



First Presbyterian Church of Olathe



March 31, 2011

An open letter to the congregation of First Presbyterian Church, Olathe –

Session has been closely following denominational voting that could enact some major changes to our denomination's constitution. Some of you have shared your concerns and you're wondering how the proposed changes could affect FPC Olathe and our ministry to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. This letter is intended to cover some basics.

Our denomination functions under a constitution which is made up of both the *Book of Order* (BOO) and the *Book of Confessions* (BOC). Changing either one is like changing the US Constitution where an amendment is approved by Congress and goes out to the states for ratification. (Did you know that our USA governing system actually is modeled after the Presbyterian Church? Yes, it's true). In the case of the PC(USA), the General Assembly (GA) approves constitutional amendments that then go out to each of the 173 presbyteries for their vote to ratify or not. Amendments to the BOO, which take place following nearly every GA, require a simple majority of presbyteries voting in favor. Amendments to the BOC take a two-thirds majority for approval.

The most controversial current item is a proposed amendment to the *Book of Order* which would remove the requirement for fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness as a requisite for ordination of our church leaders (G-6.0106b). This change, "Amendment A," would replace current specific wording with wording that grants governing bodies (sessions and presbyteries) flexibility to decide for themselves the fitness of a candidate for ordination (minister of Word and Sacrament; elder; deacon) without reference to this specific denomination-wide standard regarding sexual behavior. In our denomination ordination is conferred by one governing body yet the person is ordained into the whole of the denomination: a person ordained an elder in one PC(USA) congregation is an elder in any PC(USA) congregation. Ruling elders (those elders serving on sessions) are elected and installed by each congregation in which they serve. Likewise, ministers of Word and Sacrament (pastors), are ordained by a presbytery but they are ordained into the whole of the denomination. They are approved and installed by each presbytery in which they serve. Furthermore, ordination is for life unless self-renounced or revoked through discipline.

The ordination standard regarding sexual practice of our church leaders has been challenged in various forms since at least the late 1970's, and FPC Olathe has consistently maintained support for the historical, biblical position reflected in the current constitutional wording. Session has taken actions such as the 2001 approval of our Confessing Church Statement; <http://www.fpcolathe.org/images/ConfessingChurchResolution.pdf> and that same year sent a letter to every congregation in the PC(USA) encouraging their faithful participation in the same voting process in which we find ourselves currently. Since 2005, grieved by activities and direction of denominational leadership and decisions, Session has approved redirecting Per Capita apportionment into organizations

and projects which boldly stand for biblical truth in our denomination. And in 2008, our Denominational Concerns Committee planned and hosted the “Truth Is Grace” seminar featuring Robert Gagnon and Kristin Johnson (Tremba); a day-long event on the clear teaching of Scripture regarding homosexual behavior and the call for compassionate ministry toward those struggling with sexual sin.

There are other proposed amendments on which presbyteries are voting. One would replace the current Form of Government (FOG) section of our BOO with a restructured, new FOG (nFOG). The other is adding the Belhar Confession to our *Book of Confessions*. Each of these proposed changes would have weighty and complex implications for the PCUSA. Last summer Elder Di Lupton addressed all of these constitutional items and other business in a post-General Assembly report open to all adult Sunday School classes.

Our Heartland Presbytery voted in favor of adding the Belhar Confession to our BOC and voted to approve Amendment A. Heartland Presbytery will vote on the nFOG amendment on April 12 at Blue Ridge Presbyterian Church in Raytown, MO. FPC Olathe commissioners have participated at each meeting, and will on April 12.

Our PC(USA) may be on the verge of making some significant constitutional changes BUT ONLY if the majority votes in favor of the proposed amendments. At this writing, 74 presbyteries have voted in favor of Amendment A and 53 have voted against it. There are 173 presbyteries, so a majority is 87. There are 46 presbyteries yet to vote. Please join us in praying for these remaining presbyteries. A prayer guide and chart of when presbyteries are voting can be found at <http://www.reclaimbiblicalteaching.org/prayer.cfm>. If indeed the majority votes to amend the ordination standard, it is possible that certain ordinations taking place after the *Book of Order* is officially amended could be challenged through the church courts to test whether the fidelity and chastity standard is intact regardless of specific constitutional wording. Here again, our church court system parallels the US government court system. For us, cases appeal through to the highest court, the Permanent Judicial Commission.

And so we watch with concern, and with prayer. **Know that we are unified in our commitment to prayer and seeking God’s guidance in these uncertain times.** We do not know what the future holds but we know that God is there. We will provide updates. If you have questions, please ask. If you wish to express your concerns to us, please do so.

Above all, pray.

In Christ,
The Session

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