

The 2004 General Assembly

A Special Report to Witherspoon Society Members and Friends

By Eugene TeSelle

This was an Assembly with multiple personalities. It disappointed conservatives by voting overwhelmingly against their candidates for Moderator and Stated Clerk and turning down two challenges to the makeup of the General Assembly Nominating Committee. It voted by super-majorities to take positions on peace and justice more progressive than those of most opinion-shapers in the U.S. And yet the same Assembly was afraid to take risks on controversial issues such as relaxing of restrictions on gays and lesbians, the “morning after” pill, and the Federal Marriage Amendment.

An analysis of voting patterns suggests that a fourth of the commissioners were solidly conservative; another third were moderates who might vote in either direction; and a good 40 to 45 percent were willing to trust the ongoing work of the General Assembly committees and their staffs, then say and do new things on the basis of mutual respect and openness to dialogue.

The Presbyterian Right still wants to take over the church, its program agencies, and the Foundation. Its funders still expect it to take a conservative line in politics and economics. In the meantime, its efforts are likely to go in two directions. They will attack General Assembly programs and promote parachurch organizations like Presbyterians for Renewal and the “validated mission organizations,” in the hope that they will supersede the General Assembly agencies. And they will devote even more effort to “wedge issues” around sexuality and reproduction that have the best chance of winning over some moderates in the church.

Before and Around the Assembly

Tote bags for this Assembly were made of multi-colored manta cloth woven and sewn by a cooperative in Lima, Peru. The same fabrics were used for banners, table

Thanks to Doug King and the Presbyterian News Service, whose reports have supplemented, verified, or corrected my own notes. To get more details and learn about further developments, check our web site, www.witherspoonsociety.org.

cloths, and vests worn by local volunteers. The bags were so attractive that an additional 2000 were sold out within four hours. This procurement policy, which reflects beautifully our church’s policies on fair trade, should be followed in future years; it’s the kind of “outsourcing” through fair trade channels that we can approve without qualification. Fair trading was also apparent in the exhibit hall, where SERRV had its usual display of crafts from around the world and the Global Marketplace featured booths selling crafts and foods from fourteen cooperatives in the U.S. and in other countries.

Our Semper Reformanda Conversation on Friday afternoon, dealing with the “Transforming Families” report, was held at nearby Second Presbyterian Church. Four people who had been involved in the long preparation of the report—Barbara Gaddis, Eric Mount, Gloria Albrecht, and Charles Wiley—told about the multi-year process, and Jenny Stone offered an independent perspective on the document. By this time, feelings were highly ambivalent. There was relief that something like a consensus had been achieved; there was also a sentiment that the document, having nothing new to say but only codifying well-established positions, was barely worth fighting for; and yet its observations about the impacts of poverty, materialism, and individualism on families were well worth making.

One cloud remained on the horizon: Alan Wisdom of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, who had participated in writing the final version, was now insisting on the addition of the Christian Declaration on Marriage, a document adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention (best known for women’s “gracious submission”), the Roman Catholic Church (which regards marriage as a sacrament), and the National Association of Evangelicals—scarcely the voice of mainstream Protestantism.

The Covenant Network dinner on Friday night was followed by Witherspoon’s orientation for commissioners. A table was designated for each Assembly committee, giving commissioners a chance to meet each other and discuss upcoming issues from a progressive perspective. This was also one of the first chances for commissioners to hear from the three candidates for

Moderator.

At our Sunday luncheon, the Whole Gospel Congregation Award was given to All Souls Presbyterian Church of Richmond, organized in 1952 as an interracial church in the PCUS, the “Southern” church. One of its interim ministers was Aubrey Brown, editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, a major progressive voice during the Fifties and Sixties. In 1965, Rachel Henderlite was ordained there, becoming the first woman minister in the PCUS. Theologian Douglas Ottati received the Andrew Murray Award. And theologian Katie Cannon gave a stirring address from the perspective of those who have been excluded by the language and behavior of church and society.

