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Uniting Presbyterian Church in
Southern Africa

**Tshwane
Presbytery**

NEC TAMEN CONSUMEBATUR

General Assembly Documents for Sessions to Consider.

Dear Friends,

These are documents that have been handed down to us by the General Assembly of 2006. There are various discussion documents and we have been instructed to send them down to Session for discussion or action.

Each report is different and requires different responses.

I will introduce each report and explain the actions required.

I hope you have stimulating discussions!

Yours in Christ

Theo

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1. Unmarried Couples and Unmarried Mothers

The convener of the Doctrine, Ethics and Discipline Committee is looking for feedback on congregation's practices on these issues and their views on the "Universal Guidelines" given below. They would like responses by 30 April 2007.

Please write to Dirk Gevers, PO Box 1704, Congella 4013, dtg@xsinet.co.za

Pastoral Discipline with regard to Unmarried Couples Living Together and with Regard to Unmarried Mothers

This is one of the outstanding matters passed on to this committee by the Uniting Assembly. The committee has appealed for input as to current practice from ministers and sessions throughout the denomination and received none. Hopefully this does not mean that the problem is being blithely ignored. The nub of the concern is of course the public guise of the practice of sexual intercourse outside of the relationship of marriage. This is undeniably the prevalent practise in our society today. The committee is aware that cultural nuances in relation to this practise exist within the church. Nevertheless we would suggest that certain universal guidelines can be established in relation to our pastoral praxis:

- a. The testimony of the Scriptures, and of tradition, is consistently that the marriage relationship is the only permissible context for the practice of sexual intercourse;
- b. Unmarried couples who engage in sexual union are therefore engaging in a practise that is disobedient and sinful;
- c. Living together is a public vehicle for this sinful practise;
- d. In the context of church membership, this practise calls for pastoral discipline;
- e. Matthew 18: 15 20 is instructive as a pattern for the method of pastoral discipline;
- f. Truth must always be balanced with grace in the exercise of pastoral discipline;
- g. The point of pastoral discipline is always to exhort the recipient to bring his or her life into line with God's will in the light of the Word of God as our 'final rule of faith and life';
- h. Expulsion (cf. 1 Corinthians 5) is a last and extreme resort, when all else has patently failed;
- i. The proper context for the corporate exercise of discipline is the Session meeting and not public worship, with appropriate report being made to the congregation when necessary;
- j. Where there is conception and pregnancy, both father and mother should be addressed in terms of pastoral care and discipline, with due consideration for the welfare of the child.
- k. In terms of the 'cure of the soul' pastoral discipline must, where there is conviction of sin, facilitate confession and absolution, thus affirming the truth that 'with (the Lord) there is forgiveness' (Ps. 130:4).

2.Mnqophiso Service

This is a reminder that this service should be held annually. The order is available from the convener of the Worship Committee.

General Assembly reminds all ministers and Sessions that in 2003 it called on every congregation to hold an annual 'renewal of commitment service', or 'Mnqophiso service', in the first quarter of every year, beginning in 2004;

General Assembly commends to them for this purpose the Order for Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant that the Assembly approved for experimental use in 2004

General Assembly directs that all comments on this service be sent to the Convener by the end of March 2008, so that a final draft can be presented to the 2008 Assembly for it to adopt.

3.Basis of Assessment.

This document opens the discussion on the feelings of Sessions on the Assessment system used in the Denomination. Please send responses to Dirk Gevers, PO Box 1704, Congella 4013, dtg@xsinet.co.za

A Biblical/Doctrinal Basis for the Congregational Assessment

As explained in our 2004 report, this matter has its origin in a letter from the Session of the Pinetown Congregation. The nub of the concern is expressed in the following quotation from an e-mail received by the convener: 'In light of the attached document please respond giving feedback as to whether the Doctrine Committee finds the current Presbyterian Assessment system scripturally accurate or whether it is flawed to the extent of being sinful?' The 'attached document' referred to is one that presents an argument based on various passages of Scripture.

The committee in 2004 shared its suspicion that, in the light of the current situation with regard to assessments in our church (in particular the widespread non-payment thereof), this concern may not be limited to one Session. To quote from the 2004 report: 'Perhaps there is a need for us more firmly to base the whole question of assessments on not just pragmatic and technical but first and foremost scriptural and doctrinal grounds and then to re-examine our practice in the light thereof. If our church is facing a crisis in the area of assessments, perhaps it is a crisis in the true biblical sense of the word, meaning a moment of judgement and opportunity. If the payment of assessments were widely understood to be a matter of obedience to the Lord and not to the 'ecclesiastical tax man' and if the system of assessment were set upon a patently biblical basis, we would encounter less 'highway robbery' (if indeed there is such a thing within the Church). There would surely then be a stronger motivation on the part of congregations to meet their obligations even under difficult circumstances (which undoubtedly do exist).' The 2004 Assembly consequently gave the committee a mandate and instruction to report back to the 2006 Assembly.

