

First Presbyterian Church San Antonio--Denominational Issues (10/14/15)

For several years First Presbyterian Church San Antonio (“FPC”) has been in conversation about the next steps in its nearly 170 year history, including whether to continue its voluntary relationship with the PC(USA). After a long period of prayer and deliberation, Monday, October 12, 2015 the Session voted to recommend to the congregation that FPC terminate its voluntary affiliation with the PC(USA) and petition the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians for voluntary membership. A congregational meeting has been set for November 1, 2015 to allow the congregation to vote on this recommendation.

FPC concerns regarding the PC(USA) go back several decades, but culminated with a succession of actions at the 2014 General Assembly (“GA”). Following the GA, many members expressed great concern, some have left FPC. Therefore, the Session (FPC’s governing body) conducted a survey to measure the congregation’s attitudes toward the PC(USA). Returned surveys were delivered sealed to Galloway Research for tabulation. Almost 1000 surveys were returned (more than twice what Galloway considered statistically sound). The first inquiry asked members to rank the following statement:

[The Congregation Should Remain in the PC(USA)] 59% Disagreed or Strongly Disagreed, 20% wanted or needed more information, 21% Agreed or Strongly Agreed.

As a result of this input, Town Hall meetings were authorized by the Session and lead by Church Relations Committee (CRC). Presentations included reports on the 2014 General Assembly and guest speakers from four (4) different Presbyterian denominations or viewpoints including:

- 1) The PC(USA) regional governing body, Mission Presbytery*
- 2) The Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC)*
- 3) The Fellowship Community*
- 4) The Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO)*

(*Video recordings of these meetings are available at the FPC website: www.fpcsanantonio.org

Some areas of concern regarding the PC(USA) include:

Authority of Scripture

The Constitution of the PC(USA) consists of two parts: 1) the Book of Confessions and 2) the Book of Order. The Book of Order was originally built upon the belief that the Bible is the unique and authoritative Word of God. With the adoption of the New Form of Government (NFOG) in 2011, Scripture was to be used as a “guide.” This subtle change in wording has a significant impact on what is taught in the PC(USA) and basically gave the right to any member of the congregation “regardless of ...theological conviction” (F-1.0403) to serve as a church officer. An increasingly permissive structure has generated many examples of church leadership wandering from the Confessions and basic Biblical principles. Ministers who openly preach atheism and pluralism are allowed to continue in ministry. Currently over 50 PC(USA) churches align with a movement called “Progressive Christianity”—one of their eight beliefs is: “Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;” Conversely, ministers who continue to preach orthodox views of Scripture have had disciplinary proceeding taken against them. This includes Grace Presbytery’s stripping Rev. Joe Rightmyer, formerly of Highland Park Presbyterian, of his right to serve as a minister in the PC(USA). Mission Presbytery brought charges (later dropped) against The Rev. Ray Tear, pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Ingram, Texas, after his church expressed a desire to leave the denomination. Mission Presbytery formed an investigating committee to look into allegations that our own Ron Scates

violated his ordination vows. The basis for the complaint against Reverend Scates is (1) a comment at the end of a sermon about the future of the PC(USA); and (2) the allegation that he encouraged FPC's participation in organizations that were disloyal to the PC(USA), i.e. The Fellowship of Presbyterians. FPC joined the Fellowship in 2012. Ron Scates did not become Interim Senior Pastor until three years later. PC(USA) executives participate and speak at Fellowship gatherings including as recently as this past summer.

It is noteworthy that due to increasing theological differences, loyal International church partners have recently ended affiliation with the PC(USA) including: The National Presbyterian Church of Mexico, July 2011; The National Black Church Initiative, a coalition of 34,000 churches, with 15.7 million African-Americans, March 2015; the Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil (IPIB.), July 2015; and the Evangelical Presbyterian and Reformed Church of Peru (IEPRP), July 2015.

Political Activism

Serving and investing in local and world missions has been a priority of Presbyterian denominations since their inception. A number of years ago the PC(USA) began to classify their social justice and political initiatives as mission work. In April 2015 many international missionaries funded by the PC(USA) were recalled from the field due to budget shortfalls, yet the PC(USA) denomination continues to operate their political advocacy office two blocks from the national capitol and fund web magazines such as www.justiceunbound.org. In addition to lobbying for social justice issues, the D.C. office of the PC(USA) denomination has demonstrated on matters such as the federal deficit (where its lobbyist was arrested on the capitol steps). In 2003, the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA) joined in legal efforts to force the removal of a Ten Commandments monument from the rotunda of the Alabama Supreme Court building.

