



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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Report of the Session to the Congregation on The National Partnership and the PCA

You may have been alarmed at the recent circulation of files that may be interpreted by some as representing a secret faction of elders within the PCA who have conspired to influence voting on matters at the General Assembly. While division of opinion is inherent among men until all truth is revealed, we believe working in secret to manipulate the votes of the General Assembly, Presbyteries, and Committees of the Church raises the question of whether such activity is earthly wisdom and political maneuvering or reflects “the wisdom from above” that “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” (Jas 3:17).

A number of you have read articles published on *The Aquila Report*, *Ref21*, and other online magazines and blogs related to this and are understandably concerned about the existence of such an organization in the PCA. We urge calm and patience in the face of these revelations.

As you will see, this group represents a minority of elders in the PCA.

I. The National Partnership

If you have read Pastor Biese’s reports or previews of General Assembly, then you may already be aware of the existence of this faction. But here is an attempted description.

A. What Is the National Partnership?

The National Partnership (NP) was known to exist as early as 2013, though its origins date back prior to that. In 2013 TE George Robertson, then pastor of FPC Augusta, answered some questions related to the National Partnership.¹ He described its goals in this way:

- 1) Greater participation in the church courts.
- 2) Greater preparation for the work of the Assembly via debate preparation and committee participation.
- 3) Greater love for the brethren via increased communication and resources along with respectful dialogue and commitment to “Good Faith” subscription.²

TE Robertson went on to explain the reason for the secretive tone was to ensure free dialogue and exchange of ideas without fear of being misunderstood. TE Robertson was moderator of the PCA General Assembly shortly before leaving the PCA to minister in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

B. The Agenda of the National Partnership

The records of the NP correspondence show the organization was aimed at a specific sort of participation and preparation in the work of the courts. Here is one of the action items entitled “Partnership Extension” in the documents:

if you know like-minded men in the presbyteries below, please consider reaching out to them about the National Partnership. It's helpful for us to be able to coordinate across

¹ <https://www.theaquilareport.com/national-partnership-a-new-group-in-the-pca/>

² Good faith subscription is preferred by the NP contrasted with “strict subscription.” Subscription is a commitment and embrace of the Westminster Standards as a summary of one’s own views of the Bible and theology. A strict subscription view permits only limited differences with the Westminster Standards and largely prohibits the teaching and practice of those differences. By contrast, “good faith subscription” allows men with views that deviate from the Reformed orthodoxy set forth in the Westminster Standards to hold, teach, and sometimes practice their views so long as they do so in good faith and without hostility to the system of doctrine summarized by the Westminster Standards. This is also commonly described as keeping the PCA a “big tent” (see David Cassidy’s recent article here in which he rejoices in the Big Tent and describes those arguing for closer adherence to the Westminster Standards as desiring “pup tent” Presbyterianism: <https://www.davidpcassidy.com/blog/pca-at-the-crossroads>)

more presbyteries. [Please note: *like-mindedness is critical for what we're trying to accomplish*. If you have any doubt that your recommendation is a great fit please wait until you are more certain. We are willing to expand only as quickly as due diligence allows us.] (emphasis original; see All_NP_Emails_2013-2021.pdf, p. 23)³

The documents make clear the NP was not simply a discussion forum to exchange ideas, but “like-minded” brethren with an agenda they hoped to “coordinate” across the denomination and in various presbyteries. One of the ways they coordinated was via a GoogleGroup, the record of which has now been made available by a current (or likely now former) member.

Later, in preparation for the 2018 General Assembly, a member of the group articulated their goal: “advocate for greater health in the Presbyterian Church in America,” to create “a more beautiful, more orthodox denomination for Kingdom work around the world” (“All_NPP...” p. 288).

While the goals of the organization are stated as such, how do they understand and what is required to make the PCA more beautiful and more orthodox? This report will address that matter below.

II. Concerns Regarding the National Partnership

A. Secretive Tactics

Since the existence of this organization came to light in 2013, elders across the denomination have expressed grave concern about its tactics and operations. A large group of elders conspiring in secret to influence the outcome of General Assembly certainly has raised eyebrows. The Session of FPFO is likewise troubled by this.