There are two points in particular that the committee would make. Firstly, the debate must be taken away from the arena of simple 'proof texts', in particular those such as 2 Corinthians 8 & 9, which should be interpreted contextually and employing a hermeneutic that distinguishes between that which is descriptive and that which is prescriptive in the passage. So, for example, we can infer from Paul's approach to the collection for the

church in Jerusalem the prescriptive and enduring principle that giving on the part of an individual ('each man') should be cheerful, generous and free from compulsion. We cannot however then argue that this implies that the UPCSA has no right to determine a fixed assessment rate, or that it is sinful to do so. This would be an argument from silence and one that imposes on the text a foreign context, making it address something it did not intend to address. The mechanics of the collection for the church in Jerusalem in these passages is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The same can be said of 1 Corinthians 9, where Paul is addressing the right of a minister to support, although he himself does not exercise this right. The context again is very different to that pertaining in the case of assessments. Furthermore Paul's approach to ministry support is descriptive rather than prescriptive. If anything prescriptive is to be inferred it is by implication that the church has a right, indeed a scriptural warrant, to fix an expense to the income of the church as a whole relating to the costs of supporting ministry. This is in effect a form of assessment. The tithe is another biblical concept that does not sit comfortably in simple application to the assessment in that it refers to the covenant responsibility of an individual or group (primarily the individual) toward God. Its application, in whatever form this takes, must surely be to the giving of the individual members of the church. The tithe on the tithes was for the Levitical portion. It would take hermeneutical (and ecclesiological) gymnastics indeed to equate the Assembly with the Levites! The committee finds no scriptural location for the assessment in the realm of the tithe, whether or not this figure is rigidly determined as ten percent.

Notwithstanding the arguments about proof texts, it is reasonable to expect that the practice of the church in all its aspects should be based upon sound scriptural principles, and should not contradict in any measure the truth and values of the Word of God. The assessment is not exempt from this. The committee believes that the biblical context for the congregational assessment is to be found in the constructs of covenant and unity of the Body. In other words the assessment should be understood as the attempt of the UPCSA to fulfil the biblical injunctions of covenant responsibility and care of one part of the body for another, as well as the responsibility of the care of the Body of Christ in its UPCSA expression for its own health and ongoing ministry in the fulfilment of its mission, and indeed its role in the Great Commission. Some relevant passages of Scripture are 1 Corinthians 11:17 – 12:31, Acts 2:42-47, Ephesians 4, Philippians 2:1-11, 1 John 3:11-24, Isaiah 58:1-12, Romans 12:9-21, Matthew 28:16-20 and Mark 16:14-18. Ministerial formation, maintenance of the ministry, church growth and development and mission priority projects, which are the major cost centres funded by the congregational assessment, fall logically into these categories. The question may well be put as to the effectiveness or otherwise of our assessment system as an attempt to fulfil these biblical expectations, but this is a very different question to that which calls into question the biblical basis of the assessment itself. Indeed the biblical framework for the assessment, and the values contained therein must inform, direct and shape our approach to the assessment from all sides.

It is imperative in all of this to remember our Presbyterian ecclesiology as the context in which these scriptural principles are applied. The point of view that attaches to the assessment the role or status of an imposed tax is unfortunately forgetful of this. This brings us to our second point, that the debate must be moved away from the 'them and us'

approach and language. In our Presbyterian system, which we believe to accord with the Scriptures, the assessment is not something imposed on congregations by 'them'. It is rather something jointly determined by 'us'. The assessment is determined from Assembly to Assembly by those from amongst us who have been commissioned to attempt to discern the mind of the Lord, so to speak. For better or worse it is that system that we, in the form of the General Assembly, have agreed to apply to ourselves.

In conclusion, it is the committee's view that the constructive outcome of this discussion lies neither in the direction of imputing sin to the denomination for the congregational assessment nor in that of complacently maintaining the status quo. What is required is that we all - Assembly, presbyteries, congregations and Finance Committee alike - seek to approach the assessment more deliberately and consciously from the perspective of its biblical framework as an attempt to fulfil our covenantal and koinonial calling and responsibilities. In like manner this perspective applies equally to our evaluation of assessment expenditure. The committee will bring no proposal other than that these points be considered by all concerned.

4.Lay Preachers

There are two documents (“How to become a Member...” and “Lay Preacher Vows”) that are here for Session's information. There is no call for responses. These are simply informational.

