

News from General Assembly

An update from Pastor Elaine



Last week, I was sent as a commissioner to this year's General Assembly (GA) - the national meeting of The Presbyterian Church of Canada (PCC) held at Wilfred Laurier University, Waterloo. The GA handles national-level business of the church and makes decisions on items that may affect the church as a whole. Some of you may have been keeping up with the discussions from the meeting or even watched parts of it on the online livestream broadcast. For those interested, the reports and draft minutes of the meeting as well as video recordings from the livestream are still available at presbyterian.ca/gao/ga2019.

The most notable discussion that may affect our congregation in the future was the discussion on human sexuality (regarding ordination and marriage). There may be some confusion as to where we stand in this discussion. To clarify, no decisions have been made for The PCC at this point. Last year, at the 2018 GA, a special committee formed of former moderators of the Church was appointed and tasked to come up with ideas for a way forward for the Church while maintaining the mission and ministry of The PCC. They came back with a process by which this year's GA could use to find a way forward: a discernment process and four potential outcomes (Pathway A - Current Practice: no change to the current view which allows for celibate LGBTQI ministers and understands sexual orientation is not a sin but sexual practice is a sin; Pathway B - Inclusion: change in doctrine and practice which allows ordination of married LGBTQI person as clergy or elders and same-sex marriages while allowing freedom of conscience and action to congregations and existing ministers; Pathway C - One denomination - three streams: staying as The PCC with shared overarching ministries but with three distinct streams (Traditional, Accommodating, Affirming). This would involve reorganizing presbyteries into these three new streams. Congregations and ministers could choose which stream to belong in and have freedom to move between streams; Pathway D - Accommodation: no change to the current view on human sexuality but lifting any discipline for same-sex practicing ministers and elders and performing same-sex weddings.)

On Tuesday afternoon, after going through the discernment process this committee outlined, the GA 58% majority decision was for Pathway B - Inclusion. However, something supernatural happened between Tuesday when Pathway B was picked and Thursday morning when decisions on this topic continued. There was a great report of a movement of the Holy Spirit amongst the clergy and elder commissioners present, with much Pentecost language being referenced. Significant concerns were expressed from commissioners of traditional leanings that felt Pathway B would leave no room for those with the traditional viewpoint over time, since all new elders and new ordinands would have to be affirming. The Spirit moved in a way that the GA heard these concerns that Pathway B which purported inclusion was not wholly inclusionary (for those of the traditional view).

And with a great flurry of excitement and sensing of God's presence, a new way forward for the PCC was proposed and adopted: 1) One denomination that holds two parallel definitions of marriage (between and man and a woman or two adult persons), where freedom of conscience and action is granted to ministers and congregations regarding marriage; and 2) Congregations and presbyteries are free to call/elect and ordain LGBTQI (single or married) clergy and elders, with a provision of freedom of conscience and action. Basically in this proposal, each congregation can choose whether they will call LGBTQI clergy and elders and whether they will allow same-sex marriages in their buildings. To my understanding, unlike Pathway C, presbyteries will not be reorganized based on their views on human sexuality but will remain as they are currently.

And this is where we are now - with a new proposal for a way forward for the Church. Again, no actual decision has been made for The PCC; just a proposal for the Church to consider. In order for this to become the standard of the Church, two subsequent steps must follow under what is called the Barrier Act. First, this proposal goes back down to the presbytery level and the majority of presbyteries (constituting a majority of ministers, diaconal ministers, and elders on the constituent rolls of all presbyteries) would need to approve (and opportunities for sessions, presbyteries and synods to study and report back to GA are given). If this is the case, then second, the next GA (GA 2020) would also have to approve the proposal. This means two sets of majority votes are necessary for this proposal to become the new doctrine and practice of the Church.

In a surprising way, the special committee was successful in its task to bring the GA to a point where we could present a way forward for the Church - one which allows for unity in the midst of diversity and striving to work together. Now it is up to the Church to discern if this is indeed the path forward or not. Please continue to pray for discernment for sessions, congregations and presbyteries as we seek God's will together for the future of The PCC.