



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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Greetings Church Family!

As I prepare to attend the Assembly's meeting in Birmingham this year, I want to apprise you of some of the matters that will be considered so you can be better prepared to pray for me and the other elders as we seek to do the work Christ has called us to do in this Assembly. From our congregation REs Wil Davis and Nathan Bowers have been elected to represent the Session.

If you'd like a quick review of the acts and deliverances of last year's General Assembly as well as wider context, the preview and report from last year are on the church website: www.fpfo.org/gar.

I. The Year in Review

A lot has happened since last year's PCA General Assembly in Saint Louis both in the life of the nation of our exile as well as within this small part of Christ's Kingdom, the PCA. A few items will help set the context for this year's Assembly and will loom large over it.

A. The Failure to Ratify Overtures 23 and 37

Overtures 23 and 37 were intended to provide further clarity on what it means for officers of the PCA to be *above reproach*. The amendments would have required Presbyteries and Sessions to examine officer candidates to prevent those who are harboring scandalous sins (e.g. racism, abuse, homosexuality) or maintaining an identity unbecoming of someone in union with Christ (e.g. "Gay Christian") from being ordained in the PCA.

While a clear majority of the presbyteries voted to ratify the two overtures (63% for O23 and 55% for O37), they fell short of the 67% threshold required for ratification. I discuss more of what this means in [this article](#) and why we should be disappointed and concerned by the failure of ratification, but nonetheless I do not think it is reason to give up on the PCA.

B. The Apocalypse of the National Partnership

Last Fall someone released several files containing nine years' worth of correspondence from a secretive society of elders (mostly teaching elders) within the PCA known as *the National Partnership*. The files reveal the goals of a more progressive wing of the Assembly and how they have attempted to dilute the PCA's commitment to Presbyterian distinctives and pave the way for unordained people in leadership by allowing them on permanent committees currently limited only to elders and (in a few cases) deacons.

In November 2021 the Session produced a report examining the activity of the National Partnership; it is available [here](#). If you'd like to read the correspondence that has been made public, you can do so [here](#).

The files also revealed voting guides and attempts to ensure members of the National Partnership were elected to committees of Presbyteries and General Assembly. They also contained tips for newer elders and even a schedule to help their members know when to "SCHEDULE YOUR DRINKING" and when they needed to "be on the floor for those votes" during General Assembly.

The unveiling of these clandestine activities shocked and scandalized many within the denomination so much so that this year's Assembly is anticipated to be the largest one yet as elders from small churches sacrifice to come out and contend for Christ's bride against those who seek to weaken our commitment to the Standards.

C. The Denial and Sustaining of Complaints Against Missouri Presbytery (MoP)

As a result of public comments made by “gay pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America” TE Greg Johnson and the Session of Memorial Presbyterian Church (MPC) related to “Revoice 18,” a pair of complaints by TE Ryan Speck were filed against MoP for the way it handled the investigations of both TE Johnson and the Session of MPC. In the complaints, TE Speck argued MoP should have concluded there was a “strong presumption of guilt” regarding TE Johnson for his activities and that MoP should have concluded MPC erred seriously in hosting the Revoice conference.

The Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) denied TE Speck’s complaint (Speck 2) regarding the way MoP investigated TE Johnson’s public statements. This led TE Johnson to claim he was exonerated by the ‘supreme court’ of the PCA. However, TE Johnson was never on trial; only the procedure observed by MoP was assessed by the SJC and only his statements prior to 2020. Additionally, SJC members noted the dangerous way in which TE Johnson has been speaking and writing since that time and strongly cautioned against his “tone-deafness.”

The SJC sustained crucial aspects of TE Speck’s complaint (Speck 1) related to their investigation of the MPC Session. This will require MoP to conduct a proper investigation regarding the activities of MPC. More on this matter below.

II. Domestic Abuse & Sexual Assault (DASA) Committee

After three years and approximately \$30,000, the DASA committee produced a 220-page report aimed to help PCA session and presbyteries faithfully minister to those who are victims of various forms of abuse. Additionally the report offers advice regarding procedures to prevent abuse from taking place within the churches of the PCA.

There are numerous helpful pieces of advice within the report. TE George Sayour has written a helpful analysis, which I commend to you. The report should be received and the committee dismissed at this year’s Assembly.

III. Business of the 49th General Assembly

A. Nominations Committee (NC)

The NC is comprised of a representative from each of the 88 Presbyteries in the PCA. Each year the NC presents a report of recommended elders to staff the permanent committees overseeing the agencies of the PCA as well as the SJC. In addition to candidates from the NC, floor nominees are also permitted.

It seems this year’s NC worked hard to recommend men for the permanent committees and the SJC who are firmly committed to the authority of the Scriptures and the plain meaning of our Standards.

B. Replacement Overtures

With the failure of overtures aimed at tightening up ordination requirements for PCA Officers, new proposals have been sent to the General Assembly. Some are very specific in their focus such as O7 from Westminster Presbytery:

Men who identify as homosexual, even those who identify as homosexual and claim to practice celibacy in that self-identification, are disqualified from holding office in the Presbyterian Church in America.

Others are more broad in focus, but nonetheless clearly accomplish the goal of prohibiting those known by reputation to be dominated by scandalous desires and sins from holding office in the PCA such as O23 from Southeast Alabama Presbytery:

Those whom God calls to bear office in His Church shall demonstrate maturity of faith and growing conformity to Jesus Christ. While these office bearers will see spiritual perfection only in glory, they will continue in this life to confess and to mortify remaining sins. Thus, those who identify or describe themselves

according to their specific sins, or who teach that it is acceptable for Christians to identify or describe themselves in such a manner, shall not be approved for service by any court of Christ's Church.

