

## ***The Broken Covenant***

### **A report on dissent, defiance and discipline around the PCUSA For the month of November 2009<sup>1</sup>**

#### November 11<sup>th</sup>

The Presbytery of San Francisco vote 156 – 138 to ordain Lisa Larges as pastor of Word and Sacrament and to approve her ministry as Minister Coordinator in an advocacy organization know as *That All May Freely Serve. Presbyterian Promise* – an advocacy group approved by the Presbytery of Southern New England – is an affiliated member of TAMFS. Soon-to-be The Reverend Larges has acknowledged “departures” from the *fidelity/chastity* standards required for ordination.

#### November 14<sup>th</sup>

At the meeting of the Presbytery of Southern New England, the following occurred –

❑ The Wilton Presbyterian Church submitted two overtures for a 1<sup>st</sup> reading. One overture seeks approval for pastors to officiate at marriages between same gender person in the context of “Christian worship” in states which permit same gender marriages as a matter of civil statutes. The second overture would replace the present *fidelity & chastity* with “local option.” The overtures will be submitted for vote at the February meeting.

❑ The Reverend John Merz was elected to serve on the *Nominating Committee* of PSNE. Rev. Merz was “married” in January 2009 to his same gender partner by the pastor of the West Hartford Presbyterian Church. The nomination was presented without coming before Presbytery Counsel (a by-law requirement) and the moderator did not invite nominations from the floor.

#### November 17<sup>th</sup>

On this date, the Reverend Laurie McNeill, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair, N.J. “married” her same gender partner at Christ Church Cathedral, Harwich Port, MA on Cape Cod. Following her “marriage” she informed the session and congregation of Central Church of her “marriage.” Her pastorate was re-affirmed by both bodies.

*In those day there was no King in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judges 20:25)*

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December 7th

PCUSA, through the Washington Office, was a signatory to a letter opposing the “*Nelson-Hatch*” amendment which would have restricted the use of Federal funds for abortions in the new Senate Health care legislation. Several other “mainline” churches and lobby groups were also signatories. The *Baptist Press* issued a report that called their action “tragic”.

December 15<sup>th</sup> (ish)

The process of re-writing a portion of the Constitution is underway and it’s called FOG – ***Form of Government***. A new FOG will be presented at the next General Assembly in July. The Presbyterian Coalition (PCOG is a member) is already giving us reasons to vote “no” As they track drafts of the new FOG, they report that Scripture is demoted – ***there is no statement in the “Foundations Section” regarding the authority of Scripture for the Church and individuals***, The Coalition report also cites four other overarching reasons for a “no” vote.

Who has the time and inclination to study word-for-word the re-write of FOG? Who can understand the nuances and perhaps the *agenda* that lies behind changed words? Are there reasons to believe that a new FOG will restore a broken covenant; or will it contribute to the brokenness?

December 29<sup>th</sup>

A “***David and Goliath***” story. A 20-member church in New Orleans was awarded title to its property by the court in Louisiana. But it happened after a barrage of lawyers (reportedly 12 from various states) and denominational officials from PCUSA and the Presbytery brought litigation to gain ownership. PCUSA, et al reportedly spent over \$300,000 on lawyers’ fees. Why?

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**Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15-16)**

PCUSA Research Services released an updated survey in January. When asked, “*can only followers of Jesus Christ be saved?*” Only 35% of pastors, 22% of specialized clergy, 39% of church members and 45% of Elders responded that they “*agreed*” or “*strongly agreed*” The majority of respondents chose “*neutral*”, “*not sure*”, *disagree* or *strongly disagree*.

Did you know that in our Presbytery, only 25% of the minister members serve a church. The remainder are *specialized clergy* (e.g. chaplains, teachers, counselors, members-at-large, etc) or *honorably retired*. Our Presbytery’s website reports 175 minister members.

**Overtures Submitted by Presbyteries**

At the end of January, three overtures pertaining to “marriage” and four regarding ordination standards had arrived at the Office of the Assembly.

Our neighboring Presbytery (Hudson River) and the Baltimore Presbytery seek to change the constitution to permit same gender marriage in a Christian setting. The New Covenant Presbytery is asking the General Assembly to re-affirm the present constitutional provision that marriage is between a man and a woman.

