[OVT-015]   On Amending G-3.0303 by Adding a New Paragraph g. Regarding Authority to Convene Meetings

Source: Presbytery
Committee: Unassigned

Event: 224th General Assembly (2020)
Sponsor: Detroit Presbytery
Type: General Assembly Full Consideration

Recommendation

The Presbytery of Detroit overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) to direct the Stated Clerk to send the following proposed amendment to the presbyteries for their affirmative or negative votes:

Shall G-3.0303 be amended by adding a new paragraph "*g.*" to read as follows: [Text to be added is shown as italic.]

"*g.   when it has reasonable cause to believe the church is having or will have problems in the near future that will threaten its ability to exist as a viable church, to convene session and/or congregational meetings to present the concerns of the presbytery.*"

Rationale

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its churches have seen significant declines in membership and resources in this generation. The causes of the decline are complex, and frequently are beyond the control of councils and congregations. There is little at this point to suggest this decline will be arrested in the reasonable future.

Congregations have developed and succeeded sometimes for hundreds of years. In the course of their existence they have generated programs, formed relations, built facilities, established identities, etc., that characterize that church. Times are changing, however, and in many cases the programs and identities are not attractive to new members, and buildings are frequently much larger than necessary. The regular cost of wear-out failures as buildings age and the cost of heating structures built when energy was cheap generate increasing financial burdens. In some cases, the burden of financing a well-established ministry in an elegant building with fewer and fewer member and dollar resources cripples a church. There are readily available data on attendance, finances, mission, membership, and other indicators that can give warning that a church may be experiencing difficulties because of these factors.

Changing the dynamics of a congregation is complex and very hard to do. We do know, however, of many cases where churches have managed to reform themselves in ways that allow them to prosper. Experience shows, however, that it is very difficult to make such changes if there are insufficient resources to support the transition. It is unfortunately common, however, to find churches that for one reason or another either are unable to see the declining resources available to them or are unwilling to undertake the hard and difficult work to generate necessary adjustments to their way of doing church.

Our polity gives presbyteries few powers to address matters of decline in a way that might assist in generating redevelopment. The unilateral powers of presbyteries are keyed to the kind of difficulties that are considered emergent or indicate an inability or unwillingness of a session to wisely govern. And when a pastor and/or a

session are content with the way things are, there is no effective way to raise issues related to viability and survivability. There is no way that a presbytery can bring options to churches early enough that they still have the member and financial resources to find a form of mission and ministry that can generate a new future.

The purpose of this overture is to give a presbytery the authority to convene meetings to raise issues relating to the viability and survivability of a particular congregation when it believes that the near- or long-term prospects are not encouraging.

This overture does not give a presbytery the authority to require a church or session to do or stop doing certain things that the Constitution lays out. It is grounded on the presumption that in order to resolve a difficulty, the first step is to persuade people there is a difficulty.

This adds a mandate that the presbytery may call both such meetings when the presbytery will be considering its mission in the geographic area that might result in a dissolution.