

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

It is that time again: the **General Assembly** will be meeting soon. When I was a pastor, I found that Assemblies were viewed with both eagerness and trepidation. It became important to try to help people know *how* to watch an Assembly.

Please see following an updated version of what I have prepared for congregations before:

General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

The **General Assembly** of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the national level governing body of our denomination, will be meeting in San Jose, California, from Saturday, June 21, through Saturday, June 28, 2008.

We will certainly be watching the General Assembly with great interest. What happens there has the potential to have a tremendous impact upon the congregations of the church. I hope and pray that we can look for great and wonderful things from the Assembly.

At the same time, I am aware that sometimes things happen which have the potential to be upsetting. So, I am writing to try to provide a little help for all of us who will be watching the General Assembly.

First of all, please realize that in addition to the several hundred official and voting commissioners from the various presbyteries, there are usually several thousand other people in attendance. Some of these are staff. Some are volunteers. Some are visitors. Some are reporters. And some are members of various **advocacy groups** that are always swirling around the Assembly. Some of these groups are from the so-called "right wing" of the church, for lack of a better term, and some are from the "left wing," again for lack of a better term. Please understand that these people and organizations will be there to speak *to* the church. They do not speak *for* the church. They are seeking to influence the church to change something, one way or the other. But they do not represent the church. We may or may not like what they say, but they are not speaking on behalf the church, anyway.

Second, sometimes the General Assembly might adopt a **position statement** on some issue. This could be theological, political, economic, or social. Please realize that such statements represent only that particular Assembly. Such statements intend to speak *to* the church. They do not speak *for* the church. If any such statements are made, we may receive them, read them, study them, and determine for ourselves whether or not they seem to be helpful to us. If they are, we may use them. If they are not, we do not have to use them. They are *not* binding on the congregations or members of the denomination.

Third, the General Assembly may take actions that are intended to initiate **amendments** (changes) to the *Book of Order*, which is part of the constitution of the denomination. These are much more important than position statements, in that they may have long-term effects on the faith and life of the church. However, even if this General Assembly does give such initial approval to some amendments, they would still have to be sent out to all the presbyteries for consideration over the course of the next two years. A majority of the presbyteries would have to approve any amendments, which then would not go into effect until the following General Assembly, which will be in 2010. The point is, the presbyteries have a history of turning down some of the amendments sent to them. So, even if an amendment is initiated this year, it very well may *not* become part of the policy of the church.

Fourth, the General Assembly may make what is called an **authoritative interpretation**. This may be a little trickier. By definition, an authoritative interpretation is not a change in the constitution. It is, instead, an official declaration by the Assembly of what some part of the constitution means. It can be approved by a simple majority vote of the commissioners at the Assembly, and therefore it is not sent out to the presbyteries for their consideration. Such an interpretation does become binding upon the governing bodies of the church, including sessions, unless and until it is overturned by some subsequent authoritative interpretation.

Fifth, please realize that any coverage we receive in the **news media** is very likely to be plagued by gross misunderstanding if not outright error. It seems to be very rare that the news media gets things right about the church. So, if something bizarre is reported, please withhold judgment at least until we can look into the matter and see what is really going on.

Many will be watching the General Assembly closely, through all the information sources available. Come what may, we are grateful to be officers in and for the church, and we look forward to continuing to serve together in faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

I am sure many of you are more experienced at this than I am. If you have other ideas that you are willing to share, please send them to me.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, *Executive Director*

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