Three overtures would effectively eliminate the ordination standards regarding *fidelity* and *chastity* Hudson River Presbytery is the author of 2 of them. The fourth overture (San Diego Presbytery) is written to maintain those standards.

**Presbytery of Southern New England**

On February 6<sup>th</sup>, PSNE will add its voice to the mix by voting on an overture which deals with ordination standards.

Churches in Stamford, Wilton, Waterford and New Haven have proposed replacement language for ordination standards which would have the effect of permitting each local church to “*discern with an individual that person’s calling, gifts and preparation and their willingness to adhere to church standards.*” Fidelity and Chastity would no longer be stated as explicit standards for manner of life. The following is a stunning excerpt taken from the *rationale* that was written by the sponsoring churches.

*Our standards have never been successfully expressed as a few simple ideas or behaviors. As Calvin understood, Scripture contains the word of God, but it is not the word of God. [editor note: **That is a serious misrepresentation of Calvin.** See Calvin’s Institutes, Book 1, vii,4 to number 2 for his statements on Scripture] The result is that we depend on our confessions to inform the way we approach, read, understand and interpret scripture. Likewise, Scripture and our polity contain our standards, but are not our standards. We continually engage them as we seek to faithfully apply our standards to particular people and callings.*

The excerpt serves as yet another example of the gap in biblical interpretation and belief that has been addressed in the Q & A document on “*Denominational Issues*” distributed to congregants.

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**Presbytery of Southern New England**

On February 6<sup>th</sup>, PSNE Commissioners voted to send an overture for General Assembly action which would permit governing bodies to set-aside the fidelity & chastity requirements for ordination and installation of church officers (elders, deacons and pastors). The overture was approved notwithstanding the following **errant** statement in the *Rationale*: *As Calvin understood, Scripture contains the word of God, but it is not the word of God.* Pastors Gestal and Maxwell (Newport) spoke against the overture. And Pastor Maxwell spoke about the errancy of the statement attributed to Calvin. The overture passed by a majority of 67%.

**An echo from coast to coast**

The 1,500 member Danville, California PC voted to request dismissal from the Presbytery of San Francisco. A summary of the “underlying reasons” for their actions include the following –

✓**A creeping tolerance of theological pluralism.** – Increasingly large percentage of PCUSA pastors are taking positions that are inconsistent with the historical tenets of our faith.

✓**Conflicted witness to the world and the local churches of the PCUSA** – consistently have to explain “who we are” vs “who they are.” This defensive posture diminishes the impact of ministries and mission.

✓**Divided loyalties** – connectionalism has devolved into fractured denominations within the “denomination.”

✓**Passion and energy have been diverted** – into an interminable internal struggle.

✓Danville first belongs to Jesus Christ who is Lord of the Church. PCUSA is no longer a representation of churches that share essential beliefs, traditions and common mission. Disagreements have eroded these long-standing commitments of membership in PCUSA

PCOG's *Rationale*, as stated in the Q&A document on denominational issues, echoes Danville.

**Policy for “Dismissal”**

A Commissioner's Resolution adopted by the 218<sup>th</sup> GA (2008) states that it is the *will of the General Assembly that presbyteries and synods develop and make available..... a process that exercises the power and responsibility to “divide, dismiss or dissolve churches in consultation with their members.* The Presbytery of San Francisco has approved a process that includes the following principles for the church property *trust clause*: (i) it will not be used to shackle churches to PCUSA and (ii) not be used as a weapon to threaten civil action. The idea is that their process is designed to aid in Presbytery's ability to respectfully deal with the congregation's desire to be dismissed, and to have that happen in a way that minimizes the impact on that congregation's ministry, and for the congregation to act in a way as to minimize the impact on the mission and ministry of the Presbytery. PSF procedure has been brought to the attention of PSNE officials.

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**March 2010**

Considerable time and effort was expended in March on the PCUSA battle front --

✍️ We attended a meeting of the Committee on Ministry ("COM") on March 10<sup>th</sup> and gave considerable voice that same gender "marriages" are not "marriages" as defined by PCUSA Constitution irrespective of what the statutes of the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts say. At a later date we provided a written critique of a document written to guide the COM in making an impending decision about this issue as it pertains to minister members in our Presbytery .

