

Mixed messages about worth of human life come from the 222nd Assembly of the PCUSA

The 222nd General Assembly of the PCUSA took place in Portland, Oregon, June 18-25. Presbyterians Pro-Life gave witness to Jesus Christ and the value of human life through our exhibit booth and our Assembly news, *Daily Delivery*. We provided assistance as we were able to commissioners through nightly meetings and testimony in committees. Our PPL GA team was 10 strong, comprised of board members and volunteers. Each day began with team prayer and ended in prayer with a small band of courageous commissioners committed to making God-honoring, Bible-based decisions in an assembly more welcoming to a Muslim cleric who prayed for Allah's blessing and to the LGBTQ community than to theologically orthodox, evangelical, pro-life Presbyterians.

End of Life

End of Life paper from Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) approved

Abiding Presence: Living Faithfully in End of Life Decisions, a lengthy paper meant to provide a guide for pastors who minister to those at the end of life and to encourage Presbyterians to prepare advance directives to indicate their wishes for medical care at the end of life, was lightly amended by committee and approved by the plenary as amended. (View the paper and GA action at <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000053>).

An added paragraph clarified an important difference between palliative care and hospice care in the affirmation statement: "Affirmation: Faithful Living at the End-of-Life." Another amendment simply added 'surrogate decision-makers,' to a list of various provisions under the umbrella of 'advance directives.'

A pastoral guide in the rationale forms the heart of the resolution. It generally places a high value on human life as created in God's image. It acknowledges God's presence throughout our lives and even in our death. The paper offers excellent information about the roles of the various care providers (medical, spiritual, and ethical) that persons may encounter at the end of life. It informs about the dying process and the decisions one may face. Carefully used, it is a teaching tool to assist Presbyterians in writing advance directives or counseling others facing decisions at the end of life.

Two fault lines prevent PPL from endorsing the paper fully and so we raise these reasons for caution when using the paper as a tool for study in congregations.

The paper holds a high view of individual autonomy and seems to equate any definitive moral statement with being judgmental rather than pastoral. Scripture clearly teaches that we are not to take human life. Our Book of Confessions teaches that the prohibition against the taking of human life includes any activity that causes harm to ourselves as well as to others. Yet, authors of "Abiding Presence" state:

While sharing in the historic Christian opposition to suicide, we do not find it condemned in Scripture nor see ourselves called to judge others, particularly those facing irreversible deterioration of awareness and bodily function.

In committee discussion authors of the paper and denominational staff stated that they wanted to be pastoral to families whose loved ones have committed suicide. The affirmation states that it can be "understandable" to hasten death and the pastoral guide indicates physician assisted suicide may be "justified" in some cases.

The unborn remembered at PPL's Exhibit Hall Booth



PPL President, John Sheldon & Executive Director, Marie Bowen



Precious One models 11-12 wks



Images of child in utero on video

High importance is also placed on the individual's experience of suffering in the dying process—not only in terms of physical pain, but in loss of community relationships or personal function. While authors acknowledge that we are not necessarily to avoid suffering at all costs, and that we may be closest to God when we 'share in Christ's suffering', that theme is abandoned (along with any assurance that God is present and faithful and trustworthy in our suffering) when they indicate toward the end of the paper that physician assisted suicide (PAS) may be "justified" in some cases, that only the individual can determine their own experience of suffering, and that pastors are to support the decisions to cause one's own death through PAS. Justin Marple, TE Commissioner and PPL Board member, offered a motion to add the comment that "the church does not advocate for suicide in any form." The motion failed in committee by 10-60.

Physician finds problems in section of paper dealing with life of an unborn child when a pregnant woman is dying or already has met the criteria for brain death.

When a mother is dying or already has met the criteria for brain death, there is a chance the child may live if the mother's bodily functions can be sustained for a period of time sufficient for the child to reach viability. Dr. Patricia Lee June objected to a statement in the paper asserting that children born in such circumstances have poor outcomes. In testimony given during open hearings in the Theological Issues and Institutes Committee, Dr. June stated:

It [Sec. D of the paper] erroneously states that most infants who survive have poor outcomes. First, this implies that infants with disabilities have no value. It denies the medical literature which shows premature birth with normal development in surviving babies. Don't consign these babies to death -- let us offer them a chance for a full life.

The paper's authors focus on the mother's wishes, but little is said of the care of the child who remains alive.

The specific circumstances must be examined, and individual moral commitments and beliefs of the pregnant woman and her partner should govern whatever decision is made, in light of respecting the woman's right to govern what is done to her body.

