

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Assembly acts decisively on gun violence, abortion, tax reform

June 19, 2014

Recommendations that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) advocate measures to prevent gun violence won resounding approval Thursday from the 221st General Assembly (2014).

“Gun violence is a public health crisis in the United States that is not being adequately addressed,” said Teaching Elder Commissioner Wallace Fletcher of the Presbytery of Philadelphia, adding, “30,000 people a year are killed by guns in the United States.”

Among other things, the Assembly’s action calls for formation of support, healing and advocacy groups for those who have experienced gun violence in their families; opposition to legislation that exempts gun manufacturers and marketers from legal liability and/or financial accountability for the medical and security costs of predictable gun misuse and availability to criminals, the unstable, and the self-destructive; opposition to “stand your ground” and other legislation that may entitle gun owners to shoot before taking alternative measures (such as relying on law enforcement and/or other de-escalation techniques) in perceived defense of persons or property; encouraging church sessions and PC(USA) entities that own property to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones; raising the age for handgun ownership to 21; supporting legislation to ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor-piercing handgun ammunition and .50-caliber rifles; and advocacy in support of state and federal legislation to regulate ammunition.

Commissioners voted 465-133 to disapprove an overture from the Presbytery of South Alabama calling for appointment of a special committee to review PC(USA) policies on abortion and propose new policies if needed. The overture also urged a two-year churchwide “season of reflection” on the plight of unwanted children, “both born and not-yet-born.”

A substitute motion proposed by Teaching Elder Commissioner Jim Houston-Hencken of the Presbytery of Nevada eliminated the original overture’s call for a new study of abortion and simply urged “a two-year season of prayer and reflection on ‘the least of these’ children, both born and not yet born, who are unwanted by human society.” This motion also was voted down.

After rejecting an attempt to refer, the Assembly voted 425-170 to approve a lengthy paper from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy titled “Tax Justice: A Christian Response to a New Gilded Age,” offering recommendations seeking a fairer tax system in the United States.



Dan Ponder, moderator of Committee 9, Social justice Issues, addressed plenary VII during the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the PC(USA) in Detroit, MI on Thursday, June 19, 2014. —*Danny Bolin*

General Assembly News

EVA STIMSON

Ruling Elder Commissioner Dan Ponder, moderator of the Assembly Committee on Social Justice Issues, said the aim of the document is to “start discussion of a Christian framework for tax reform.” Ruling Elder Commissioner Debra Davies, a commissioner from the Presbytery of Maumee Valley, praised the paper. “In my experience as an accounting and business professional, this is the most thorough and in-depth analysis of the tax structure I’ve seen,” she said. “This is an opportunity for us to be a prophetic witness for economic justice in our country.”

However, Steve Watkins, a Teaching Elder Commissioner from the Presbytery of New Harmony, contended that the paper is based on false assumptions and “does not reflect the wider diversity and perspectives of our denomination.”

Several commissioners said they needed more time to read and digest the lengthy document, but a motion to refer it to ACSWP to bring back to the 222nd General Assembly (2016) was defeated.

An overture from the Presbytery of San Francisco calling for a two-year churchwide study to discern how to advocate for more effective drug policies in the United States, approved unanimously by the Social Justice Issues Committee, was pulled from the consent agenda for a vote by the full Assembly. When it came to the floor, two commissioners raised questions about the two-year duration and the \$50,000 financial implication of the study. However, the measure ultimately was approved by a vote of 317- 260.

Most of the business items dealt with by the Assembly Committee on Social Justice Issues were placed on the consent agenda approved by commissioners on Wednesday. Among the items approved:

- an overture from the Presbytery of Nevada that seeks training in trauma crisis counseling for pastors and other caregivers so that they can respond more effectively to the needs of survivors following a homicide or mass shooting;
- an overture from the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta calling for measures to promote food sovereignty, which includes the right of all people to “safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and food-producing resources”;
- an overture from the Presbytery of National Capital affirming the importance of maternal and child nutrition in the 1,000 days between the beginning of a woman’s pregnancy and her child’s second birthday;
- an amended overture from the Synod of the Covenant calling for a study of end-of-life issues;
- an overture from the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta calling for a national moratorium on the death penalty;
- an amended overture from the Presbytery of Santa Fe urging the church to support financial and political reforms of the U.S. political and financial sector, including campaign finance reform;
- a commissioners’ resolution encouraging presbyteries and denominational agencies to adopt parental leave policies with minimum terms of six weeks at 100 percent of prorated annual salary and full housing allowance;
- a commissioners’ resolution seeking support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons in 81 countries where homosexuality is illegal; and
- a resolution from the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns proposing actions to counter a “new wave of voter suppression” it says is disproportionately affecting racial ethnic communities following the June 2013 decision of the U.S. Supreme Court nullifying a core provision of the Voting Rights Act.