We should also mention the annual Peace Breakfast sponsored by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship on its sixtieth anniversary. The speaker was Bob Edgar, General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. He urged people not to worry about how many people are attending church but to make a witness for justice, singling out elimination of poverty, healing of the earth and the environment, and seeking justice.

The Peace Fellowship gave its 2004 Peaceseeker Award to ten prisoners of conscience, Presbyterians who have gone to prison as a witness against the School of the Americas. One of them, Witherspoon member Don Beisswenger, is currently in federal prison. His award was accepted by Gene TeSelle, a colleague in Vanderbilt Divinity School, and Jane Summey, a former student who is now a minister in North Carolina.

Election of the Moderator

Saturday night, of course, is always devoted to the election of the Moderator. Candidates were David McKechnie, pastor of a “confessing church” in Houston; K.C. Ptomey, pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Nashville and a leader in the Covenant Network; and Rick Ufford-Chase, a Tucson elder, co-founder of Border Links, who had just turned 40. (We’ll take the liberty of calling him “Rick,” since he’s been a member of Witherspoon and a leader in the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and soon everyone in the church will be calling him that.)

Going into the Assembly, observers agreed that all three would be articulate, appealing candidates. Most predicted that K.C. Ptomey would be elected as the “moderate” candidate and the one whose experience would be valuable as the church experiments with two-year terms. Those who knew Rick Ufford-Chase were

enthusiastic about him, but many gave him an “outside chance.”

McKechnie tried to minimize his association with a confessing church. His session did it, he said, under pressure from a local newspaper after there had been mounting concern over various matters in the PC(USA); nothing, he added, has been heard from the confessing movement for two years. But his position on ordination and other issues was clearly hard-line.

All performed well on the platform, but Rick impressed the commissioners with his articulateness, good spirits, and forthrightness. On the first ballot, the vote was McKechnie 166 (34%), Ptomey 101 (20%), and Ufford-Chase 226 (46%). The votes were going away from the middle, and on the second ballot they split even more, with some shifting to McKechnie but more moving the other way: the vote was McKechnie 186 (37%), Ptomey 40 (8%), and Ufford-Chase 275 (55%).

Experienced observers recalled two other elections in which the commissioners seem to have voted for candidates not simply for their positions on issues but because of who they were and what they represented. In 2000 Syngman Rhee was elected, fifty years after he fled North Korea and eleven years after a vicious attack on him for seeking Korean unification. In 2002 Fahed Abu-Akel, a Palestinian-American, was elected as a champion of a just peace in the Middle East and an opponent of Palestinian and Israeli violence.

Rick, of course, represents youth, energy, discipleship, and mission. He promised to reach out to all sectors of the church and be fair to all. Since the Assembly he has made it clear that he does not intend to give ceremonial addresses to presbyteries but will work with small churches, attend youth conferences, visit college campuses, build cross-border contacts, and emphasize the mission that Presbyterians share, not the issues that divide them.

When John Fife, Rick’s pastor and Moderator of the 1992 Assembly, was congratulated on having his protégé elected Moderator, he answered that Rick seems to think of him as his protégé, since he is always pressing the session to go farther and expanding the limits of what is possible.

It should be noted that the coming of two-year terms means that the Moderator will need to be assisted by the Vice-Moderator. Already this year the candidate was announced in advance of the Assembly, and Rick chose the Rev. Jean Marie Peacock of New Orleans. He expects

her to take an active role during the next two years.

Election of the Stated Clerk

Although the election of a Stated Clerk for a four-year term would not come until Friday morning, commissioners knew throughout the week that Clifton Kirkpatrick was being challenged by three right-wing critics. He had been endorsed by the review committee, all the seminary presidents, and many stated clerks of presbyteries. Watching him on the platform, they were reassured by his good disposition, his explanations of the votes to be taken, and his knowledge of the “background” on many questions that arose.