✍️ On March 24<sup>th</sup>, we met with a representative of COM to discuss the criteria for admitting a minister to the Presbytery as a members-at-large with voice and vote.

✍️ We authored a letter dated March 11<sup>th</sup> to Presbytery Council dissenting to a statement in an overture approved by the PSNE which errantly stated the following: *"As Calvin understood, Scripture contains the word of God, but it is not the word of God."* Our letter which was co-signed by 5 other churches stated: *"We affirm Scripture as the infallible Word of God, inspired and preserved by the Holy Spirit and is the authority of obedience in faith and life."* Council voted to receive the letter and to send copies of it to the four churches that sponsored the overture.

✍️ We sent a proposal to amend the *"Discerning the Way Process"* to the Executive Presbyter so that it would make provision for "gracious dismissal" based on prescribed criteria. At the March 18<sup>th</sup> meeting of Presbytery Council, approval was given to "endorse" the plan of the Executive Presbyter to make the amendment – always subject to Presbytery final approval.

✍️ PSNE was advised that the congregation voted on March 21<sup>st</sup> to request the Presbytery to form the appropriate "Team" to begin the process of seeking a mutual understanding of God's Will for the relationship between PCOG and PCUSA. Presbytery Council Chair has responded that the next step is to appoint a "listening/review team" with the approval of Council. His response confirmed that revisions to the present "review process" are ongoing and if approved by Presbytery the revised process would be applicable to our request.

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Note: In March, the First Presbyterian Church, Beaver, PA was dismissed by the Beaver-Butler Presbytery to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

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**April 2010**

**Presbytery Meeting --**

It happened as April ended. On May 1<sup>st</sup> the Presbytery of Southern New England held its spring stated meeting. At the meeting, the Committee on Ministry (COM) made the motion to approve the “validated ministry” of a minister member who recently “married” his same gender partner as permitted by the statutes of Connecticut. Your PCOG commissioner sought to send the matter back to the COM on the grounds that “Validation” was not permitted by the Constitution. The COM’s *rationale* was that the constitution was found to be “unclear” and therefore validation could not be denied. 80% of the Commissioners voted to support the motion of the COM.

There is more to add but too long to explain about (i) the ordination of a person from New Haven PC and (ii) nominations for committees and chairpersons who also serve as members of Presbytery Council. Your commissioners can give you a report. Call them (Pastor Gestal, Shirley Prey and Walter Baker.)

**General Assembly --**

The “manner of life” things that impact upon our denominational relationship and which will come before the General Assembly when it convenes in early July continue to capture the headlines:

- The “Belhar Confession” will be considered for inclusion in the Constitution. It affirms “natural diversity” which opens the Constitutional door to same gender anything.

- A Majority Report of the “*Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage*” will be presented. It will recommend that the issues be “studied” and “discussed” for another 2 years.

- A Minority Report which declares the biblical standard for Christian Marriage will be presented as a “Substitute Motion.” Obedience to God’s Word is proclaimed.

- Will Jesus Christ will be lifted-up and glorified in the “business” of the GA? Check it out for yourself on the GA website and decide.

**Did you know --**

As of April 21<sup>st</sup>, there were a total of 174 ministers with voice & vote in the Presbytery of Southern New England.

- 41 are pastors (24%) serving congregations.

- 60 (35%) are either serving in an approved service beyond the jurisdiction of PSNE or are “members-at-large” (chaplains, teachers, counselors, 501 C (3), awaiting a call, etc.)

- The remainder is “honorably retired,” some of whom reside outside of the PSNE area and do not attend meetings.

- There are probably 12 minister members serving congregations (out of 41) who would affirm the values and viewpoints held by PCOG. Only 1 will serve on Presbyterian Council during the 2010 – 2011 fiscal year.

Is there something wrong with this picture?

