

Reforming, Renewing, Refreshing and Modernizing The Presbyterian Church (USA)

--February 18, 2016--

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ,

2016 is well underway and soon the Commissioners, Advisory Delegates, and observers will gather with the Staff of General Assembly in Portland, Oregon for the 222nd Stated Meeting of the General Assembly. I am writing this letter to my colleagues across the denomination to share a couple of pieces of news, as well as a reflection about the efforts of the Foothills Presbytery General Assembly Reform Group.

1. Foothills Overtures: All 9 of Foothills Overtures have received concurrences and so will go before General Assembly. We are grateful for the concurrences on one or more of our overtures from Yukon, Northeast Georgia, John Calvin, Middle Tennessee, Inland Northwest and New Harmony Presbyteries. We are grateful as well for the support expressed by many across the country.

2. Foothills Concurrences: The Bills and Overtures Committee of Foothills Presbytery reviewed the overtures that were listed as of the end of January. At the 2016 Winter Stated Meeting of Foothills Presbytery, Foothills voted to concur with overtures from Arkansas (039) and St. Andrews (020 & 022). The GA Reform Group was also pleased to see The Presbytery de Cristo amendment 056 which also calls for a supermajority vote to make changes in

the Constitution. This overture came to us after our Bills and Overtures Committee met.

3. Another Conversation: What follows is a personal reflection about the Foothills General Assembly Reform efforts...

I begin with a word of gratitude to the members of the Foothills Presbytery General Assembly Reform Group, Foothills' Bills and Overtures Committee, and to the Sessions, congregations and members of Foothills. In the face of yet another year of what had become "the usual reactivity" in the aftermath of General Assembly across 2014/15, a committed group of Presbyterian Ruling and Teaching Elders, who represented a variety of perspectives, sat at table and talked proactively about reforming, renewing, refreshing and modernizing the Presbyterian Church (USA). Foothills Presbytery heartily engaged the produce of the 221st General Assembly. The work of the GA Reform Group brought a new depth and breadth to our consideration not only of the overtures and policy statements of the Assembly, but it also brought the affirmation, "the PC(USA) can do better!" As Foothills is in a time of major transition, this effort fit right into considering the whole of our common witness and mission.

Noting the above, across the last few months some very strong reactions to our work have been published. Great concerns have been expressed that the Foothills overtures are regressive in nature, that passing them will put a damper on the Church, preventing it from facing the serious justice issues of the world, and that they will needlessly bind the church in its

operations. While we have not appreciated the resort to name-calling and caricature that has been expressed by some, we deeply appreciate that our call for change has stirred deep fears. The world has been rapidly changing for well over a century and the pace of change only continues to accelerate. These *are* fear-filled times.

Consider the following. Christendom is no more. The expression “Mainline Protestantism” is passé. The corporation-like model that we and many other denominations established in the boom years after World War II is worn out. In the last half-century the multiplication of the number of denominations and non-denominations has led to the increased fracture of Christian witness. And clear understandings of denominational identity have markedly declined. In a world of over 7 billion souls the question rings loud, “How shall we bear witness?”

On the whole we PC(USA) Presbyterians have evermore focused on what change theorists call “technical change” and we have produced great numbers of rule changes and policy statements. Of course, some of these technical rule changes and policy statements have been important, however is not another conversation now profoundly needed? Do we not need to take a deep and patient look at the world and ourselves and truly consider serious adaptive change?

The Foothills Presbytery GA Reform Group believes we truly need to Reform, Renew, Refresh and Modernize the PC(USA). We believe the overtures we have produced are not the end of that conversation and work,

but simply provide a place to start. Our Reform Group is acutely aware of the irony underlying the first eight overtures. In short the Group shared some good chuckles about the fact that the first eight *are* advocating specific technical changes, but also understand that as a collection and with the addition of a summary principles overture, these changes will hopefully open the way for meaningful adaptive change. We long for a denomination and congregations that are truly engaged in meaningful social justice, deeply connected in proclaiming rich witness, and one that practices the deep strengths of our Reformed Polity in ways that are gracious and uplifting. In sum, we believe we need a different conversation, another conversation, a time of depth reflection about how best to be the Presbyterian Church USA for the 21st century.

4. Resources:

Whether your presbyteries are for or against the Foothills Overtures, I urge all of you to share the Foothills Presbytery web address with them (www.foothillspresbytery.org). There is a dedicated GA Reform section and there the commissioners will find a number of resources to help them reflect upon the Foothills work. Our site also has a link to *The Presbyterian Outlook* site. Many thanks to Jill Duffield and the *Outlook* staff for providing space for debate about our efforts.

Gordon W. G. Raynal
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