

# MEMORANDUM

**To:** Sessions and Teaching Elders of the Presbytery of St. Andrew  
**From:** Greg Goodwiller, Executive Presbyter and Stated Clerk  
**Ref:** August Gathering of the “Fellowship of Presbyterians” in Minneapolis, MN  
**Date:** August 31, 2011

I have just returned from Minneapolis and as promised, I am submitting this memorandum to you as my perspective on the event, its content, and its meaning. Feel free to forward or otherwise circulate this document as you see fit.

The “Fellowship of Presbyterians” (hereinafter, “Fellowship”) began as a letter composed by a group of pastors of large PC(USA) congregations, in which they described our denomination as “deathly ill,” and declared their conviction that the time had come for them to take action. The letter quickly grew into a movement, and the movement’s architects began to map out a variety of options – from the creation of yet another new denomination, to creative ways to both stay in the PC(USA), and yet somehow be “differentiated” from it in tangible ways.

At issue, of course, is the recent passage of amendment “10-A” that replaces the Form of Government’s mandatory behavioral standard requiring those in ordered ministries to “live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman (W-4.9001), or chastity in singleness,” with the requirement to “submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life.”

The decision on “10-A” means that the denomination-wide mandatory behavioral standard (which was added to the *Book of Order* in 1996 as a response to the debate over the ordination of self-affirming, practicing homosexuals) has been removed, and we have returned to the long-standing practice of allowing ordaining bodies (sessions for ruling elders and deacons, and presbyteries for teaching elders) to determine fitness for ordination.

While ordination decisions can still be challenged, the current assumption (not yet tested) is that in sessions and/or presbyteries where homosexual practice is *not* considered to be “sinful” behavior, self-affirming and/or practicing homosexuals will now be ordained. And although in the Presbyterian system of governance, no congregation can ever be *required* to elect or not elect particular individuals to serve as its leaders at the local level, this change has created a conflict of conscience for some in our church – since our constitution *also* states that “the councils [of the church] are distinct, but have such mutual relations that the act of one of them is the act of the whole church” (G-3.01).

## MEMO – Fellowship of Presbyterians, page 2

More than 1900 Presbyterians gathered recently in Minneapolis for the first event sponsored by the new organization. A steering team member reported that 40% of those gathered were in fact staff of mid-Councils and the General Assembly. It was also evident that some of the attendees were curious onlookers, or individuals on the “other side of the aisle,” who were present to observe, but who do not share the same concerns as the event’s organizers. Still, well over 1,000 Presbyterian pastors, ruling elders, and concerned church members were present to learn about ways they and their congregations might respond to the recent change to the *Book of Order* and other concerns they have about the PC(USA).

The plan as presented in Minneapolis is complex, and most definitely still evolving. It includes four distinct “tiers” of response, as well as a number of options within each tier. It is envisioned that all four tiers will exist simultaneously under the “umbrella” of the Fellowship. In their own words (from the event agenda), the tiers are as follows:

Tier One – “Nurturing Mission and Ministry ‘In Place’ ”

Tier Two – “Presbyteries Within Presbyteries and Ecclesial Orders”

Tier Three – “Pathways to a Distinctive Identity”

Tier Four – The “New Reformed Body.”

It was argued that a primary factor in determining which “tier” a particular congregation should pursue is its current context – by which was meant primarily the presbytery in which the church exists. Five distinct scenarios were presented:

### 1. Conservative/Evangelical Dominance

*In some presbyteries (noted examples were San Diego and Santa Barbara), the perspective of the Fellowship is the dominant view, in which case there may be no need for congregations to do anything other than focus their attention on their mission and growing Christ’s Church.*

### 2. Conservative/Evangelical Majority

*In some presbyteries, the Fellowship’s perspective is clearly in the majority, even though a significant minority view also exists – leading to presbytery statements/actions that are conservative, yet mediated and conciliatory.*

### 3. 50% / 50% Split

*In many presbyteries, the votes on matters related to human sexuality, etc. are nearly equally divided, with the result that debates are often rancorous and divisive.*

### 4. Liberal/Progressive Majority

*On the other hand, there are presbyteries where the Fellowship's perspective is clearly in the minority, often leading to similar results as in #2 above, except that the statements fall on the side of the progressive perspective.*

5. Liberal/Progressive Dominance

*In still other presbyteries (noted examples were from certain presbyteries in the Synod of the Northeast), the Fellowship's perspective is represented in such small numbers that its proponents feel devalued and even persecuted.*

I would note, at this point, that I think the Presbytery of St. Andrew falls in category 2. Its votes on controversial issues demonstrate a consistent “conservative” perspective, while its responses to the denomination's actions represent earnest attempts to speak for the *whole* presbytery – with the understanding that we do not all agree, and need to leave room wherever possible for difference of views and various interpretations of Scripture.

Tiers two and three were probably the most difficult to understand, and are the most challenging to discuss. They include a variety of options for some sort of separation or distinction between different ideological perspectives *within* the PC(USA). My conclusion, having attended the one “breakout” group on Tier Three, is that these two tiers are really just one tier – another demonstration of the fact that this entire movement is a ‘work in process,’ and by no means a ‘finished product.’ Here are a number of options that were discussed in these tiers:

- “Overlay” Presbyteries

*The concept is that two presbyteries should “share” the same geography, and yet be distinct in all respects – except that they might choose to share staff, and participate together in certain programs.*

*Although its proponents have attempted to argue that this could be accomplished under the new Form of Government (and effected by the General Assembly's Administrative Commission on Middle Governing Bodies), the general consensus of constitutional authorities is that it would require a change to the constitution.*

