

January 25, 2016

To: Presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

From: National Black Presbyterian Caucus

Subject: Important Issues for our Denomination

This correspondence from the National Black Presbyterian Caucus (NBPC) is being sent to bring to your attention two issues that will come before the General Assembly of our denomination in June 2016.

The first issue concerns the fact that the members of the Special Offerings Task Force have received a referral from the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board recommending that the 222nd General Assembly (2016) approve that funds from **the Christmas Joy Offering** continue to be distributed to eligible Historically Presbyterian Racial Ethnic Institutions through 2024, after which time, funds will be allocated for racial ethnic leadership development programs in the Presbyterian Mission Agency.

NBPC encourages the Church to oppose this recommendation and advocate that the Christmas Joy Offering funds be continued without interruption to our racial ethnic institutions well into the 21st century to assure their financial viability. Presbyterian Racial Ethnic Institutions, while they have made some progress, will still need support from the Church well beyond 2024. This is true because Black wealth is still very limited in the U.S. According to the Institute for Policy Studies, Blacks comprise 13 percent of the U.S. population but have only 2.7 percent of total wealth. The wealth of the Forbes 400 billionaires is equal to the wealth of the entire African American population (Institute for Policy Studies, "Billionaire Bonanza Report: The Forbes 400 and the Rest of Us," December 2015, Collins and Hoxie).

Martin Luther King, Jr. observed in his **I Have a Dream Speech** that the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. Even so, Black institutions are trying to cultivate alumni support and support from other sources, but raising funds is still challenging.

In an article written this fall in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* about Black institutions, it was noted that these institutions have played a significant role in the lives of African Americans. The supportive atmosphere at these institutions has allowed Black students to excel within the classroom without the racial pressures that can be found in society. They have allowed many to enroll as diamonds in the rough that are nurtured and polished to become, after graduation, significant contributors to church and society. Many of these schools take chances on students that other schools will not enroll. Many students come from low-income families, from less than well know high schools, and will be the first to attend college in their families. These institutions have produced some significant leaders for the Church and society. We are a much stronger Presbyterian Church today due to the leadership of African Americans like Drs. Thelma Davidson Adair, Katie Geneva Cannon, James Thomas, Edward Newberry, Arthur Canada, Darius and Vera Swann, Lonnie J. Oliver, Byron Wade, Larry Hill, and the late James H. Costen, all of whom are products of racial ethnic institutions.

These institutions have been a major factor in educating African American leaders for the Church. If we want to ensure the development of African American Presbyterian leaders for the Church and society, we need to continue to provide financial support to our Historically Presbyterian Racial Ethnic Institutions through the Christmas Joy Offering for a very long time.

The second issue that NBPC wants to bring to your attention concerns the fact that Foothills Presbytery will send to the 222nd General Assembly nine overtures for consideration that will have an impact on how the Church will deal with social justice matters. Find below a very brief description of the overtures. NBPC opposes all nine of the overtures.

Overture # 1 overtures the General Assembly to amend paragraph G.0503 of the Book of Order adding language that requires the Biennial meetings of GA to discuss and more faithfully fulfill the Great Ends of the Church. Every third General Assembly shall depart from the rotation of the Six Great Ends and instead be called together to consider all amendments to the Constitution that have been properly submitted. All overtures to amend the Constitution, in order to be considered by the GA for Constitutional change, must have the endorsement of no fewer than 15% of the Presbyteries. Overtures that receive 2/3rds endorsement of the presbyteries may be considered at any GA following the achievement of the 2/3rds endorsement.

Overture # 2 overtures the GA to amend the Standing Rules of the GA regarding plenary meetings requiring that any social witness policy statement of resolution to be proposed at the GA shall first have the concurrence of 1/3rd of the presbyteries. As an alternative to yes/no votes the Assembly shall seriously consider calling the denomination's attention to the issue to explore its dimensions, and imploring its members to learn and pray about the issue, and become more engaged at the local church and presbytery level. In developing dockets of plenary and committee meetings, social witness policy should relate only to the Six Great Ends of the church.

Overture # 3 overtures the GA that for the next three General Assemblies, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy shall focus its attention on generating discussion in the presbyteries about social witness policy concerns. The aim of these discussions will be to work toward forming consensus in the broader church regarding social witness policy. This will temporarily set aside the GA's guidelines for forming social witness policy.

Overture # 4 overtures the GA to Amend the Standing Rules of the GA to strike certain words (under section B and Subsection 2) and adding others to read that 20% of the presbyteries may elect an Executive Presbyter Advisory Delegate, who shall ordinarily be the presbytery executive, to be an advisory delegate to the GA. The Committee on the Office of the GA shall design a rotation system among the Presbyteries to accomplish this goal.