Rick Ufford-Chase interacted easily with Clif Kirkpatrick, looking like a Mutt-and-Jeff team (standing together on the platform it was clear that Clif is a head taller than Rick). When one session was running late, Rick commented that he had been given some Trail Mix. When Clif asked whether it would be shared he said, “You’ll have to fend for yourself.” Clif said, “You’ll have to fend for yourself, too.” The goodies were immediately shared.

Among the challengers, Alex Metherill projected the most rigid image. He is the person who two years ago called for a special session of the General Assembly, and in his opening speech he called the church an “absolute monarchy” under Jesus Christ. In answer to a question about the infallibility of Scripture in light of Galileo, his answer came straight out of “scientific creationism.”

Rus Howard was the most irascible, directly accusing Kirkpatrick of failing to “uphold and defend” the constitution of the PC(USA) in the face of open defiance. Using the theology of the Deuteronomistic historians, he said that “when leaders are unfaithful, God removes his [sic] blessing”; it is for this reason, he asserted, that the church is dying. Asked about withholding of per capita payments, he said that these have been used to support activities that violate our ordination vows; withholding is a sign of disapproval of how the money is being used.

Bob Davis, executive director of the Presbyterian Forum and one of the “brains” of the conservative wing, positioned himself as more moderate than the other two, emphasizing the need to equip people for the world mission of the church. In response to the question about per capita payments he was more positive, saying that these are a way of participating in the life of the General Assembly.

Clif Kirkpatrick was good-spirited and articulate throughout, explaining, for example, that in “upholding

and defending” the constitution he has refused to take over the powers that are assigned to governing bodies or to countermand the decisions of their permanent judicial commissions. As for the problem of per capita, he pointed out that his approach has reduced the uncollected amount, which totaled only \$188,000 in 2002.

It took only one ballot. The count was 19 for Metherill, 25 for Howard, 137 for Davis, and 349 (66%) for Kirkpatrick. One commissioner probably expressed the feeling of many of them about the challengers, commenting that “it is amazing to hear people say these things out loud, with gusto, and making them a platform.”

Conservative critics made a small gain when the Assembly voted to add a Standing Rule for “special administrative review” of General Assembly officers and to consider procedures for “independent review” of all its committees and commissions.

The Theological Task Force

Commissioners had two opportunities to hear from the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church: a Saturday morning gathering attended by hundreds of commissioners and guests, and a presentation to the plenary. The TTF, as we will call it, was created by the 2001 General Assembly to lead the church “in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” It was to deal with a broad range of issues, including but not limited to “Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.” The General Assembly, by insisting that the TTF report regularly to presbyteries and congregations, also made these same bodies responsible for participating in the discussion.

The TTF’s interim report, released last February, makes “preliminary affirmations” emphasizing that Jesus Christ is the church’s peace, unity, and purity. Its language grows stronger as it moves through these themes. Christians are reminded that they cannot sever their ties with each other without the danger of separating themselves from Christ himself (cf. 1 Jn. 4:20). Purity is described in terms of “truth, goodness, and justice,” and twice in this section Presbyterians are urged to “live into” what Christ has already accomplished, to which we are joined by baptism.

Theologian Mark Achtemeier of Dubuque reinforced this point, saying that peace, unity, and purity in the church are not human achievements. And theologian Stacy Johnson of Princeton said that the TTF’s project requires “ownership” by the whole church and all its

governing bodies. As the Task Force seeks a way forward, its emphasis is to “edify rather than divide,” to seek the “more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31).

Other Theological Issues

Another ongoing project is the Work Group on the Trinity. It has been criticized from the right for not insisting loudly enough on “Father,” “Son,” and “he,” and from the left for not being daring enough. The Work Group has tried to be comprehensive in its scope, and it invites responses and comments as it moves toward a final report in 2006.

