

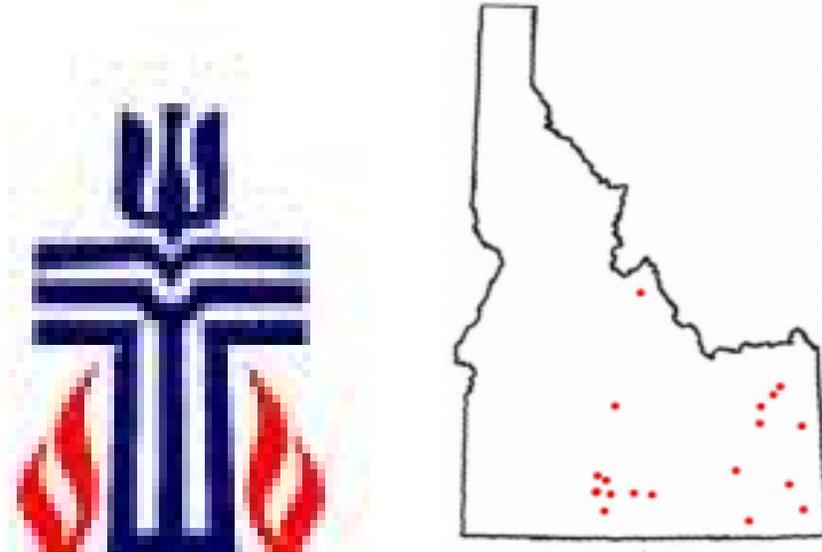
THE KENDALL CONSTELLATION

A Newsletter of Kendall Presbytery

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“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (Colossians 3:12-14)



Please forward this to all your friends in Kendall Presbytery.

Reflecting on the 221st General Assembly, Detroit, MI

At this year's General Assembly in Detroit, the following was passed by an overwhelming vote:

“Worship is a central element of the pastoral care of the people of God (W-6.3001, W-6.3010) in which a teaching elder’s discernment of the leading of the Holy Spirit is indispensable. The necessity of ensuring the exercise of freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) in the planning and leadership of worship has deep roots in our Reformed tradition and theology. Because a service of marriage is one form of such worship, when a couple requests the involvement of the church in solemnizing their marriage as permitted by the laws of the civil jurisdiction in which the marriage is to take place, teaching elders have the pastoral responsibility to assess the capabilities, intentions, and readiness of the couple to be married (W-4.9002), and the freedom of conscience in the interpretation of Scripture (G-2.0105) to participate in any such marriage they believe the Holy Spirit calls them to perform.*

“Exercising such discretion and freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage service for any such couple in the place where the community gathers for worship, so long as it is approved by the session; or in such other place as may be suitable for a service of Christian worship. In no case shall any teaching elder’s conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of

the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The authoritative interpretation of this section by the 203rd General Assembly (1991) (Minutes, 1991, Part I, p. 395, paragraphs 21.124–.128), and the subsequent authoritative interpretations of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission relying upon it, are withdrawn and replaced with this authoritative interpretation.”

In reading the above action of this year’s General Assembly, one might well ask “What’s all the fuss about?” One might also ask, “Where are all the sensational headlines coming from?” These points are well taken.

This action “withdrew and replaced” a previous General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission “Authoritative Interpretation” (decree) which explicitly prohibited same-sex weddings to be performed by either Presbyterian pastors or in Presbyterian churches. This “rule” had been a bone of contention for nearly 25 years, for a variety of reasons, some of which had more to do with polity concerns than the subject matter, per se. Each time this rule was challenged, it was clear that sentiment opposed to it was mounting from year to year, for one reason or another. At the 221st General Assembly in Detroit this year, it was overturned by an overwhelming vote (approximately ¾ margin). However, not all who opposed the ruling did so because of favorable opinions about same-sex marriage. A significant number of Presbyterians have voiced serious polity concerns in opposition to this ruling. There were basically four reasons cited in floor arguments for overturning this ruling. A significant

majority subscribed to at least one of the following points of view and therefore voted in favor or overturning the previous “Authoritative Interpretation” of the GA-PJC (a small panel of judges).