- Multiple Ecclesiastical Commissions or Joint Commissions

*The new Form of Government does allow the formation of commissions that are responsible for some or all of the responsibilities of a presbytery. A presbytery could, for example, create two commissions with the full authority of the presbytery in all aspects of its life and work, but with congregations of the presbytery choosing (with presbytery's permission) to be under the authority of one or the other of those commissions. The commissions would still need to report all actions to the full presbytery at least twice each year, which would retain its authority to “amend something previously adopted” by one of the commissions, which would serve as a “check and balance” over the commissions.*

## MEMO – Fellowship of Presbyterians, page 4

*Alternatively, presbyteries could create such commissions, but only give them authority over ecclesiastical (current COM and CPM) functions, while continuing to do mission, camping, educational, and other programs as a single presbytery.*

*Finally, the new Form of Government also allows “joint commissions,” so that two or more presbyteries could form a commission responsible for ecclesiastical functions in their (joint) bounds – over congregations that their respective presbyteries agree to place under its jurisdiction.*

- Non-Geographic Presbyteries

*Another option that would require a constitutional amendment is the formation of non-geographic presbyteries (presumably within a synod) that are formed along ideological lines. Currently, the Form of Government only allows such presbyteries to be formed with immigrant fellowships.*

Tier Four involves the creation of a “new Reformed body.” First of all, this is not simply an option being explored. It is a reality being birthed. It is already incorporated, and a “constitutional convention” has been set for mid-January, 2012. The convention will be held in Orlando, and First Presbyterian Church of Orlando has already begun the process of seeking dismissal from its presbytery in accordance with its “gracious dismissal policy.”

Proponents of this option first point out that the difference between this movement and prior schismatic divisions is that it hopes to maintain communication and fellowship with the PC(USA), and the movement’s leaders were both careful and emphatic in their assertion that they are not declaring the PC(USA) to be apostate. They have also mapped out three distinct ways in which congregations might “relate” to the new entity: dismissal to the new body, becoming a union church/presbytery, and becoming an “affiliate member” of one or the other bodies. These options are discussed below, but in a different order than they were presented:

1. What they described as the “most radical” option is that congregations are dismissed *to* the new Reformed body *from* the PC(USA). The Leaders also intimated their intent to promote an overture to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2012) that would establish a denomination-wide dismissal policy to assist congregations that wish to pursue this option. They furthermore discussed the possibility that congregations *not* currently in the PC(USA) might also desire to unite with this new Reformed body (for example, congregations currently in the transitional presbytery of the EPC with ordained female pastoral staff whose ordination will be in question when the transitional presbytery’s life comes to an end).
2. The third option addressed (discussed here as number two), is the concept of “Affiliate Membership,” along the lines of affiliate membership for local church members – where churches are members of one body, but hold temporary

membership in another. This is not currently possible, and so would require a change to our constitution. It was not clear to me whether this was entirely an option under tier four, or could also be a tier two/three option (where, for example, a congregation in the bounds of the Presbytery of St. Andrew could choose to become an “affiliate member” of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta). It was also not clear to me what the *benefits* of this option would be – since if affiliate membership worked in the same way that it does with local church members, affiliate members would have voice but not vote in their affiliate bodies, and while creating a certain *connection* with them, would not in any way be *bound* by their judgments, since they could simply vote to end the relationship at any time.

3. The second option presented (discussed here as number three) is that congregations could become “union” churches with the new body. Indeed, even under the current constitution, entire presbyteries could pursue this option. Chapter five of the new Form of Government defines how such entities can exist, and there are numerous examples of both union churches and union presbyteries in our history – including union churches and presbyteries that were formed in the years preceding the reunion of the PCUS with the UPCUSA.

Such entities can only be created with the permission of the next higher council (presbytery for congregations, and synod for presbyteries), which allows for negotiation of the terms under which that body would be willing to approve the relationship.

G-5.05a. states, “Such joint witnesses shall be subject to the constitution of each denomination involved. Wherever the constitutions of the denominations differ, the mandatory provisions of one shall apply in all cases when the others are permissive. Wherever there are conflicting mandatory provisions, the congregational council shall petition the next higher councils or governing bodies to resolve the conflict.”

Similar wording exists for union presbyteries. For those seeking “differentiation” from the PC(USA) while remaining fully in it, this option has obvious attractions. It does not require any changes to the current PC(USA) constitution. It would allow continued participation in the Board of Pensions and the Presbyterian Foundation, continued voice and vote in PC(USA) councils, and continued participation in the life and work of presbyteries. And at the same time, any mandatory ordination standards in the constitution of the new Reformed body that are permissive in the PC(USA) would be mandatory for those churches/ presbyteries.

Again, the current intent and commitment of the Fellowship is to pursue *all* of these various options *simultaneously*. The Fellowship’s leaders are very much aware that most of the options require the cooperation, if not the majority vote, of higher councils in order

**MEMO – Fellowship of Presbyterians, page 6**

to be effected. They therefore expressed on numerous occasions their desire to maintain good working relationships with those councils, as well as their commitment to doing their work “in the open,” and not secretively. There are a growing number of resources on the Fellowship’s website ([www.fellowship-pres.org](http://www.fellowship-pres.org)), and I will keep you informed of developments along the way, including any response(s) of the Presbytery of St. Andrew’s leadership when they have the opportunity to consider and reflect on the Gathering.

Let me conclude by repeating what I said in my May 12<sup>th</sup> communication shortly after the the passage of amendment 10-A: my prayer is that here in the Presbytery of St. Andrew we will continue to work *together* to participate in God’s mission in the world. Maintaining unity during a time of great division on important matters of the faith is not easy. But it is also not unique to our time, and it is not impossible.

Christ’s peace to you all as you consider these weighty and important matters.