TE Tom Cannon, who was invited to join the organization in its early stage, publicly expressed⁴ his reservations regarding such operations; he described it this way: they hope to “staff committees with people who share our convictions on disputed matters...And this would be done through select membership and anonymous discussion.”

Even before TE Cannon raised his objections to secretive operations behind the church courts, the principle of openness and public discussion was well-enshrined in Presbyterianism. The late dean of American Presbyterianism Samuel Miller noted: “concealment and evasion, are, nowhere, ultimately profitable to any man: but in ecclesiastical assembly, there is a hatefulness about them which cannot be too strongly portrayed, and a mischief which never fails, sooner or later, to fall on the head of him who employs them” (cf. Luke 12:3).⁵

While there is nothing improper about openly, publicly, and freely advocating for one’s theological and doctrinal commitments, the Session finds the secretive nature of this organization most distressing.

PCA historian and pastor Paul Settle reminds us that a secretive group seeking to manipulate the church courts is not without precedent in the PCA. In the early 1990s a group called the “Vision Caucus” tried to unseat and replace “undesirables” on the PCA General Assembly’s nominating committee (i.e. the committee that helps the Assembly choose men to serve on all the other permanent committees of the General Assembly). At that time the PCA recognized this “smacked...of the clandestine political maneuvering” that plagued conservatives in the old PCUS.⁶

³ The files are currently available on the internet. Session has tried to accurately summarize approximately 450 pages of correspondence. The reader is free to make his or her own assessment.

⁴ <https://www.theaquilareport.com/spinal-tap-rodney-king-and-the-national-partnership/> TE Tom Cannon acknowledges he likely agrees with many of the theological goals of the NP, but not with their methods.

⁵ Samuel Miller, *Letters on Clerical manners and Habits*, p. 330.

⁶ Paul G. Settle, *To God All Praise and Glory* (1998), 61.

B. The Language and Attitudes

1. The “Majority”

Despite operating in secret, the document reveals the group believes it represents the true majority: “we are the majority” (p. 335), they assert, and must “bear with the minority” who do not share their views (p. 26). It seems the NP presumes its own views represent “the majority of the PCA” (p. 163) whereas those who do not share in the NP agenda or vision are in a minority.

If the NP represents the majority, why must they act in secret? Recently someone who claimed to be affiliated with the NP stated there were never more than approximately 200 members of the NP out of many thousands of teaching and ruling elders. With such numbers, it seems to the Session presumptuous at best to claim to represent the majority of the PCA.

Additionally, the PCA is *not* a democracy in which the whims of the majority reign, but part of Christ’s Kingdom. The PCA is a confessional denomination in which the views of her officers must align with the Westminster Standards. Employing language of “the majority” smacks of secular politics rather than spiritual care and submission to the brethren and Standards.

2. Voting Bloc

Also contained in the documents are a several lists of candidates for whom members of the NP are encouraged to vote. A short reason is given for voting *for* or *against* one of the candidates. Most of the reasonings behind the recommendations are innocuous. However, one glaring exception involved a personal attack on a Ruling Elder from Calvary Presbytery in which the author of the voting guide stated: “[Name Redacted] is the primary GRN [Gospel Reformation Network] organizer and agitator, the prime organizing voice against CTS [Covenant Theological Seminary] and mover of the Nashville statement. He would be, i [sic] cannot stress enough, a disaster for the court” (p. 319).

While one may disagree with the theological convictions of this Ruling Elder, the fact that the author of this recommendation felt at liberty to describe a fellow presbyter in such terms in a secret group is sufficient reason to forever eschew such machinations regarding the Courts of the Church.

Later on, the group betrays the voting bloc nature and factional spirit of the organization as an urgent message was sent reading: “Please join us in the assembly hall. We are losing votes at the moment” (p. 327).

C. Participation in the Courts

As anyone who has been to (or watched on livestream!) General Assembly knows, there is a lot of time in which no (critical) votes are taking place, but information is given or less important matters are discussed.

Although the stated purpose of the NP articulated by TE Robertson was to encourage “Greater dedication to the work of the Assembly through preparation, committee participation and floor debate,” the document suggests the NP worked to enable men to participate in the work of the Assembly only when it was “important” and then be absent while other business was conducted.