At the 2014 GA, commissioners voted to divest from holdings in Caterpillar-Holt, Motorola and HP (US companies doing business with Israel). When passed, a national media whirlwind ensued, including a searing interview by CNN with the PC(USA) Moderator. On NBC's "Meet the Press", Netanyahu said about the divestment, "It's so disgraceful. Most Americans understand that Israel is a beacon of civilization and moderation." Rabbi Steve Gutow, president of the Jewish Council for Public Affairs said, "This decision will undoubtedly have a devastating impact on relations between mainstream Jewish groups and the PC(USA)." For many at FPC, this punitive action toward our Jewish friends was a complete embarrassment.

Also at the 2014 GA, commissioners debated in plenary sessions political resolutions such as advocacy for hotel and hospitality workers, gun and ammunition regulation, adding for-profit prisons to the "sin list", voter suppression, drones, tax justice, normalizing relations with Cuba, divestment from fossil fuel companies, and designating Evolution Sunday.

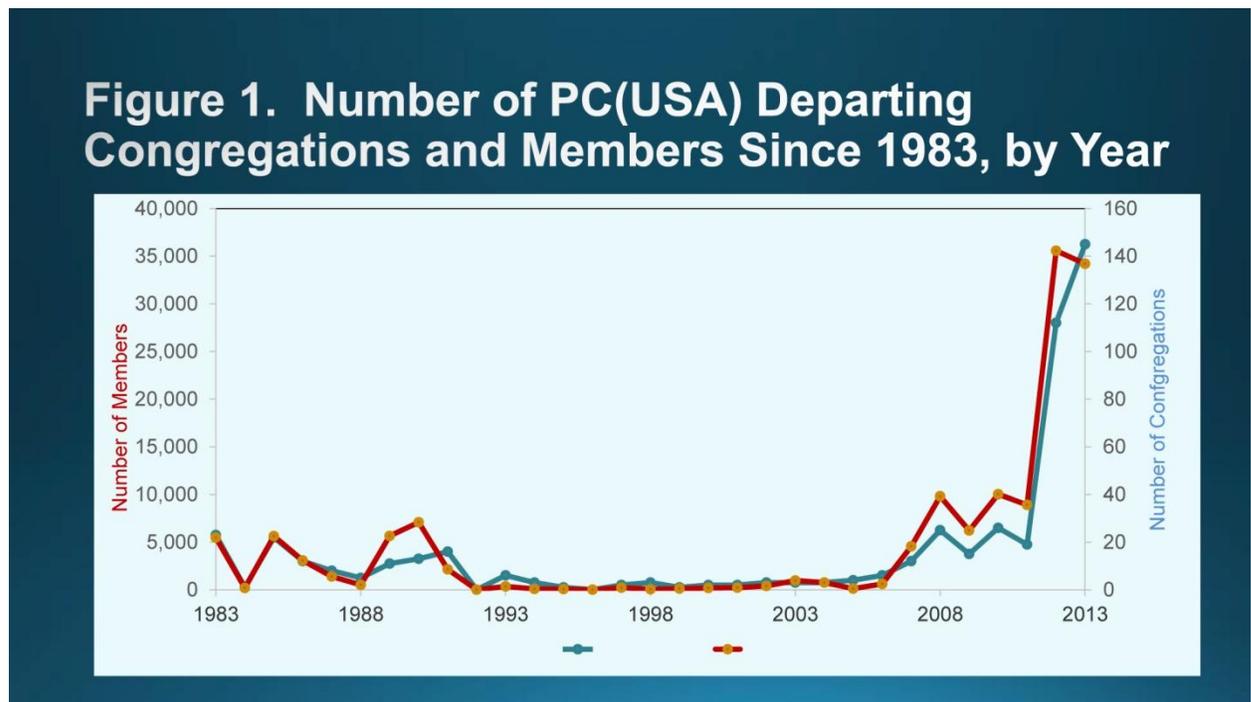
FPC representatives to the 2014 GA describe the meeting as something like a political convention, with buttons and banners and demonstrations on hot-button issues.

Whether one is for or against these causes, the question is—Is this the appropriate focus of time and money for the Church?

