev. Dr. Hunter Farrell, Director of PC(USA) World Mission to our global mission partners.

This pastoral letter you are reading, and these four resources are being sent as print packets to our presbytery and congregational leaders, as well as our retired pastors. We are also opening a 10-A resource area on the Donegal Presbytery Website, which will include many more links.

In addition to this plethora of print, what many of us need to do is to *talk* with each other and process our thoughts and feelings. **Along with members of our presbytery leadership team, I will be hosting Roundtable Discussions for Pastors on these dates:**

-  **May 25: 9:00 A.M. Presbytery Office**
-  **May 25: 1:00 P.M. Latta Memorial, Christiana**
-  **May 26: 1:00 P.M. Wrightsville**
-  **May 31: 1:00 P.M. Cedar Grove, East Earl**
-  **June 1: 10:30 A.M. Doe Run, East Fallowfield**

Copies of the FAQ will be available to guide our discussions, but the content will be guided by those in attendance. We will also be meeting with our educator and retired pastor groups to talk about 10-A, and nFOG, should it pass, in the near future.

**On June 9, we will hold two special sessions for anyone who would like to attend called “How Can You Think That Way?? Talking Together about Biblical Interpretation and Homosexuality.”** They will both be at the Presbytery Office – the first from 10:00 to noon, and the other from 7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. These sessions are open to all interested church leaders, and are intended to be safe spaces to talk about our profound and controversial differences.

**The June 21 Presbytery Meeting at Union** will have many issues of interest: education, debate and vote on the Belhar Confession, and some of our mission coworkers. **In addition, there will be a panel of pastors not in favor 10-A, who will share why they plan to stay in the PC (USA). At the conclusion of the formal meeting, the leadership will host small group listening sessions for all who would like to hear and be heard.**

A separate invitation will be issued to join the **“Life Together by Bonhoeffer” email discussion group**, with face-to-face gatherings, if there is interest. Bonhoeffer strongly believed that our unity in Christ is a gift far more profound than what divides us. In this group, we will explore the costly grace of discipleship, and what we mean when we say that although we are divided, we are the Body of Christ.

We are in the process of appointing the **Special Task Group on Examinations**, to develop a process for examination of new minister members, and to assist sessions in their plans for examinations.

**As a supplement to the above events, representatives of the presbytery leadership team are available and eager to meet with pastors and sessions to discuss your joys and concerns.** Appropriate people will receive separate invitations and registration information for each of the above events.

In conclusion, I share with you this experience: Recently, I went to cover the pulpit for the Rev. Dr. Michael Wilson, our presbytery vice-moderator, while he went to worship with a congregation with whom there has been some contention. By the luck of the draw, I got the Sunday where the amazing Madrigal Singers from Lampeter-Strasburg High School were visiting musicians. Michael made it back in time to lunch with the young people, who wanted to talk with him about their perceptions about the Presbyterian Church. In particular, they wanted to talk about the intensity of our debate in the denomination over homosexuality and ordination standards. One of them said, "It seems that you people are at *war* with each other."

I remind us that while we have concerns over who will stay and who will go denominationally, the compelling reality is the number of young adults who are unchurched – at least 90% of them. If you go to the places they frequent, these unaffiliated young adults, over and over they will tell us that our profound internal debates sound to them like a bedlam of bickering.



So, my dear friends, I beseech us, not to lose sight of what is truly essential, although even in that matter we are not of one mind. We will continue to work together on these things.

For me – this coming Fourth Sunday of Easter is what is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Let us be the shepherds Christ expects us to be, and focus on our mission and ministry to seek and to save the lost. Let us be united in prayer, for one another, for our churches, for this world that God so loves.

And -- Let us rejoice that Christ is Risen, and hopelessness is forever destroyed. May your Eastertide be filled with the greatest of joy, even in turbulent times.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Erin S. Cox-Holmes".

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