Medical providers are bound by the mother's advance directives, it is true, but authors of the paper missed an opportunity to encourage women of child-bearing age to make provisions in their advance directives for any unborn child to have a chance to live beyond the event of their own death. Dr. Ernest Krug, primary author of the paper and a pediatrician/ethicist, thanked those from PPL who had testified and told the committee he had gone back and researched the literature and found more recent information giving a 62% survival rate among these babies. He suggested the wording be changed from "infants if they survive have generally poor outcomes" to "infants may face developmental challenges". No one offered this amendment in committee but there is some hope that an editorial change may be made before publication and distribution.

Protection of Born Children

There is good news in items of business that call for the protection of already born children against violence and abuse

Commissioners approved Advocating for the Safety and Well-being of Children of Palestine and Israel (Item 08-02 <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/6312>) calling "the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, and the government of Israel to denounce and cease the incitement of violence against children or at the hands of children."

Also approved was the PC(USA) Child/Youth/Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy and Procedures (Item 03-14 <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000164>) . The rationale for the policy affirms children as a gift from God

Children, youth, and vulnerable adults are a gift from God and the Church has a divine mandate to provide for their safety and nurturing. The Church is called to be a place that reflects the open arms of Jesus. In Matthew 19:14, Jesus says, "Let the little children come to me."

Children and youth are not only persons of care and service in the church, but they are also co-recipients of the graces and love of God. Jesus exemplified this in the Gospel of Mark 10:15-16 when he urged his followers to receive the kingdom of God as a little child. And he specifically takes up the children into his arms and blesses them. So also the Church, as the body of Christ, is to be the presence of Christ's love, in the same way taking up all children and youth into its arms and blessing them; providing for them a safe, thriving, and nurturing environments in which to grow in every way.

Of special interest is the definition of a child used in the protection policy rationale: Child: A child will be defined as a person between the ages of 0-11. Did the Office of the General Assembly mean to include the months from fertilization until birth? Probably not, but it is an interesting development in the body of Assembly statements about the value of human life all the same.

The Imago Dei

Language about Imago Dei found in several items of GA business

The value and dignity of human life was the basis of a report (Item 11-21) from ACSWP titled *Human Trafficking and Human Rights: Children of God, Not for Sale*. Approved on a voice vote in both committee and in plenary, the report focused

on the trafficking of humans for forced labor and declared: “Human beings, created in the image of God, are not for sale.”

The theological basis for the paper contains statements with which pro-life Presbyterians can agree:

The church stands against human trafficking and forced labor based upon its conviction that each person bears the image of God, or Imago Dei, and that work is both a necessity and a calling: “the laborer deserves to be paid” (1 Tim. 5:18). We may understand the image of God as the capacity for personal, covenantal relationship that gives all humans individual worth...human beings should never be treated as commodities.

The rationale says more about the Imago Dei and concludes:

Human trafficking is thus a violation of the image-bearers whom God has created. It is an affront to God and a rejection of God’s purposes for humankind.

How is it the church is so clear that human trafficking is a “rejection of God’s purposes for humankind” and is yet so blind to the offense of abortion that has killed more than 55 million of God’s image bearers? Is our imagination so dull that we cannot see beyond the curtain of the womb and know that we are thwarting God’s plans and purposes when we abort unborn children?

In other items of business the Imago Dei did not fare as well.

The confusion of the PCUSA about the nature of human beings in relationship to our Creator God is evident in two measures approved by the Committee on Theological Issues and Institutions. In a lightly amended Affirmation of Creation (Item 14-13) the teaching of science ascends to a ‘truth’ level that seems to supersede the biblical account of the creation of humankind in God’s image. The Affirmation includes the following points about which Presbyterians do not have essential agreement:

That God has connected all life on Earth in a network of kinship by virtue of biological evolution from common ancestors;”

“That, in response to God’s call, we Homo sapiens (modern humans) emerged, in our wide diversity and different cultures, as a species over more than 6 million years of hominin development;»

That, since our line of descent split from the line that resulted in our contemporaries, the chimpanzees and bonobos, we Homo sapiens were preceded by at least eighteen already identified hominin species, all of which are now extinct;*

Commissioners also endorsed a clergy letter (Item 14-01) stating:

Religious truth is of a different order from scientific truth. Its purpose is not to convey scientific information but to transform hearts. . . .We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth,

The letter labels as ignorant any who disagree with their position on evolution:

To reject this truth or to treat it as “one theory among others” is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.



Justin Marple waits to be recognized by the moderator to speak on the issue.

Such is the Value of Life in the PCUSA

A report by Carmen Fowler LaBerge of the Presbyterian Lay Committee, reprinted by permission.

Should the Presbyterian Church (USA) continue its membership in the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice? (<http://rcrc.org/homepage/about/>) That was the question and it came to the 222nd General Assembly meeting in Portland, Ore., in the form of a Commissioner’s Resolution (CR).

