

WHAT'S NEXT FOR EVANGELICALS IN THE PC(USA)?

BY LESLIE SCANLON, *Outlook* national reporter

With the decisions of the 2014 General Assembly still reverberating through the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), both those pleased with the decisions and those discomfited by them are now finding a way to move forward.


Evangelicals who remain in the denomination, at least for now, are considering new realities. The Fellowship of Presbyterians, which is merging with Presbyterians for Renewal to form the Fellowship Community, will hold a national gathering Aug. 18-20 in Dallas in conjunction with ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians. The theme is not any of the hot-button

148 churches left in 2013 and 110 in 2012 — was palpable at this assembly, with many key organizers from previous years' battles over sexuality simply not being present at all.

In interpreting the actions of the 2014 General Assembly, evangelicals have stressed that while the assembly did vote to allow PC(USA) ministers to perform same-sex marriages, it does not require pastors to do so. "It remains up to each pastor and each session to determine what is and is not appropriate for their congregation," Presbyterians for Renewal said in a pastoral letter near the close of the assembly.

issues the assembly just debated — such as same-sex marriage or divestment — but "From Consumerism to Community," an exploration of relationship-building and focus on God in a consumer age.

The absence of evangelicals who have already left the PC(USA) for more conservative congregations —



The assembly approved both an authoritative interpretation — which has already taken effect and which allows PC(USA) ministers to perform same-sex marriages in places where such marriages are legal — plus a proposed amendment to the denomination's constitution. The proposed amendment would revise the definition of Christian marriage from the current language of marriage being between “a man and a woman” to say it involves “two persons, traditionally a man and a woman.” Over the next year, a majority of the denomination's 171 presbyteries will need to vote approval for that change to take effect.

Some Presbyterians were thrilled with the assembly's decisions on same-sex marriages — and some pastors are ready to perform same-sex marriages now. Even since the assembly adjourned in Detroit, a series of federal court rulings involving Indiana, Kentucky and Utah puts more states closer to permitting same-gender marriage, as 19 states plus the District of Columbia already do.

There also will be an effort by the denomination at reconciliation with those unnerved by what the assembly has done. The assembly directed the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board and the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly to work together with churches “in the task of reconciliation, starting with visiting each presbytery ...” When the assembly's Civil Union and Marriage Issues Committee discussed the issue, Stuart Broberg, a minister from Washington Presbytery, spoke with urgency about the need for reconciliation, after having witnessed the pain of departures all around him in the Pacific Northwest, including his home church and the first congregation he served as a minister.

“I'm sticking with it; I'm still at the table,” Broberg said. “I'm going to keep my ordination vows and retire as a PC(USA) pastor.” But he was blunt about the alienation and disheartenment many evangelicals in the denomination feel. “We talk a big deal about reconciliation in the PC(USA) and unity,” Broberg said. “I'm sorry. I don't see a lot of reconciliation and people reaching out to pastors like me ... We've got to do reconciliation. We've got to do it.”

There also have been attempts to reach out to the global church — a reminder that Hunter Farrell, director of World Mission for the PC(USA), has warned that in preliminary conversations, 17 of the denomination's 54 international partners have indicated they might break relations if the PC(USA) allowed its ministers to perform same-sex marriages.

Following that, 92 Hispanic and Latino leaders from the denomination wrote a letter “to our brothers and sisters of the Hispanic Latin community in the United States and our partners in Latin America,” stressing that the assembly took many actions beyond controversial measures on same-sex marriage and divestment in three companies the assembly determined to be involved in non-peaceful pursuits in the occupied Palestinian territories.

“We have achieved a lot together in Detroit,” the letter states — describing worship that was inspiring and uplifting; the progress of mission work in dozens of countries; and the assembly's approval of adding the Belhar Confession from South Africa to the denomination's Book of Confessions (which still needs ratification from two-thirds of the presbyteries).

Rob Weingartner, executive director of the Outreach Foundation — which is involved in evangelistic and mission efforts around the world — wrote in a letter on the Fellowship website that while “some of you are discouraged about the PC(USA), I want to remind you that God continues to use Presbyterians' to turn the world upside down.”

Weingartner described the growth of churches in countries such as India and Ethiopia with whom Presbyterians are partners. “There are more Presbyterians in Ghana today than in Scotland, more in Kenya than in the United States, more in the East Indian state of Mizoram than in Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Texas and California combined,” he wrote. “And these brothers and sisters are disclosing God's glory and grace in ways that are changing lives and transforming communities.” ●