

CHAPTER 4 **Special Organisations**

4.1 Introduction

The existence of special organisations or special-interest groups within the PCUS, UPCUSA, PCUS, and, off late, the PC(USA) has both polarised the denomination and intensified the battle over who controls the polity. Therefore, understanding their function, authority, history, and the control over them through G-9.0600 from 1983-1991, as well as the role they have played in the gay and lesbian ordination and/or installation, and same-gender blessing and marriage debates is a foundational element for interpreting the unfolding of the debates in Chapter 5.

4.2 The History of Special Organisations

Special organisations first appeared in the Form of Government of the PCUSA in 1902. Chapter XXIII clarified the relationship between judicatories, or governing bodies, and organisations that were not a formal part of the church. Chapter XXIII remained unnoticed in the *Book of Order* for six decades and later became Chapter XXVIII of the Form of Government of the UPCUSA (PC(USA) Minutes 1990:565).

In 1967, an overture was expected that called upon the General Assembly of the UPCUSA to require annual reports from certain church-wide organisations. Thus, the Stated Clerk ruled that Chapter XXVIII applied to these organisations and wrote to four organisations requesting that each submit an annual report (PC(USA) Minutes 1990:565).

The 1976 General Assembly of the UPCUSA charged the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) to annually review divisive or conflictive situations. The GAMC referred this concern to the ACDW, which established the Committee on Pluralism and Conflict (CPC) to fulfil this task. The 1979 General Assembly directed the ACDW to establish a system to regularly consult with all Chapter XXVIII organisations, and the CPC established procedures. The PCUS did not have any

provisions for independent organisations (PC(USA) Minutes 1988:603). While relations between the special groups and General Assembly were sometimes strained, a system of dialogue was established (Eller 1992:257).

In the 1990s, special organisations reported to the General Assembly under the provisions of the *Book of Order*, G-9.0600-.0601, and thus they were also called Chapter IX organisations. The Stated Clerk and General Assemblies made it clear that reception of these reports did not imply General Assembly approval of their purpose or program (PC(USA) Minutes 1990:565-566). The submission of annual reports was not an application process, nor did their reception indicate or imply that these organisations were approved by the General Assembly. Thus, there was not a “Chapter IX status” that could be granted to or withdrawn from reporting organisations (:566).

4.3 G-9.0600, the *Book of Order*

In 1983, with creation of the PC(USA) and the adoption of a new Constitution, sections were added on special organisations (Chapter IX), G-9.0600 in the *Book of Order*. They had the right to organise (G-9.0601), were accountable by review and control by the appropriate governing body (G-9.0602) (Eller 1992:257), and had to submit annual financial reports (:259). Thus, it was presumed that this model would be the proper way to monitor special organisations. These special organisations were granted recognition and a role in the denomination from 1983. Eller (:259) views this as crucial that the Constitution legitimised organised advocacy groups from 1983-1991. They were given a dramatic opportunity, despite the small size of their numbers in the total denomination, to steer the church to different agendas.

The 1984 General Assembly directed the ACDW to prepare standards for Chapter IX organisations that would clarify their rights and duties. The 1985 General Assembly adopted the ACDW guidelines (Eller 1992:257-258). The guidelines called for an annual review of each special organisation and the General Assembly to vote whether each was “in compliance” (adherence to the Constitution), or “not in compliance,” which carried disciplinary consequences (:258). The ACDW pointed out that among

all denominations, the PC(USA) provisions of Chapter IX appeared to be unique (PC(USA) Minutes 1988:603).

Chapter IX, Section 6, numbered G-9.0600 in the *Book of Order* from 1983, was an abbreviated revision of Chapter XXVIII of the UPCUSA. Several revisions of the 1983 wording took place from 1988-1990 and will be briefly discussed.

The 1986 General Assembly requested the ACDW to study G-9.0600 with special reference to the problems of these special organisations listed in the report of the Assembly Committee on the Constitution (ACC) and Overture 37-86, i.e. the purpose of such organisations; their control, relationship, and accountability and oversight by the church; the responsibility of such organisations to the church for their activities; and the potential liability in the civil courts of the church (PC(USA) Minutes 1986: 52, 790).

The 1987 General Assembly referred to the Task Force of the ACDW, which was studying G-9.0600, the question of whether coalitions of special organisations already reporting under G-9.0600 were considered to be a separate special organisation (PC(USA) Minutes 1987:89, 453).

