

Study Guidance for Congregations Concerning Constitutional Amendments

Pittsburgh Presbytery

October, 2010

At our September leadership retreat, presbytery's staff took up the challenge of framing pastoral questions for presbytery congregations in relation to the constitutional amendment proposals that the 2010 General Assembly sent to presbyteries for our votes. We hope and pray that these questions will elicit truly illuminating discussions in congregations across our presbytery. These questions are best considered by groups of no more than 15 that gather in a season of prayer before they begin their study. It would be most appropriate to begin the study by reading a Scripture passage that addresses the nature of our life together, such as Romans 12.

The study questions below are listed in three blocks, corresponding to the groupings in which we will consider these proposed amendments in upcoming presbytery meetings. The first block relates to a set of proposed amendments to our current *Book of Order*, upon which we will be voting as a presbytery on November 18. The second set of questions considers the proposed addition of "The Belhar Confession" to our *Book of Confessions*. We will vote on that during our February 3 meeting. The final group of questions refers to the proposed new "Form of Government" section for our *Book of Order*; presbytery will vote on that March 19.

For a more extended introduction to the study of these proposed amendments, see Sheldon Sorge's pastoral letter to presbytery entitled "Praying, Thinking, Living," posted at http://www.pghpresbytery.org/news/sheldon_shares/2010/ss_102110.htm.

.....

Proposed amendments to the current *Book of Order* can be downloaded at http://oga.pcusa.org/pdf/proposed_amendments3.pdf. The current *Book of Order* is available online at <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/2009-2011-boo.pdf>.

For each *Book of Order* amendment:

- Why was this change proposed? What is the given Rationale for the amendment, and what might be unstated reasons behind the proposal?
- How might this proposal help or hinder the church's proclamation of the good news of God's unquenchable love revealed in Jesus Christ?

Questions related to Amendment A:

- What would be gained and what would be lost were Amendment A approved by the church? Would its adoption raise or lower the bar of expectations that officers live in a way that demonstrates the Gospel? What impact would those gains and/or losses have upon our congregation's ability to proclaim the Gospel in our place and time?
- What differences has the current *Book of Order* paragraph G-6.0106b made for the climate of the church and for its practices of ordination since its adoption in 1997?
- How is the question of ordination standards related to sexual practices different from and similar to earlier struggles over full welcome into ministry without regard to gender or to race?
- Two of our sister denominations opened the ordination path years ago for persons with same sex partners – the United Church of Christ and the United Church of Canada. How has this affected the vitality and ministry of these denominations? What changes have taken place for their local and regional ordaining bodies that do *not* wish to ordain partnered GLBT persons?
- Understanding that adopting Amendment A would not require ordaining bodies to accept candidates regardless of their sexual practice, what impact would adoption of Amendment A have on how we examine candidates for office in the church? Would examination processes be strengthened or weakened, more thorough or less thorough?

.....

The text of the Belhar Confession, along with a guide for group study, is posted online at http://oga.pcusa.org/pdf/proposed_amendments2.pdf.

Is Belhar a timely statement for *your* community? How does it speak to situations of injustice that might be on our front steps or even inside our walls?

Why do we need “confessions” in order for us to be who we are? How would Belhar help or hinder us to be more faithful to God’s calling on us as a people?

In its historical context, Belhar was an attempt to come to grips with racism in the church. Does the church still have work to do in addressing racism both within and beyond our walls, and if so, how might adoption of Belhar into our *Book of Confessions* help us in that task? How might it inform other areas in which the church has had to deal with inclusion of particular categories of persons (e.g. situations related to sex, disability, or age)?

A detailed study guide for the Belhar Confession was prepared by the Rev. Eunice McGarrahan of The National Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C., and is available at <http://www.pcusa.org/get/resources/resource/1843/>.

.....

The proposed new “Form of Government” can be accessed online at http://oga.pcusa.org/pdf/proposed_amendments.pdf. The current *Book of Order* is available at <http://oga.pcusa.org/publications/2009-2011-boo.pdf>.

What is a “constitution”? To what extent is it designed to equip and empower action and to what extent does it function to delimit action? Does the current form of government or new form of government better fit the core functions of a constitution?

Would the revised Form of Government (RFOG) be less regulatory and more empowering? Compare both sections on the role of session; which would more helpfully shape the session to do the work of the Gospel? (*Book of Order* G-10.0102, RFOG G-3.0201) If you were in a pastoral transition, how would the RFOG help or hinder your process? (See RFOG G-2.0504) How would it change things such as the time it takes to find a new pastor, or who could be your new pastor?

Does the RFOG requirement that each session develop its own manual of administrative operations increase or decrease the likelihood of session being a strong missional agency? (See pp. 69-72.) How might a local manual of operations be more or less likely to shape faithful ministry in your congregation than the national standard offered in the current *Book of Order*?

Compare the foundational principles in the RFOG with *Book of Order* chapters 1-4. What does each say about the doctrines of Jesus Christ, Scripture and the Church? How well do they reflect the foundational faith commitments of our tradition?

For further chapter by chapter study of the RFOG, the General Assembly commended a study guide that includes links to a number of background papers, including “A Letter to PCUSA Elders” by Pittsburgh’s very own Carol Hunley, who served on the task force that prepared the RFOG. The complete guide is available at http://oga.pcusa.org/pdf/amendments_219_insert.pdf, and Carol’s letter is posted at <http://oga.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/pdfs/hunley-elder-ltr-sept-09.pdf>.