D. Prominent PCA Officials and Factionalism

From time to time the documents recognize there is a division between “our Elders” (293) and those who are not their elders. The author of what appears to be a pre-GA pep-talk cautioned the members of this faction:

[W]e run the risk of the wrong moderator selecting the wrong committee let’s not lose the moderator vote. Win. We have to be there, we have to get our Elders in the room at GA, we have to find ways to finance our friends that can’t afford it. We have to show up. The only way to avoid the wrong committee is to win the right to a good committee. You have to show up. (p. 293)

This plea to attend the meetings of the Assembly was in reference to potential study committees to be formed. Rather than presume the best about their brothers, they were worried the “wrong” committee would be formed.

The selection of a moderator is important, however. In what appears to be a “wrap up” report on General Assembly, the author offers the following words to the moderator of that year’s General Assembly: “Thanks to Bryan Chapell who did not wait the extra second to hear calls for ‘division’” (p. 164). A call for “division” is a parliamentary procedure in which someone in the assembly who does not agree with the moderator or chairman’s determination of a voice vote requires a counted vote to be taken to verify the result. It is a matter of principle and fairness that if a voice vote is in doubt, a counted vote must be taken to ensure the moderator judged correctly.

In that particular vote, the moderator did not pause to consider a request from the members of the assembly to ensure his call was accurate, and he was thanked by the NP leadership for failing to do so.

TE Bryan Chapell is reported as a member by the NP (p. 114). He is the current Stated Clerk of the PCA. It is unclear whether he remains a member of the NP, but we have heard he is no longer a member of this faction.

III. Goals of the National Partnership

As the NP is a secret organization, it is difficult to say with certainty, clarity, and in a concise way what their goals are, however the unveiling of their correspondence is helpful here. A number of times, the documents reference their goal of moving the denomination in a “healthier” direction that is “more orthodox” and “beautiful.”

Those are indeed worthy goals and fine sounding arguments, but what is meant by them? The documents provide a clearer picture. As noted above, the NP has an agenda. It is not wrong to have an agenda, however the way in which one pursues an agenda may be sinful or blameless, ethical or unethical, proper or improper. It is also worthy to note one’s means of pursuing an agenda may be neither sinful *nor* proper.

A. Unifying Causes

A number of endeavors undertaken by the NP have broad appeal. The documents show their efforts at rallying support for overtures dealing with racial reconciliation as well as to study abuse and ministry to victims of various sorts of abuse. These measures were passed by wide margins at the General Assembly.

B. Faction-Specific Causes

In addition to causes that had wide appeal in the PCA, the NP correspondence does give clarity to their specific goals and aims or what they mean by “more orthodox” and “beautiful.”

1. Loose Subscription / “Big Tent” Presbyterianism

The documents show a concerted effort to have NP members elected by their presbyteries to the PCA “Review of Presbytery Records” (RPR) committee. In short, this committee is responsible to make recommendations to the GA on whether the actions of each presbytery have been conducted properly and in accordance with the Westminster Standards.

As mentioned in TE Biese’s reports related to the 2021 General Assembly, for years certain presbyteries have graciously allowed men to minister within their bounds who hold views contrary to what is taught in the Westminster Standards on the condition these men do not teach or preach those views.

The NP has attempted to exert influence on the RPR to recommend such prohibitions be ruled out of order as unlawfully binding the man’s conscience (p. 401) and instead allow for a broader range of ideas and doctrines to be taught within the PCA.

This issue came to a head in 2021 when the General Assembly ruled clearly that a presbytery does have the right to restrict a man from teaching views that deviate from the Westminster Standards. This was a significant defeat for the NP.

2. Women and Non-Ordained People in Leadership

The documents show a clear desire to see women in leadership of the PCA as they seek to “*open the guild of theologians and leaders to the gifted women in our denomination*” (p. 255; emphasis original).