You can read the whole list of overtures on the PCA General Assembly [Website](#).

C. Original Jurisdiction Overtures

Note: these overtures come under BCO 34-1. However BCO 34-1 has never been successfully implemented. For that reason there are two overtures attempting to change this procedure in order to ensure there is a path for the General Assembly to directly take up matters of grave public scandal involving ministers in the PCA. This one is the best of the two.

1. [Central Indiana Presbytery \(CIP\)](#)

Numerous [media outlets](#) in Indiana have covered the scandal surrounding a PCA teaching elder and National Partnership Member who has been accused of sexual harassment. Because of the complex nature of this issue, some argue the presbytery acted improperly regarding the teaching elder in question, so two presbyteries have requested the General Assembly assume "original jurisdiction" over this matter through its SJC. You can read the overtures [here](#) and [here](#); the overtures summarize the difficulties CIP attempted to navigate as it adjudicated this case.

2. [Missouri Presbytery \(MoP\)](#)

As discussed above, MoP investigated some of TE Greg Johnson's past statements and concluded there was "no strong presumption of guilt," however TE Johnson continues to speak and be identified in ways that some argue contradict the Scripture and Standards as well as violate his ordination vows. As such, two presbyteries have requested the SJC take up this matter.

While these overtures are likely to receive wide support, it is unlikely the SJC will take up the case. First, it remains unclear whether MoP has refused to act. It does not appear there is a new request for an investigation into TE Johnson's Christian character in light of his ongoing activities (BCO 31-2), and if that is the case then there is nothing on which MoP has refused to act. The SJC may take up original jurisdiction only in the vaguely defined situation in which a presbytery "refuses to act," so the SJC may decline the request on that basis. Second, there are many indications TE Johnson and MPC are preparing to withdraw from the PCA quite soon.

You can read the overtures [here](#) and [here](#) in which the authors of the overtures give some evidence for why the SJC should take up the case of TE Johnson. It is also important to remember, in the previous cases involving MoP, TE Johnson was not a party to those cases. He has never been tried by the SJC nor has the SJC exonerated him, despite what he has claimed and even the imprecise language in the PCA's *ByFaith* Magazine coverage of those previous cases that implied he was a party.

D. Other Overtures

1. [National Association of Evangelicals](#)

The Assembly will again this year have the opportunity to vote to leave the so-called "National Association of Evangelicals" (NAE). While the organization purports to be such, the causes for which it advocates and the groups it represents strain any standard definition of *evangelical*. The NAE is a political lobbying arm that has advocated for compromise with the culture on sexuality and gender as well as compromise on the exclusivity of salvation in Christ. You can read the [overture for more reasons](#) as to why its authors believe the PCA should not be associated with this organization or pay tens of thousands of dollars annually in membership dues to support the NAE agenda.

As the unveiling of their correspondence has revealed, the previous attempts to withdraw from the NAE were stifled in large part due to the National Partnership successfully advocating for the PCA to remain in the NAE. One National Partnership Member argued the PCA should remain and offered the following rationale to the National Partnership:

The PCA is typically looked to for biblical and theological guidance within in NAE. We have a disproportionate influence for the size of our denomination within NAE. Roy Taylor, our stated clerk, has served as the chairman of the Board for NAE for more than a decade. But I also believe the PCA would be impoverished by our leaving the NAE. The Mission of God is so much bigger than the PCA and being part of NAE demonstrates we recognize this fact and are willing to cooperate whenever we can.

Given the positions adopted by the NAE (see the overture for more details), it seems dubious the NAE gives much weight to the “biblical and theological guidance” of the PCA.

2. Abortion

Ascension Presbytery overtures the Assembly to petition the United States Government to end the scourge of legalized abortion in this country. While the church’s mission is spiritual, there are occasions in which the Church both prophetically and by way of “humble petition” may or must address the magistrate regarding extraordinary cases. The legalized murder of some sixty million persons by so-called “medical professionals” is undoubtedly a matter of both urgent and extraordinary concern.

3. Secret Organizations

The final overture received by the Stated Clerk’s Office for the General Assembly would call PCA Elders to sever ties with “secretive and exclusive political groups for the purpose of influencing or manipulating the church courts according to a particular agenda.” While the verbiage may require perfecting by the Overtures Committee, it certainly is a great start.

Our own RE Nathan Bowers has written on how the presence of secret caucuses hinders the work of the Church. TE Jared Nelson elsewhere has compiled a history of secret organizations within Presbyterian church history and traced the wretched impact they have had in recent decades.

IV. Matters for Prayer and Concluding Thoughts

Please pray for the work of the Assembly asking God to give strength to the elders as we endure long days of deliberation. Pray God will enable the elders to bear witness of Christ’s kingship and righteousness to the people we encounter in Birmingham. Pray God will give wisdom to the elders in all we do from the election of a moderator on Tuesday night to the votes on the overtures into the wee hours of Friday morning.

One former moderator of the General Assembly characterized this year as the “Pitchfork Assembly,” because of the outrage in the pews related to some of the events of recent years in the PCA. This is both cause for prayers of thanksgiving (i.e. that people in the churches are willing to sacrifice to send their elders to the Assembly and that God has raised up elders willing to do the work of the church) and prayers for peace (i.e. that God will pour out a spirit of humility and grace even as we contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints so we may be united in truth and love).

This Assembly has the potential to be a watershed moment for the PCA in which we take decisive steps toward renewing our commitment to the Scriptures and our Doctrinal Standards which summarize them. Please pray the PCA will enter her fiftieth year with greater devotion to the Reformed Faith, the Scriptures, and the Great Commission than ever before.

Your servant in Christ,



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