How to Become a Member of the Order of Lay Preachers

The regulations of our church governing the Order of Lay Preachers (OLP) are set forth in Paragraph 5.20(h) and Appendix F(3) of the Interim Manual.

The Route to Follow:

- The first step is to speak to your Session in order to obtain a letter of recommendation.
- The second step is to notify your Presbytery Lay Preacher Convener of your desire to become a Lay Preacher and intention to undertake the necessary training and preparation. It should be noted that the authority to set candidates apart to the OLP rests with the Presbytery. Your Presbytery can advise you as to your specific study route, and also on possible equivalent courses specific to your area (in consultation with the Assembly D E & D Committee).
- The third step is to complete the prescribed course of study (see below). Whilst you are doing this, seek opportunities (if you do not already have them) from your minister and Session to participate in different aspects of the Worship Service.
- The fourth step, once you have completed your studies, is to contact your Presbytery Lay Preacher convener and request an interview and a trial service, which can be held in your own congregation.
- The final step, once you have completed the interview and conducted the trial service to the satisfaction of the Presbytery, is for arrangements to be made by the Presbytery to set you apart to the Order. This would usually be done at a Presbytery meeting.
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Approved Study Options

It should be noted that the General Assembly Doctrine Ethics & Discipline Committee is in the process of developing an in house training programme. The Assembly recognizes, as an interim measure, the following courses as legitimate training for the Order of Lay preachers:

One from category A and one from category B:

- Category A:
The TEEC course on Preaching, at least at the Award Level;
The Center for Contextual Ministries Basic Course or Advanced Course on Preaching,
The Orr/Booth Lay Preacher's Course.
- Category B:
The TEEC course Introduction to the New Testament, at least at the Award Level;
The TEEC course Introduction to the Old Testament, at least at the Award Level;
The Bethel Bible Course.

Please note that equivalent courses, as determined by consultation between the Presbytery and the Committee, may be acceptable.

Some Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

1. The role of a Lay Preacher is to conduct services when invited to do so, usually when a minister is unavailable (on leave, sick or away). A member of the Order of Lay Preachers may be invited to take services in any congregation within the UPCSA. Your specific involvement in your own congregation will depend on your minister, your Session and yourself. Please note that a Lay Preacher is not authorized to dispense the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion). S/he may however conduct funerals. It is not customary for a Lay Preacher to be paid for his/her services, as usually s/he is employed in a secular job. A travelling/incidentals allowance should however be paid. A Lay Preacher may wear a preaching gown, but is not entitled to wear a clerical collar. A member of the OLP is eligible to be appointed as Stated Supply in terms of Appendix E(1) of the Interim Manual.
2. How long the studies will take depends on you and the pace at which you should choose to do the courses, but it will take at least a year.
3. Information concerning study fees may be obtained from the training institutions themselves.
4. The courses may be taken part time and by correspondence. In the case of Vista, the candidate will probably be required to attend a few contact (lecture) weeks spaced over the duration of the course (one week at a time) in addition to your assignment work and reading at home.
5. The contact numbers of the training institutions are as follows:
TEEC- 011 683 3284
Center for Contextual Ministries- 012 420 4951/2; e-mail- suki@postino.up.ac.za

Queries by prospective candidates should be addressed to the Presbytery Lay Preacher Convener. Queries by Presbyteries should be addressed to the Convener of the Doctrine, Ethics & Discipline Committee.

LAY PREACHER VOWS

I own and confess anew God as my Father, Jesus Christ as my Saviour and Lord, and the Holy Spirit as my Helper.

As far as I know my own heart, I am moved to enter this ministry by zeal for the glory of God, love for the Lord Jesus Christ, the call of the Holy Spirit, the commission to proclaim the coming of God's Kingdom on earth and a desire for the salvation of all people.

I accept the Scriptures of the Old and new Testaments as inspired by the Holy Spirit to be the uniquely authoritative and sufficient witness to Jesus Christ, and as such the Word of God and the final rule of faith and life.

I accept as subordinate standards of the faith the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds.

I affirm the substance of the faith expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Declaration of Faith for the Church in Southern Africa.

Or

I affirm the substance of the faith expressed in the Twenty-four Articles of the Faith, with their Appendix, and the Declaration of Faith for the Church in Southern Africa.

Or

I affirm the substance of the faith expressed in the new Confession of Faith of the UPCSA and the Declaration of Faith for the Church in Southern Africa.

I acknowledge the doctrine and form of government of the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa to accord with Scripture; and I promise to seek the unity and peace of this Church and to be subject to its authority.

With God's help I undertake to be diligent in the study of scripture and in prayer, to live a holy life, and to proclaim faithfully the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.