The Task Force of the ACDW reported back to the 1988 General Assembly and recommended, with the ACC's input, placing special interest organisations under Chapter IV and removing them from Chapter IX. The reason was that Chapter IX emphasised reporting, review, and control, while Chapter IV emphasised diversity and dialogue. The hope was that special interest organisations would be less subject to discipline and control if they handled their diversity and dissent with respect for the elected agencies of the church. In 1988, G-9.0600 stated, in part:

Where such special organizations exist in a particular church, they shall be under the direction, control, and oversight of the session; where they cover the territory included within a presbytery or synod, they shall be responsible to the governing body having jurisdiction and where they cover territory larger than a synod, they shall be responsible to the General Assembly (PC(USA) Minutes 1988:604).

The ACDW, with the ACC's approval, had four recommendations. It recommended that the General Assembly delete G-9.0601-.0602 and create a new paragraph G-9.0601 to send to the presbyteries to ratify. In part, it read:

These special organizations are independent, autonomous groups which are not official agencies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They alone bear responsibility for their views and actions. These organizations also bear a responsibility to the church and shall respect the appropriate governing bodies in matters affecting decency, order, peace, and unity of the church (PC(USA) Minutes 1988:33, 603-603).

This revision would shift the emphasis from direction and control to recognition and dialogue (Eller 1992:260).

The ACDW also recommended that coalitions of organisations already reporting under Chapter IX not be allowed to submit a report as a separate organisation (PC(USA) Minutes 1988:603). The General Assembly affirmed the recommendations, but did not move special organisations to Chapter IV. It sent an amendment to G-9.0600 to the presbyteries (:33). The presbyteries approved Amendment F1 with a 131-32 vote, with three presbyteries taking no action (PC(USA) Minutes 1989:75).

In 1990, the Presbytery of Eastern Virginia sent Overture 90-33 requesting that G-9.0600-.0601 be deleted from the *Book of Order*. They argued that the special-interest groups were given special status and privileges which appeared to be special recognition and thus a type of tacit approval (PC(USA) Minutes 1990:757). The Presbytery of St. Andrew sent Overture 90-37 with the same request, but different arguments (:759). The ACC advised the General Assembly that the appropriate unit of the General Assembly Council (GAC) should study the topic first and to disapprove the overtures (:236)

The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit (TWMU) reviewed the *Guidelines for Special Organizations* per the request of the 1989 General Assembly and wrote a new document, *Special Organizations Reporting to the General Assembly under the Provisions of the Book of Order, G-9.0600-.0601 Policies and Procedures* (PC(USA) Minutes 1990:565) which the GAC recommended for approval (:572). The 1990 General Assembly, however, did not approve the document, but approved Overture 90-33, as amended, to delete G-9.0600-.0601. It also declared “that it will no longer provide any special recognition or privileges to these special organizations” (:81). The vote was 422-104 (Eller 1992:260). The presbyteries by a 109-60 vote approved the removal of G-9.0600 (PC(USA) Minutes 1991:94).

Eller (1992:260) states that the denomination had no effective way of handling the special organisations. The Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC) defied all attempts at control, and even when G-9.600 was deleted, the threat of schism remained. Weston (1997:143) argues that the decision to remove any reference to special-interest groups from the Constitution is part of the attempt to avoid theological conflict.

In the absence of G-9.0600, the issue still remained of how these special organisations, later called affinity groups, reported to the broader church; how their finances were used, etc. Overture 00-49 in 2000 addressed the national issue of campaign finance reform that was also occurring in the political arena. Affinity groups were spending \$15 million a year to influence the General Assembly and denomination, but were not accountable to the denomination. The overture asked that groups using PC(USA) in their name provide: annual and voluntary statements regarding their total annual budget and donors above \$1,000; a 300-word statement of the organisation's goals and methods; and a 300-word summary of their theological emphasis and vision to commissioners (PC(USA) Minutes 2000:425). The 2000 General Assembly approved the overture as amended (:51).

The 2001 General Assembly approved an alternative resolution to Commissioners' Resolution 01-23 (PC(USA) Minutes 2001:499) which modified the amount of information requested. Information was to be requested annually and all donors above \$1,000 should be listed. Compliance was voluntary, but a list would be compiled of those groups not complying. The information would be displayed on the PC(USA) Website and also sent to all commissioners. Lastly, the impact of affinity groups, their funds, and strategies was to be referred to any future special commission/task force that investigated the causes of division in the church (:22).

Currently, most of the conservative affinity groups either do not state or refuse to state all donors above \$1,000, while the liberal affinity groups state their donors (see PC(USA) Minutes 2006:212-298). Thus, even though the 2000 and 2001 General Assemblies requested that all donors above \$1,000 be listed, there is no rule to enforce it, since statements are voluntary.