The immediate hot-button issue for this Assembly was an overture asking for a more specific definition of the “essentials of the Reformed faith.” Strong arguments against trying to specify the essentials were made in testimony by a number of ministers and theologians, and in carefully reasoned responses from the Advisory Committee on the Constitution and the Office of Theology and Worship. The measure was voted down in committee and on the floor.

A counter-overture from Hudson River, affirming freedom of conscience and the need for governing bodies to exercise “spiritual discernment” in the examination of candidates, was approved by the committee. Warning against the tendency of some presbyteries to add new doctrinal requirements, it affirmed “the primary role of the Book of Confessions as a guide to interpreting Scripture.” This was weakened on the floor, however, with an amendment changing “primary” to “significant and instructive.” We must still watch out for presbytery-level doctrinal decrees like the one adopted last year by the Presbytery of San Diego.

The committee and then the Assembly also approved a commissioner resolution calling for an anniversary celebration of the “Social Creed” of 1908, which advocated legislation ending many labor abuses and led to formation of the Federal Council of Churches. Further, it called for preparation of a similar document to address the new problems of the twenty-first century. This will have to be international in scope, considering new issues such as the outsourcing of jobs to countries with ineffective laws protecting labor and the environment.

Governance, Worship, and Discipline in the Church

Two innovative but controversial measures were approved by this Assembly.

An overture from the Presbytery of Des Moines requested voice and vote in presbyteries for “immigrant fellowships.” A New Church Development, they said, takes years to reach fruition. Less formal fellowships offer a way to reach out to immigrants without putting obstacles in their way. Leaders in these fellowships, if they have been ordained as elders in the Reformed tradition in their own countries, might be given voice and vote in presbyteries. The proposal will be coming to the presbyteries as an amendment to the constitution.

And an overture from the Presbytery of Central Washington asked for an amendment to the Directory for Worship (W-2.4006 and 4011) that would broaden the invitation to the Lord’s Supper from “the baptized faithful” to “all who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.” The issue was referred to the Office of Theology and Worship, which is already conducting a wide-ranging study of the sacraments.

Both proposals seem to reflect American evangelical culture more than the Reformed tradition. The Rev. Mark Smutney of Pasadena commented, “We are highly selective about our flexibilities” (what he had in mind, of course, was resistance to any relaxation of the prohibition on ordaining gays and lesbians).

An interesting youth issue came before the Assembly because of the increase in the number of commissioners to biennial Assemblies. Atlanta Presbytery, noting that there would still be only one Youth Advisory Delegate (YAD) per presbytery, suggested increasing the number of YADs by sixteen, one from each synod. This addition to the Standing Rules of the General Assembly failed, falling just short of the needed two thirds. Another proposal to take the vote away from advisory delegates (including YADs) in committee meetings was soundly defeated. Advocates for the YADs noted that we often say that youth are not the future of the church but are the church; it would be a shame, they said, to bring them to the Assembly and deny them an active role. A YAD commented that “this is not a camp experience” but a governing body, and one in which youth expected to play a role.

The Assembly heard the report of an Independent Committee of Inquiry, chaired by the Rev. Paul

Masquelier, set up after accusations surfaced about sexual abuse by missionary personnel in the Congo from 1945 to 1978. Although the accused has since died, the committee continued to investigate what the church could do by way of restoration and prevention. The Assembly approved an apology to the victims and is sending to the presbyteries a number of amendments to the Book of Order.

In discussing the life of the church we should also take note of a controversy stirred up when Avodat Israel, a "Messianic" Jewish congregation in Philadelphia, received New Church Development funds. It is accused of being covertly Christian in its use of Jewish rituals. Critics said it lacked truth and integrity and proposed that no more New Church Development funds be given to other such congregations until the issues could be examined. After former Moderator Fahed Abu-Akel spoke in favor of the congregation, the proposal narrowly lost. This same Assembly, however, adopted by common consent a declaration against Christian Zionism.

