

NEWS RELEASE

Pittsburgh Presbytery
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
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For Immediate Release

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PRESBYTERIAN CONVOCA TION ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AT RISK

Pittsburgh, PA. Concerned about civil courts becoming involved in internal church governance issues, the Pittsburgh Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is staging a national convocation on “Our Freedom at Risk: A Presbyterian Crisis” on Thursday, Feb. 19, 2009. The convocation, to be held at a Pittsburgh area church, will offer a national webinar or interactive webcast to enrolled locations including churches and other presbyteries.

According to Interim Pastor to Pittsburgh Presbytery, the Rev. Dr. Robert C. Anderson, “America’s churches should be concerned that civil courts are eroding the constitutional protection of religious freedom by interfering in the internal, ecclesiastical practices of the Church. Local congregations have sought and obtained court orders preventing presbyteries (regional governing units of the Presbyterian Church) from exercising their constitutional obligations concerning division, disorder, disloyalty and other issues as required by our church constitution.”

Dr. Anderson continued, “This convocation is an opportunity for Presbyterians to learn about and discuss the social, legal, disciplinary and theological challenges confronting the church. Speakers will present the historic and theological foundations of Presbyterian faith and practice in today’s secular context. Pittsburgh Presbytery is taking the leadership in initiating a national dialogue about how to be the Church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.”

The Presbyterian Church’s *Book of Order*, one part of its constitution, defines procedures for dismissing local congregations from the denomination. Several congregations wanting to secede from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in the Pittsburgh area and elsewhere have obtained court injunctions against presbyteries that have invoked such procedures. Ownership and control of church property is often the purpose of the litigation. Presbyterian Church law states that all congregations hold property in trust for the denomination. Local courts in some cases have ruled that state law overrules church law in property cases.

Dr. Anderson said “Evolving civil law in many jurisdictions appears intent on treating all denomination without clerical hierarchies to be congregational in their governance. That not true of Presbyterian Church organization where local congregations are connected to and under the supervision of the presbyteries.”

(MORE)

PRESBYTERIAN CONVOCA TION

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A panel of experts on Presbyterian Church history, governance, belief and religious liberty will discuss these topics:

The Westminster Assembly– the biblical basis for Presbyterianism and rejection of Congregationalism by Dr. Joseph Small, director, Theology, Worship and Education Ministries, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, KY

Covenant and Freedom of Conscience, -- the historic tensions between Scottish and Scots-Irish Presbyterianism by Dr. Euan Cameron, Professor of Reformation Church History and vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty, Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY

The Adopting Act of 1729 – the colonial application of freedom of conscience under the rubric of scrupling and its historical limits by Dr. Beau Weston, professor of sociology, Centre College, Danville, KY

Religious Liberty: A Legal History – deference and neutral principles doctrines in Constitutional interpretation by attorney Mark Tamman, director of constitutional services, Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.), Louisville, KY

The Application of Neutral Principles congregation-based claims to property -- The Rev. Jeff Tyndall, pastor of Carnegie (PA) Presbyterian Church and attorney of counsel on mediation and alternative dispute resolution.

Following each topic presentation, small groups will meet and report on their discussions. The convocation organizers plan to include the on-line audience in the group discussions or in question and answer sessions via email.

Details, including on-line registration forms, on the convocation are on its web site:

www.presbyterianconvocation.org Presbyteries, churches and other groups will find instructions on that web site for hosting their own local gathering by logging in. Beulah United Presbyterian Church, 2500 McCray Rd., Churchill (Pittsburgh) PA 15235 is the site of the convocation.

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