

Report to Geneva Presbytery

Jeff Falter, Commissioner to the 219th General Assembly
July 3-10, 2010 in Minneapolis

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Thank you for the opportunity to serve as your minister commissioner to the 219th General Assembly in Minneapolis. I never thought I would have the opportunity to attend a General Assembly. Thank you for this unique and exciting experience.

I will not repeat here all the details to you of what occurred at General Assembly. Others have reported these events much more wholly and objectively than I can. You can find all sorts of information about General Assembly's actions on the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) website at ga219.pcusa.org. There in particular you can find links to FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) about the General Assembly's actions on **Civil Union and Marriage**, the new **Form of Government** being sent to the presbyteries for their votes, the reports on issues related to **Middle East Peacemaking**, a newly established **Middle Governing Body Commission** to address issues related to the purpose and place of synods within our denomination, actions on **Ordination Standards**, the General Assembly's **Response to Arizona Immigration Law**, and an explanation of the General Assembly's request that the Board of Pensions provide full benefits to **same gender** partners and families. You can also find a link to *Assembly in Brief*, a nice summary of the Assembly's work and actions available for download and distribution within your congregations.

I would like to share with you my own experiences from General Assembly.

The Assembly's work was done by nineteen separate committees. Before attending, each commissioner received a committee assignment. Along with more than fifty other commissioners, I was assigned to Committee 12: On Civil Unions and Christian Marriage. We were given a narrow, focused mandate: to review the *Final Report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage*, as well as a minority report from some members of that special committee. One day of our work together was spent reviewing these two documents, hearing presentations from members of the special committee, listening to people who wished to speak about these two reports. After several hours of listening to others, our committee worked through the documents, perfecting each, then elected (47-8-2) to send the *Final Report* to the full assembly for its adoption. This report provides descriptive material on the historical and theological aspects of marriage, as well as a look at current laws on same - gender partnerships and their children, and the place of same - gender covenanted relationships in the Christian community. To me, I found particularly appealing the special committee's conclusion that there is no clear agreement among Christians within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) about issues related to Christian marriage between same gender partners, but that we are called to exercise mutual forbearance toward those with whom we disagree. Most powerfully, the special committee commended to the whole church its covenant, "Those Whom God Has Joined Together, Let No One Separate," as a guide for Presbyterians to come together to discuss difficult issues especially when there is disagreement. That covenant would remind us all that even though we may disagree passionately about these issues, we remain children of one and the same God, brothers and sisters of each other through our one Lord Jesus Christ. "Those whom God has joined together" — that us, the body of Christ made known through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) — must not simply walk away from one another when our disagreements become difficult.

Then another day of our committee's work was spent dealing with issues sent to the General Assembly by individual presbyteries—items of business called "overtures". We divided these overtures into three groups for our work. The first group of overtures sought to reaffirm the traditional understanding of marriage as between a man and a woman. A second group of overtures sought to allow pastors and

congregations greater freedom in deciding whether to celebrate marriages between same-gendered partners in individual congregations. The third group of overtures sought guidance about how congregations should respond to civil marriages between same-gender couples in states that permit such marriages, and similar issues. Our committee, after long and fruitful discussion, voted to recommend that the committee answer the first group of overtures by saying, “no”, and the second group by saying “yes”; that is, by sending to the presbyteries for their votes a change to the Directory for Worship which would change the definition of marriage from “between a man and a woman” to “between two people”. The committee felt that this provided the space necessary for each congregation to pursue the truth as it discerns it. On the third group of overtures, the committee again sought to allow pastors and congregations the freedom and the flexibility to pursue the truth as they discern it, and to protect all individuals involved.

A minority of our committee did not agree with these recommendations. Approximately eight committee members presented a minority report to the full assembly, asking the assembly to approve the Minority Report from the Special Committee and to reaffirm the traditional understanding of marriage.

Our work together on this committee was the highlight of my General Assembly experience. I found it moving and gratifying to see us all work through the complex and emotional issues related to human sexuality. We didn’t all agree at the beginning, nor at the end, but we talked openly, with respect, for all, and walked away committed to recognizing Christ in one another.

The incredible high of that committee experience led to my deep frustration with the assembly as a whole. The full assembly voted to commend both the Final Report and the Minority Report of the Special Committee to the whole church, without taking any stand on either. Then, the assembly voted not to discuss the issues related to same-gender marriages but to answer most of the overtures with the action taken on the two reports—reports which don’t address the specifics of the overtures. I love parliamentary procedure. I think it provides a good means of having orderly debate so that a large body can “reason together” (Isaiah 1). However, in this circumstance, I felt that parliamentary procedure was used correctly but unwisely to stifle discussion and debate of issues related to same sex marriage at this assembly. Lyndon Johnson once said, “In Selma, as elsewhere, we seek and pray for peace. We seek order. We seek unity. But we will not accept the peace of stifled rights, or the order imposed by fear, or the unity that stifles protest. For peace cannot be purchased at the cost of liberty.” I wish the assembly had heard those words. Of the nineteen committees of the assembly, ours was the only one not permitted to present its full report because of this parliamentary maneuver.

Much more occurred at this assembly than the work of my one committee. As I said before, I do not want to repeat here all those details which others have reported much more wholly and objectively. The one other piece I want to celebrate, however, is that the General Assembly has forwarded to the presbyteries, for their consideration and vote, the Belhar Confession. After all the work we as a presbytery did, after all our study and worship around its themes, it will be gratifying to have the opportunity to cast our official vote for this confession.

Again, my sisters and brothers, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to serve Christ and you as a commissioner to the 219th General Assembly. May the peace of the Lord be with you as we pursue Christ’s calling together.

P.S. If you would be interested in talking with me directly about the General Assembly, or if you would like me to come to your church to talk about General Assembly, please contact me at hezekiah316@gmail.com or (315) 759-1118.