The word “proliferation” has been used to describe the growth in the number of affinity groups. In 2006, there were forty-eight affinity groups and ten groups indicated that, according to the 2000 and 2001 General Assembly actions, they did not qualify as affinity groups (PC(USA) Minutes 2006:210-211, absent in 2008 Minutes). Some of these groups were born as a direct result of the partnered gay and lesbian ordination and/or installation, and same-gender marriage debates within the PC(USA). Since these affinity groups are pressure groups which influence commissioners at both General Assembly and presbytery levels, a brief discussion of the history and purpose of these groups is required.

4.4 The Presbyterian Lay Committee

The Presbyterian Lay Committee (PLC) was founded in 1965 in the UPCUSA as a response to writing of the Confession of 1967. They proclaimed Jesus Christ alone was the way of salvation and the only Saviour. In 1968, the PLC started *The Layman* and later, *The Layman Online*. In 1995, an attempt to have *The Layman* publicly censured by the General Assembly failed by a 517-20 vote. The PLC has been and remains the strongest conservative group and a vehemently critical voice within the denomination. They advocated for the passing of G-6.0106b, continue to oppose any partnered gay or lesbian Christians in ordained positions, and oppose same-gender unions, blessings, and marriages (see www.laymanonline.com).

They actively support defiance through the withholding of per capita payments, assist congregations in dissolving their relationships with the denomination and advocate that congregations join the EPC, and provide resources for congregations to retain their church buildings which are held in trust by presbyteries, not individual congregations. The PLC has worked closely with Mr. Jensen, a Presbyterian member and attorney, who has filed countless complaints against individuals and sessions for ordaining and/or installing or participating in the ordination and/or installation of partnered gay and lesbian officers.

The PLC, previously a special organisation under G-9.0600, does not view itself as an affinity group under the 2000 and 2001 General Assembly guidelines, and

sometimes gives annual reports to the General Assembly (see PC(USA) Minutes 2006:211). Conflict between the PLC and the General Assembly will be discussed in Chapter 5 under the various years that the issue was addressed. The biggest conflict occurred in 2004, when the Western North Carolina Presbytery revoked the special ministry validation of the chief executive officer of the PLC, Rev. P T Williamson (see Chapter 5.48 for full discussion).

4.5 The Witherspoon Society

The Witherspoon Society was founded in 1973 within the UPCUSA to address “inclusiveness in church and society, social and economic justice, lifestyle concerns, and just international relations” (Eller 1992:262). They address many social concerns, of which gay and lesbian ordination is but one. Since 1994, part of their mission states that they support “equipping faithful Presbyterians for responsible participation at all levels of the church” (Witherspoon Society [s a]), meaning they support the full inclusion of partnered gay and lesbians as ordained officers.

4.6 More Light Presbyterians

Presbyterians for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (PLGC) was founded in 1980 and, in 1999, merged with the More Light Churches Network to form More Light Presbyterians (MLP). MLP works for the full participation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people of faith in the life, ministry and witness of the PC(USA) and the deleting of G-6.0106b. Congregations, through a vote of session can become More Light Congregations or a Welcoming Congregation (PC(USA) Minutes 2006:262, More Light Presbyterians [s a]).

4.7 Presbyterians for Renewal

“A Call to Renewal” was issued by 73 ministers and elders in 1988 and led to “A Gathering of Presbyterians” in 1989 (PC(USA) Minutes 2006:245). Presbyterians for Renewal (PFR) is a combination of the former Presbyterians for Biblical Concerns in

the UPCUSA and the Covenant Fellowship of Presbyterians in the PCUS (Eller 1992:263). Although PFR started with many centrists and received a glowing recommendation from Eller in 1992, they, too, have become a strong critical voice in the denomination. They work for renewal in the Presbyterian Church. Their mission is to be biblically faithful, conforming their lives and beliefs to the Word of God (PC(USA) Minutes 2006:245). “Biblically faithful” is a code phrase, meaning they vehemently oppose the ordination and/or installation of partnered gay and lesbian Christians and same-gender unions, blessings, and marriages.

4.8 That All May Freely Serve

That All May Freely Serve (TAMFS) was founded in 1993 to advocate for an inclusive and welcoming church and for the ordination of qualified GLBT persons for ordination to the offices of elder, deacon, and minister. This group was formed in response to the GAPJC setting aside the pastoral call of the Rev. J A Spahr, an avowed lesbian, to Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, NY. Downtown Church created a mission project, TAMFS, and called Spahr to be their “traveling lesbian evangelist” (see Chapter 5.15). With Spahr’s retirement in 2007, Ms. L Larges, who was denied “ready to receive a call” status by the GAPJC (see Chapter 5.14), was promoted to Minister Coordinator (www.tamfs.org). TAMFS collaborated with More Light Presbyterians and Showers of Stoles Project (PC(USA) Minutes 2006:252).