Finally, the Assembly affirmed the work of the National Council of Churches, defeating a crippling amendment by a vote of 63% to 36% and approving the main motion by 80% to 20%. Former moderator Syngman Rhee spoke strongly in behalf of the ecumenical character of the PC(USA) and the work of its relief arm, Church World Service.

Reproductive Rights, Once Again

Every year there is an attempt to change the church's pro-choice policy, and late-term pregnancies offer the most effective ammunition.

The Health Issues committee turned down an overture to reverse the church's pro-choice position and add a condemnation of abortion to the Book of Order. After debate about the "Statement on Post-Viability and Late-Term Abortion" made by earlier Assemblies, the committee, by a four-vote margin, recommended a change that called for delivery whenever possible, support for women in problem pregnancies, and promotion of adoption as an alternative.

Opponents pointed out that the statement preserved the option of abortion for the sake of the mother's health, but eliminated fetal suffering, rape, and incest as factors that might warrant abortion. The committee's recommendation was disapproved on the floor by a four-vote margin; instead a pastoral letter on problem pregnancies is to be issued, calling attention to existing resources in dealing

with problem pregnancies.

The committee and the Assembly did approve guidelines for fetal-tissue and stem-cell research. But an overture calling on the Food and Drug Administration to approve over-the-counter sale of emergency contraception, championed as an alternative to unwanted pregnancies and abortions, was opposed for encouraging promiscuity and being a form of abortion. It lost in committee and on the floor.

A disturbing development was that the conservative bloc threatened to create parliamentary hell during the report of the Health Issues committee if their "experts" were not allowed to be on the platform to answer questions. The upshot was that the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, the body that has every right to be on the platform, agreed not to be there; all questions had to be answered by the moderator of the committee.

A resolution on global population stabilization and reduction was disapproved, in committee and on the floor, despite the fact that it simply reaffirmed a 1996 statement on the subject. Opponents decried telling other cultures how to live; they expressed fears that it would encourage abortion, using expressions like "rights of the unborn"; and they claimed that it did not address the root causes and urged improving health care rather than promoting contraception.

Racial-Ethnic Issues

This Assembly heard important reports from two Task Forces, one growing out of concern about disenfranchisement of minorities during the 2000 elections, the other on reparations for historic injustices. While there was some opposition in the National Issues committee, both were approved without dissent on the floor. Instead of a proposed "confessional statement repenting of the sin of racism," the Assembly commended the Belhar Confession from South Africa "as a resource for reflection, study, and response." Study materials are to be prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship, and further steps will be considered after a report is made to the 2008 Assembly.

An overture from National Capital on improving education "for African American and other at-risk students" was approved, after broadening the terminology to "economically disadvantaged and children of color."

The Belhar Confession was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (organized by the exclusively white NGK for “Cape coloreds,” mostly Khoi-San) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (for Bantus) in 1982; these churches joined in 1994 as the Uniting Reformed Church, with Belhar as one of its confessions along with the Belgic and the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Belhar Confession grew out of the declaration of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches that apartheid poses a status confessionis, a misrepresentation of the gospel. It rejects any doctrine that “absolutizes either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people,” “sanctions in the name of the gospel or the will of God the forced separation of people,” or “legitimizes injustice.” It is quite similar to the Confession of 1967, with its four strong declarations against domination, nationalism, indifference to poverty, and lack of compassion (C-9.44-47).

The task force on reparations asked for a confession of sin, taking the form of a confession of faith that would be included in the Book of Confessions. It was the National Issues committee that substituted study of the Belhar Confession, which does not come from the U.S. context, says nothing about reparations or confession of sin, but does stand in the tradition of Reformed Confessions like Barmen and C-67.

While we’re talking about absolutizing natural diversity, we might refer the Belhar Confession to the Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity as it considers the PC(USA)’s prohibition on gay/lesbian ordination.