Overture # 5 overtures the GA to change the language to amend G-6.04 by striking language to allow for a 2/3rds vote from the present majority vote of approval from the presbyteries to change the Book of Order. The approved amendment would become effective not one year following the adjournment of the assembly transmitting the proposed amendment, but it would become effective, if approved and enacted by the next General Assembly, which now meets every two years.

Overture # 6 overtures the 222nd GA to amend the Book of Order, Chapter 3, "Councils of the Church," to allow presbyteries to register an abstaining vote when voting on GA proposals recommending constitutional changes. Consequently, a presbytery's decision to abstain will not be recorded as a no vote. The authors of the overture think this will help presbyteries that are undecided about an issue to vote their conviction that to change the constitution at that time is inadvisable, divisive, and that further prayer, discussion and discernment will benefit the Church. They reason it will also help the perceived

pressure on the part of some who feel that GA is pressing for votes on divisive issues which have disrupted the peace, unity and purity of the Church, resulting in diminished membership and mission momentum.

Overture # 7 overtures the 222nd GA to amend Section L of the Standing Rules of the GA as found in the Manual of the GA. Presently, these rules allow for the Stated Clerk to recommend changes to the GA for changes in the Standing Rules in consultation with the Committee on the Office of the GA before proposing to the GA any amendment. The change would allow for Presbyteries and Synods to submit overtures to amend the Standing Rules. The Committee on the Office of the GA, in consultation with the stated Clerk, may offer their advice on the overtures. These rules may be amended by a majority vote of the commissioners. A motion to suspend the standing rules is not debatable and shall require a 2/3rds vote of the total enrollment of the commissioners.

Overture # 8 overtures the 222nd GA to amend G-3-05 by inserting a new section, G-3.0502 (Organizational Review). The new section shall read that the GA has the responsibility to regularly review the Manual of the GA. Presbyteries and Synods may submit overtures to amend, delete or suspend sections of the Manual of the GA. The concern is that this will prevent the GA from becoming entrenched and isolated and self-perpetuating.

Overture # 9 overtures the 222nd GA to create a General Assembly Reform Coordinating Committee with the aim to reform, renew and refresh the practice of our Reform polity for the 21st century. This committee will coordinate with Synods and Presbytery Stated Clerks and Executives to organize regional gatherings of the commissioners to the 222nd and subsequent GA's, plus Ruling Elders, Teaching Elders, and other leaders. The thinking in implementing this change is that the issues facing the Church and society are complex and multifaceted and are often made simplistic by simple "yes" or "no" choices, the aim is to create a third category of voting that allows for the message, "**no, not now.**" Some feel that this will make the Church more stable and bring change through building consensus and developing mutual interdependence.

Rational for opposing all 9 Overtures: NBPC encourages the Church to oppose these overtures because they are intended to slow down the process of dealing with social justice, economic and political issues that bring about change to improve the human condition. There are some who feel that changes are being made in the Church and society which stand in stark contrast to their faith and belief. Consequently, they want to change the process for considering social justice issues. In a sense, creating islands of stability amid the prophetic cries for "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

For example, consider the fact that health care should be a guaranteed right of every individual. The Affordable Care Act passed by Congress helps to make this more of a reality. However, if some had their way, the Church would delay supporting this right and perhaps would still be trying to build a consensus around this issue. In 2014, the White House reported that more than 14 million people had obtained health care under the Affordable Care Act, 8 million had selected insurance plans through exchanges established by the health-care law and 5 million more people had gained coverage through the Medicaid expansion provision of the law.

It is quite apparent, that if the Foothills Presbytery overtures are passed, they will slow down the process and make the Church a Neanderthal in dealing with social justice issues. Change is not easy. However, as Presbyterians we are aided in our reformed process by our commitment to education. This helps us to grow and become more knowledgeable about the things of God. Through our study of scripture and theology, we learn about why we must change to live in keeping with God's purpose. Also, Reformed theology encourages us to embrace the motto **Ecclesia Reformata Semper Reformanda**, which means the church reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God and the call of the Holy Spirit. In other words, as followers of Jesus Christ, we must be aware of our human fallibility and sinfulness. And so, we must confess our separation from God and submit all aspects of our lives to constantly being reformed and transformed according to the Word and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Martin Luther King addressed the importance of the urgency of social justice change by suggesting in one of his books that society can't wait because when we see the vast majority of African Americans smothering in airtight cages of poverty, one can't wait. When one sees parents stammering to explain to their children why they can't have the same privileges and opportunities as white children, one can understand why society can't wait. And when one is forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodyness," then we understand why it's difficult to wait.

Powerful reasons exist why we cannot wait to address issues that we must change to make the Church and society a better place. As followers of Jesus Christ, we must work to guarantee the God given rights of every human being. Too many are still standing and languishing on the margins of life suffering from injustices. We need to bring about change now and not wait until sometime off into the distant future when folk can feel more comfortable about change and reform. We must oppose all nine of the overtures being proposed by Foothills Presbytery.

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