Dramatic Membership Decline in the PC(USA)

In 1967, the combined membership of the two pre-cursor denominations was over 4.2 million. After merging in 1983, the total was 3.1 million. In 2014 membership dropped to 1,667,767 members.

PC(USA) Research Services publicized this graph illustrating departing congregations nationally:



Since 2012, twenty-two churches in Texas have left the PC(USA) to join other Reformed Presbyterian denominations. Like FPC, many more churches in Texas are in the midst of determining their future.

Very telling is the virtual disappearance of PC(USA) Hispanic churches in Texas. In 1950, there were 50 Hispanic churches—now there are about 8. In 2012, three valley churches departed after the Presbyterian Church of Mexico severed ties with the PC(USA). They left by renunciation of jurisdiction, so they left with nothing. Mission Presbytery took all funds and all property including hand-made communion cloths, a Bible given by the church in Mexico and a communion table made by a member. Mission Presbytery even went to the bank where El Principe de Paz had an account and claimed ownership of the \$2,000 raised by the new EPC church after their vote to leave. The church building now sits vacant and unused.

To address the growing, even alarming rate of churches leaving or wanting to leave the denomination, the PC(USA) has been asserting increasingly rigid control over member churches. It has utilized tactics such as:

1. All church property, no matter how titled approved, paid for or maintained, is owned for the benefit of the PC(USA) (Book or Order G-4.0203)(the “Trust Clause”).
2. When faced with information that a congregation is intent upon or at risk of departing from the PC(USA), presbytery should create an administrative commission. This administrative commission claims authority to take disciplinary action against pastors, including removing them from their pulpit; assuming jurisdiction over (i.e. firing) a session; freezing the assets of a church; and clouding title to church property. See Louisville Papers (2011).

3. Asserting that a congregation does not have the right to leave the PC(USA); only the presbytery may release a congregation to another denomination. *Advisory Opinion: Note 19* (PC(USA)).
4. When a congregation asks to be dismissed to another denomination, the presbytery claims a fiduciary obligation to enforce the Trust Clause to initiate a monetary ransom for dismissal. *Tom v. Presbytery of San Francisco* (2012) (GAPJC).
5. A presbytery requires a valuation of the financial assets of the property at stake when deciding whether to allow a church to leave the denomination *Ibid.*.
6. If a presbytery fails to carry out the constitutional responsibilities, the synod may be required to intervene. *Advisory Opinion: Note 19*.
7. Even if a church and a presbytery reach an agreement on dismissal and the amount to be paid, that decision is not binding on the PC(USA). *See Presbytery of New York v. McGee* (2014) (GAPJC).

Human Sexuality and Redefinition of Marriage

The PC(USA) portrays the denominational dispute as a gay marriage issue in an effort to denigrate or besmirch the local church. FPC's issues with the PC(USA) are centered on those expressed above. Indeed, in 2014, the GA changed the definition of Christian marriage from being between "a woman and a man" to between "two people". The change is not binding on the churches or the pastors, however. Each church is allowed to decide its marriage policy and each pastor is allowed freedom of conscience on the issue. In the recent Supreme Court ruling, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote for the majority: "*Finally, it must be emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered.*" First Presbyterian Church continues to maintain its orthodox understanding of Scripture that marriage is between one man and one woman. (Matthew 19:4-6).

The Session of FPC is recommending to our congregation to move to the ECO: A Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians—a rapidly growing reformed Presbyterian denomination. Many like-minded churches in Texas have already joined, including First Presbyterian Church-Kingwood; Providence Church-Dallas; Highland Park Presbyterian Church-Dallas; Bethany Korean Presbyterian Church-Dallas; First Presbyterian Church-Amarillo; Matthews Memorial Presbyterian Church-Albany; First Presbyterian Church-San Angelo; First Presbyterian Church-El Dorado; West Isle Presbyterian Church-Galveston; Peace Presbyterian Church-Houston; Windwood Presbyterian Church-Houston; and First Presbyterian Church-Wichita Falls. Many more churches are in the midst of making decisions as well, including FPC Midland. The process leading to this recommendation has been intentionally slow, careful, and most of all prayerful. In all deliberations the officers, the staff, and the congregation earnestly seek to be true to Jesus Christ and to remain together as a worshipping community.

FPC has a long history of founding and/or supporting organizations in our community like SAMM Ministries, Christian Assistance Ministry (CAM) and others. In all that we do, we desire to glorify God and make Jesus visible here in San Antonio and throughout the world.