Peace and Justice

The Assembly approved by huge majorities, in the range of 85-95%, a number of measures at odds with U.S. government policy and popular opinion. Presbyterians understand issues of peace and justice when they see them; especially when they meet in the General Assembly and are responsible for taking a national and international perspective, they transcend narrow self-interest. They seem to be more ready to advocate justice in society at large than in their own church.

Thus the Assembly approved resolutions supporting the Geneva Accord and urging both Israel and Palestine to implement it; calling for an end to construction of the wall by Israel; urging consideration of disinvesting from Israel, noting, for example, the unregulated use of Caterpillar bulldozers in the Occupied Territories; calling for peace in Colombia and demilitarization of the U.S. anti-drug war, devoting funds to humanitarian aid and self-development; condemning the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA); calling for rescinding

of new administration policies that impose hardships on Cuban exile families; and advocating changes in U.S. immigration policy.

A resolution calling the invasion of Iraq “unwise, immoral, and illegal” was approved by a 78% vote, after the Assembly rejected by 64% a motion to delete “illegal.” It was pointed out that the term gets its meaning from international law, which clearly prohibits preemptive attacks. The clincher came when a commissioner asked Younan Shiba, ecumenical delegate from the Assyrian Evangelical Presbyterian Church, whether the country was better or worse off than before, and he answered, quite simply, “We were better off before.” A resolution confessing violations in the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and in Abu Ghraib was approved by 85%. And a resolution on “violence, religion, and terrorism” was approved by 81% after an amendment strengthened its language, changing the wording from “discourage” to “disavow” preemptive attacks. It should also be noted that Iain Torrance, the new president of Princeton Theological Seminary, has criticized the Bush-Blair approach in Iraq.

Families, Marriage, and Civil Unions

The much-disputed “Transforming Families” paper was approved without discussion. There was an attempt to add to it the Christian Declaration on Marriage. Some championed it as a gesture of “ecumenism” (in this case with Southern Baptists, Roman Catholics, and evangelical denominations); other supporters argued that it would ingratiate the church to Asians, with their strong emphasis on family. But the Assembly was convinced that our own statements on marriage (especially W-4.9001) are sufficient, voting to “join in a year of prayer for marriage renewal and reconciliation.”

On Thursday, July 1, the General Assembly considered a Virginia law taking effect that very day. The law rolls back the rights of gay and lesbian persons to enter into committed relationships and even to make contracts between partners. (Governor Mark Warner, a Presbyterian, refused to sign it because he wants a law that would have a chance of standing up in court against constitutional challenges. The legislature passed it with a veto-proof margin.) It voids all unions and contractual arrangements and prohibits their enforcement in the state of Virginia, even when made in other states. The Assembly issued a statement of condemnation by a vote of 71%.

The Assembly also approved a commissioner resolution, advocated by John Rhodes, elder in the First Presbyterian

Church of New York, calling on the Board of Pensions to explore the feasibility of making the same benefits that are now provided to married couples available to domestic partners in long-term committed relationships.

In keeping with the position of the PC(USA) since 1978, the Assembly, by 75% to 24%, approved a statement that champions equal treatment for all persons, urges state legislatures to give rights to “civil union,” and urges Congress not only to recognize those state laws but to extend federal benefits and privileges to persons in such relationships when they are licensed by the states.

Moderatorial candidate David McKechnie successfully added a paragraph inserting the Presbyterian definition of marriage as a civil contract between a man and a woman. Though it seemed beside the point in a resolution dealing with civil unions, it prevents the use of the term “marriage” in referring to civil unions. The Assembly voted, by 60% to 39%, in favor of a commissioner resolution advocated by minister commissioner William Teng of National Capital, stating that nothing said by this Assembly “is to be construed to state or imply a position for or against the Federal Marriage Amendment,” and decreeing that “General Assembly entities shall not advocate for or against the Federal Marriage Amendment.” The action contradicts the position that the Assembly had just taken; perhaps the commissioners were not clear about what the Federal Marriage Amendment says. The resolution seems designed chiefly to muzzle the Washington Office.