TAMFS also supported same-gender unions, blessings, and marriages. One of its members, Rev. Dr. J M Edwards, was found not guilty of performing a same-gender union which she called a marriage (see Chapter 5.62). Spahr was found not guilty by the GAPJC in April 2008 of performing what she called same-gender marriages. From June-November 2008, when California legalised same-gender marriage, Spahr openly performed tens of same-gender marriages in the state. This writer expects that she and others will be involved in complaints, which will be investigated by Investigative Committees, and possible charges, which will be investigated by various PJs. TAMFS is a strong action group, with members mostly from within the gay and lesbian community.

4.9 Showers of Stoles Project

The Shower of Stoles Project (SOSP) was founded by Rev. M Juillerat, who, when faced with the threat of being defrocked by the church in 1995, after coming out as a lesbian, chose to set aside her ordination. At the presbytery meeting, her GLBT friends had sent almost eighty stoles; a year later, they had 200. SOSP now has a collection of over one thousand liturgical stoles and other sacred items representing the lives of GLBT people of faith who serve in thirty-two denominations and faith traditions. Each stole contains the story of a GLBT person who is active as minister, elder, deacon, teacher, missionary, musician, administrator, or layperson, as well as GLBT persons who have been excluded from service because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The Project also keeps three thousand stoles signed by heterosexual allies. Upon retirement in 2006, Juillerat gave the SOSP to the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources. The Project supports the ordination and/or installation of all GLBT persons and same-gender unions, blessings and marriages (Showers of Stoles Project [s a]).

4.10 OnebyOne

OnebyOne was started in 1995 as a ministry to those conflicted about their sexuality, including, but not limited, to homosexuality. They believe sexual intimacy is only permitted in marriage between “one man and one woman,” and that homosexuality is a form of sexual brokenness. They promote abstinence for all unmarried persons and claim to help homosexuals to come out of homosexuality (www.OnebyOne.com), a code-phrase for sexual reorientation therapy. They oppose same-gender unions, blessings, and marriages.

4.11 The Presbyterian Coalition

The Presbyterian Coalition is a movement of people committed to life and transformation in the PC(USA) by exalting Jesus Christ, energising its congregations, and upholding historic biblical leadership standards (The Presbyterian Coalition [s

a)). Thus, they are opposed to the ordination and/or installation of partnered gay and lesbian Christians. During the early 1990's [sic - 1990s] they gathered individuals, churches, organisations and their leadership into a loosely-defined and active movement, sharing the conviction that the words of Scripture, interpreted by the Confessions of the church, reveal the will of God (ibid). One should notice that this is nearly the same wording used in G-6.0106b, where there is no mention of Christ as the highest authority, rather Scripture and the Confessions. The introduction and maintaining of G-6.0106b in the *Book of Order* has become their main focus.

The Coalition works with several like-minded groups, such as the PLC and OnebyOne. In 1998, they issued *A Declaration and Strategy Plan*, containing a six-point plan of how to gain control of the denomination. Several of their Church Discipline task force members led the four ecclesiastical trials regarding ordination in 1999 (PADNET 1999:1). PLC's Williamson is part of the visioning team (:2).

Dr. R A J Gagnon, from Pittsburgh Seminary, is the fiercest academic opponent of gay and lesbian ordination, and has written more than forty articles on the subject, all in a negative, condescending tone. Gagnon's book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics*, has provided conservatives with the theological and scriptural arguments to supplement their attempts at controlling the polity through the voting on General Assembly and presbytery levels.

4.12 The Covenant Network of Presbyterians

The Covenant Network of Presbyterians was founded in 1997 to support the passage of Amendment 97-A, the Fidelity and Integrity Amendment to replace G-6.0106b, the Fidelity and Chastity Amendment of 1996. They work for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian Presbyterians to ordained service and for the removal of G-6.0106b. They are a broad-based group supported by gays, lesbians and heterosexual Presbyterians, twenty former Moderators, 350 sessions and several presbyteries (Covenant Network [s a]).

4.13 Presbyterian Parents of Gays and Lesbians

Presbyterian Parents of Gays and Lesbians is a non-advocacy group and a parent support group, and takes no position on issues before the General Assembly (PC(USA) Minutes 2006:240).

4.14 Summary

Special Organisations or Affinity Groups have become and remain significant role players in the same-gender relationship debate and polity formation in the PC(USA). As will be seen in Chapter 5, conservative groups have been instrumental in assuring that G-6.0106b was added to the *Book of Order* in 1997, while progressive groups have been vehemently apposed to any standards limiting the inclusion of gays and lesbians as officers and prohibiting same-gender blessings and marriages.