The CR on the proposed withdrawal of the PCUSA from the RCRC came to committee #10 as business item 10-16 (<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000184>). The commissioner who submitted the resolution, Justin Marple, was serving on another committee and the timing of item 10-16 was moved around the docket several times which ultimately prevented him from being able to speak to his own CR until after debate had already taken place.

In committee open hearing, arguments in favor of ending the denomination’s relationship with the RCRC included that of the Rev. Tara Thompson, teaching elder from Tampa Bay Presbytery:

I want to tell you a story of a young woman who wasn’t ready to be a parent, a mother who abandoned her child more than once. But it’s also a story of two lives deeply intertwined; it’s MY story.

Continued on back

As a child I didn't understand and pleaded with my mom to stay. For years I was angry, but later felt compelled to track her down. To honor her not because she was a great mother, but simply because she was MY mother. I wish I could tell you we lived happily ever after, but even in adulthood, we had seasons of difficulty.

But at the end of her life, she asked for my forgiveness. Weeping she told me she almost had an abortion, but the thing she was most proud of in her life was me, that she knew she'd done something right. TWO lives which testify to the good news of God's redeeming grace.

I ask you to approve CR10-16 because it underscores the PCUSA's commitment to affirming the nuances involved in abortion decisions. RCRC policies don't.

Others offered equally powerful witness on behalf of life. Jack Sharpe, a well known Presbyterian Pro Life advocate, reminded the committee of the words of Jesus in John 10:10, "A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy. I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance." He then said that he favors withdrawal from the "RCRC because it stands against life. It always takes a position in favor of abortion. Walk in my shoes. How would those of you who support abortion think if the PCUSA were part of the National Pro-Life Alliance?"

Others reminded the commissioners of the denomination's own policy statements like the "Problem Pregnancies and Abortion 1992 Social Witness Policy." That document says Presbyterians substantially agree that:

"a. Church ought to be able to maintain within its fellowship . . . those who come to diverse conclusions and actions." Continued participation in RCRC effectively aligns the denomination with a pro-abortion access position.

Dr. Patty June also testified, saying,

"RCRC advocacy and PCUSA policy are different. We say the lives of viable unborn babies who could survive outside the womb if delivered — ought to be preserved, cared for and not aborted Conversely, RCRC opposes both bans on abortions after fetal viability and even laws requiring care for babies born alive after abortion procedures. Our policy says abortion should be the choice of last resort — after consultation between a woman and her physician and prayerful consideration but RCRC opposes letting women see an ultrasound and getting full information. RCRC opposes even a 1-2 day waiting period that allows a woman time to prayerfully consider the information she's read."

The arguments made in favor of RCRC — and therefore against the CR — centered on the service RCRC provides to pastors through its "all options clergy counseling training" and it was argued that the CR mischaracterized the RCRC's policies.

One of the reasons the CR arose was that the United Methodist Church recently withdrew from the RCRC (<https://juicy-ecumenism.com/2016/05/23/the-methodist-surprise-in-portland/>) because they no longer experienced it as a place where a pro-life voice was effectively heard. Those arguing for the RCRC vehemently argued against the PCUSA's alignment with the UMC.

One commissioner argued that to compare the PCUSA and the UMC was to "compare apples to oranges." He said, "we do not look to organizations that are culturally or structurally not the same as us. The UMC is a global church," noting that their cultural diversity "encumbers their decisions" related to women's reproductive rights. He concluded that the "the PCUSA is a national church with global partners and serves the reality of the culture of women in the US."

That argument was echoed by Noelle from Seattle who said, "We do not need to follow in the path of the UMC." Concluding that "choice" is "one of the reasons I'm Presbyterian and proud to be Presbyterian."

Mike Smith of Tucson, Arizona heralded PARO, Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options, (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/phewa/paro/>) a part of the denomination's Health, Education and Welfare ministry. "We've been a pro-choice church for over 40 years. It makes sense for us to join with other churches and faith groups through RCRC because RCRC is an ally with the same mission: pro-choice and wants to strengthen a woman's right to choose."

Donna Riley also said the PCUSA takes a "pro-choice position that trusts women to discern God's will." She noted that being in the RCRC is an "efficient and wise use of our limited resources." She concluded that "as a woman of reproductive age in SW Virginia, my healthcare options are limited, I'm glad my church has my back on this."

The notion of withdrawing from the RCRC was characterized as "a regressive step in terms of respect for women" and a "stigmatization of access to reproductive resources."

In the end the CR was voted down in committee by a vote of 65-5. It failed as well on the floor of the Assembly 431-132. Such is the status of life in the PCUSA.

Carmen Fowler LaBerge is the President of the Presbyterian Lay Committee. Access her GA video reports and other GA news articles at Layman.com. Carmen is also the host of a daily radio program, The Reconnect. To listen via livestream visit <http://reconnectwithcarmen.com/>.

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