1. The rule constituted an encroachment on the historic rights and freedoms of pastors and sessions and a violation of the core value of our polity, “*freedom of conscience*,” for all pastors and sessions.

F-3.0101 God Is Lord of the Conscience

“God alone is Lord of the conscience,” and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men ...

Because of the deep distrust of governing power by our founding reformers, all aspects of our polity were organized with a view toward preserving, at all costs (including the cost of dissention inevitably arising from differing expressions of that freedom), the freedom of individual pastors and sessions. As a result, the Presbyterian Church (USA) is not an organic unity but a connectional network of free and independent congregations gathered together for common witness and the pursuit of mission in the world beyond the scope of what would be possible on their own. The General Assembly, properly understood, is essentially a mission agency and it speaks to the Church, not for the Church.

2. The rule proved nearly-impossible to enforce, owing to its vagaries and the growing lack of consensus. Multiple attempts to enforce the rule proved expensive and unsatisfactory. The main reason for this is that the General Assembly does not have the power to force Presbyterians against their will. The Book of Order, ideally, would contain no controversial

provisions. Items which could not be agreed upon by a significant margin would be left to the individual sessions to decide as they sought God's will through prayer. The following item is excerpted from the "Foundations of Presbyterian Polity:"

F-3.0107 Church Power

"All Church power, whether exercised by the body in general or in the way of representation by delegated authority, is only ministerial and declarative; that is to say, that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and manners; that no Church judicatory ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority ..."

3. The incessant arguments over this rule were detrimental to Presbyterian life and mission, provoking an insatiable interest on the part of the press. Increasingly, Presbyterians were convinced that this rule was serving no useful purpose and that we were not running our affairs properly as long as a long line of news vans was parked along the streets at every General Assembly. General Assembly meetings should be more like our Synod meetings where the agenda is focused on the arrangements and provisions for regional mission. I never see news vans parked outside our Synod meetings ... and I rarely see people getting upset - all are focused and engaged in doing the Lord's work. Yet, I am sure that in these meetings there is represented the full spectrum of opinions about the controversial issues. We might well ask ourselves, "how do these meetings go so well and are so productive despite these differences?" Because they are an

example of how we should operate - allowing ourselves freedom of conscience on points of disagreement, gathering together to celebrate what we hold in common, and setting our minds and hearts on doing the Lord's work (and not trying to boss each other around).

4. Increasingly, many are convinced that the phenomena of homosexuality is an inborn trait for many, if not most, homosexuals. As such, they feel convinced in their conscience that they deserved to be treated with equality and not be discriminated against in Church or society (and marriage is a blend of Church and society like no other institution - each informing and affecting the other whether we wish it so or not). While some disagree and assert that homosexuality is most often, if not always, a choice, their point of view does nothing to diminish the fact that those who feel otherwise are following well-established ethical principles. As such, it is an uncharitable stretch to accuse those who feel that way of being anti-Christian. It is to be acknowledged that this change in historic perspective does pose significant challenges to biblical interpretation at several points in Scripture, yet to claim that such a perspective undermines the entire faith is, at a minimum, a gross exaggeration. In the end, this may come down to a disagreement about scientific fact yet to be proven and which will be resolved, no doubt, over time and the needed adjustments to biblical interpretation will surely follow as they have when we were convinced by science that the earth is more than 6,000 years old and that biological evolution is a fact.

In regard to the practical impact of the General Assembly's action, the following items excerpted from a FAQ document just released by the General Assembly are helpful:

Question: Are congregations and/or pastors required to participate in/host such weddings?

Answer: "In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage service for any couple except by his or her understanding of the Word and the leading of the Holy Spirit." No pastor is compelled to perform a service of marriage nor a session compelled to use church property for a service of marriage.

Question: Can the session make a categorical prohibition of same-gender weddings in its building?

Answer: Yes. Nothing has changed about the authority of the session with regard to the use of the church building.

In Christ's Love,

Ron Lavoie,

Stated Clerk/Executive

Kendall Presbytery