The Ordination Question

The Church Orders and Ministry committee was once again under the glare of media attention. After hours of testimony, the committee decided not to recommend a constitutional amendment to delete G-6.0106b, which requires either chastity in singleness or fidelity in heterosexual marriage. Instead it voted (by a margin of 5 votes) for the Western Reserve overture. This called on the Assembly to declare that sessions and presbyteries are no longer bound by any of the “authoritative interpretations” (AIs) by General Assemblies and decisions by its Permanent Judicial Commission that predate adoption of this provision in the constitution. The alternative proposed by the minority of the committee was to ask the Assembly to pray for the work of the Theological Task Force.

During floor debate, several unsuccessful efforts were made to get consideration of the amendment. Instead, the gist of the minority report was added to the committee’s majority report, since no one is against prayer for the

TTF.

In explaining the recommendation about the AIs, it was pointed out that these earlier actions cannot be rescinded; they stay on the record as “guidance,” but the General Assembly can declare them to be no longer binding. This would give presbyteries and sessions a bit more flexibility in considering the suitability of candidates.

Commissioners were informed that the TTF had said that an amendment would make their work more difficult but was neutral about action on the AIs. A commissioner in a wheelchair said that she had come to the Assembly expecting to vote for the status quo, but her experience in the Greater Richmond Convention Center, where she was unable to open any of the doors, made her understand the situation of those who are excluded.

In the end, the Assembly voted by a margin of four votes (259/255/2) for the minority report. What tipped the balance? Many professed to be afraid of what the press, or the people in the pews, would say if the church were perceived to be letting down barriers. Some felt apprehensive about making the AIs mere “guidance,” even though G-6.0106b would remain on the books. The minority report offered commissioners a tempting way out, calling on the church to pray for the TTF and “engage faithfully in the process of discernment as led by the Task Force.” It will be interesting to see how many of those who voted for the minority report will participate in this process.

Before the vote, Moderator Rick Ufford-Chase said that he would meet with whichever side lost the vote. Those who needed to lament gathered in a plaza across the street. The circle grew to perhaps 350 people. The Moderator, Vice-Moderator, and Stated Clerk all attended. Rick offered supportive comments, urging those who were still excluded to continue the struggle for justice. The Rev. Jane Spahr urged people to light a candle and keep it burning for the next two years in a quiet vigil for justice. Marco Grimaldo led a closing litany, but after the event came to a close many remained for another half hour or so, embracing and grieving another loss but preparing to begin the struggle again. (For the statement issued by More Light Presbyterians and That All May Freely Serve, as well as the closing litany, visit www.mlp.org.)

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What now?

1. The commissioners to the 216th General Assembly have given themselves the responsibility of taking active leadership in promoting dialogue in every presbytery under the auspices of the Theological Task Force.
2. The TTF will have to take risks that this Assembly refused to take, specifically the ordination question. The TTF has not regarded this as one of its central tasks. Now it has been authorized to take it on and bring it to a resolution.
3. Nominating committees in every presbytery will have the responsibility of identifying persons who actively participate in the coming two years of dialogue and nominating them as commissioners to the 217th General Assembly. That Assembly now has greater responsibilities imposed upon it, including consideration of the "ordination question" without further excuses for procrastination.

As we begin another two years of wrestling over the ordination question, we remind Witherspooners of an hour-long documentary produced by the Covenant Network and unveiled at the General Assembly. Entitled "Turning Points: Stories of Life and Change in the Church," it shows Presbyterians struggling with the denomination's current ordination standards. A study guide is included. The cost is \$10 plus \$2 shipping and handling (specify VHS or DVD). Contact the Covenant Network of Presbyterians, 2515 Fillmore St., San Francisco, CA 94115; (415) 351-2196, fax 351-2198; web site www.covenantnetwork.org.

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