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**May 2010**

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. **By their fruit you will recognize them.**"  
(Matthew 7:15-16)

An historic principle in the PCUSA Constitution states the following: "*That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness, according to our Savior's rule, 'By their fruits ye shall know them'.....there is an inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty.*"

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In May, an "affinity group" known as the "Covenant Network" announced three primary goals for the 2010 General Assembly which convenes during the first week of July. They are reported upon here because they are a "voice" for many who will devote enormous energy to make changes in the Constitution (1) to redefine "marriage" to include same gender persons and to grant Board of Pension benefits, (2) to permit pastors to "marry" same gender persons in a "Christian" ceremonies in churches (10 overtures have been submitted by Presbyteries proposing Constitutional changes for items one and two), and (3) to remove ordination standards as they pertain to *chastity* and *fidelity* (11 Overtures were sent by Presbyteries including our Presbytery.)

Is this the fruit of "wolves" or "sheep" [Mt 7:15-16]? We have been taught to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit by application of the following "test": (1) does it give glory to Jesus Christ in the present and in the future and (2) is it consistent with the intentions and character of God as revealed in scripture? How do you vote?

Yet again, so long as we are members within PCUSA, it is time to stand firm in the faith based values which we hold as members of PCOG.

**Presbytery Meeting – May 1<sup>st</sup>**

The April edition of ***The Broken Covenant*** reported the information which follows. It is repeated here since it fits into the scheme that will unfold at the General Assembly:

"On May 1<sup>st</sup> the Presbytery of Southern New England held its spring stated meeting. At the meeting, the Committee on Ministry (COM) made the motion to approve the "validated ministry" of a minister member who recently "married" his same gender partner as permitted by the statutes of Connecticut. Your PCOG commissioner sought to send the matter back to the COM on the grounds that "Validation" was not permitted by the Constitution. **The COM's rationale was that the constitution was found to be "unclear" and therefore validation could not be denied. 80% of the Commissioners voted to support the motion of the COM.**"

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**June - July 2010**

It's over ... the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. If you want to review the outcome of every action, it can be found at [www.pc-biz.org/explorer](http://www.pc-biz.org/explorer). There were at least four actions that will require PCOG's time and attention. Here's the list --

1 – An overture was approved which would amend the *fidelity / chastity* standard for ordination & installation with new words which effectively leave decisions to ordain/install in the hands of each governing body (about 12,000 counting each session and presbytery.) It requires approval by a majority of the 173 presbyteries. This will be the 5<sup>th</sup> (maybe 6<sup>th</sup>) attempt to change the present standard. PCOG will work to defeat the overture.

2 – A report on “Civil Union & Marriage Issues” was *ordered* sent for study by the “wider church” -- that's us. An attempt to affirm the biblical definition of marriage was **defeated** by a 2:1 margin.

3 – A revised *Form of Government* was approved for action by the presbyteries. PCOG will have to compare it – carefully -- with the present *FOG* before voting.

4 – A new confession was approved for action by the presbyteries – called the Belhar Confession. Another thing to study carefully before voting.

There were numerous other actions (Middle East, Afghanistan, Immigration, you name it!) which can be read on the web site shown above.

Following the GA meeting (in late July) a well known “faith-reporter” (Bill Tammeus) conducted an interview with the newly elected Vice Moderator of the GA. One of the questions that was asked was “*What are the most important issues facing the PCUSA and the church universal?*” His response follows:

"Even though they are intertwined, I'll say there is one that's theological and one that's political. Theological: As Phyllis Tickle says in [The Great Emergence](#), the most important questions of our day is 'Where is the authority?' '[Sola Scriptura](#)' is dead in most places, and dying rapidly in others. So where do we lodge the authority of our faith? That's the real battle we see fought in the church. We're not really arguing about LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) inclusion, we're arguing about how we read the Bible.

"Political: Again, it is connected to the first issue, but the political question is 'Who gets to play?' The church is faced with the questions of who gets to participate and at what level. The Roman Catholic Church just made a statement on women's ordination that caused a riot. The Presiding Bishop of the ECUSA (Episcopal Church) couldn't wear her mitre to preside over Mass in England. Anglican Churches are splitting right and left over LGBT bishops. We Presbyterians talk about it every GA. People always ask: 'When are we going to settle it?' My answer is: 'When we finally let everyone in.'"

(Note: Sola Scriptura is one of the great “watch words” of the reformation and it means “Scripture Alone” as our authority for faith and life.)