For some years, a vocal minority within the PCA has advocated for women to be deployed in diaconal roles or even elected to the diaconate and ordained along with men to the office of deacon. The NP documents lament efforts to limit the apparatus within the PCA that has advocated opening diaconal ministry to women:

I expect a hard push (in view of the overtures submitted) to push forward limits on the CMC’s [Cooperative Ministry Committee] scope and effectiveness, and to further restrict any remaining Session discretion regarding the election and utilization of women in diagonal [sic; *diaconal* was likely intended] roles (p. 267).

It is important to understand the BCO – in keeping with scripture – already allows women to minister along with the deacons in a wide variety of roles. However, the office of deacon is currently open to ordained men only.

The NP frustration with the PCA’s doctrine of ordination and women’s roles is clarified later on:

“We are within reach of asserting a proper view of the ministry of women in the PCA. Practice is still a long ways away, but I believe the change in our polity leading to women on boards and agencies in the PCA is only one year from reality” (pp. 282-283).

The NP appears to believe the current requirement that members of General Assembly Permanent Committees be ordained men is unbiblical and improper.

Recently overtures have come to General Assembly seeking to permit the committees of the General Assembly to allow non-ordained people to serve on them. We now know that – at least in part – this secretive organization was behind the effort to weaken our commitment to Presbyterianism, that is a Church overseen by elders.

Later on, a leader in the NP wrote that their goal is to create “a denomination worth having” which includes: “Providing the means for the unordained, including women, to serve as voting members on committees of our boards and agencies” (p. 295).

3. National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)

For many years it has been a goal of more conservative members of the PCA to withdraw from the NAE. Reasons for this include the lack of other conservative, Reformed denominations in the NAE as well as the leftward political slant of the organization. The NP leadership encouraged its members to vote to remain in the NAE (p. 298).

4. Permanent Committee Work

While not a cause precisely, throughout the document there are calls for men to secure their presbytery’s slot on key committees of the General Assembly. This is especially important in the Nominating Committee as it recommends men to the Assembly to serve on the permanent committees.

The trajectory of the denomination can be greatly influenced by the composition of these permanent committees. For multiple years, the NP produced a voter guide aimed at ensuring men friendly to the vision of the NP are elected to these committees.

5. Celibate Gay Christianity/Side-B

The NP vigorously opposed efforts by the 2019 General Assembly to adopt or affirm the *Nashville Statement* as both biblically orthodox and a helpful resource in ministry. The NP viewed the *Nashville Statement* merely as “the latest stick being used to whack away the unclean” (p. 294).

The NP was likewise unambiguous in its *opposition* to attempts to strengthen ordination requirements that would explicitly exclude men who self-identify as “gay Christian” from office in the PCA.

At one point the NP correspondence described those in favor of the *Nashville Statement* in the following terms: “Riding the wave of culture-war, fear has created a strong voting block that has not only stilted our voice as an Assembly but helped to repopulate some of our committees, like the SJC, with less healthy expressions of our denominational body” (p. 347). That is how the NP writes in secret about their fellow presbyters who disagree with their goals: *less healthy expressions*.

IV. Assessing National Partnership Success

The NP has indeed enjoyed some small successes such as keeping the PCA as a member of the NAE. But what about their significant projects and goals to transform this denomination in to one they believe is “worth having” and “beautiful” (their words)?

A. Celibate Gay Christianity / Side-B

For all the impassioned speeches against the Nashville Statement in 2019 by NP and “NP-adjacent” (our term, not that of the NP) elders, it passed by a wide margin and sent a clear message that a gay identity is incompatible with a Christian identity.

Likewise, the NP was clear in its opposition to recent amendments aimed at strengthening the ordination requirements to clearly prohibit a so-called “gay Christian” from serving as an officer (Pastor, Ruling Elder, Deacon) in the PCA. Both of the overtures to do this were passed by wide margins at GA.

It remains to be seen whether the presbyteries will ratify these changes to the *Book of Church Order* by a two-thirds margin.

B. Non-Ordained Leadership

Some years ago, a study committee produced recommendations for ways non-ordained people might be involved in more areas of ministry in the PCA, but those recommendations are entirely non-binding.

Tennessee Valley Presbytery, along with other presbyteries, sent an overtures to “Allow Non-ordained Persons to Serve on Committees and Boards” of the PCA. These overtures were soundly defeated despite political maneuvering publicly and in secret to change the way the PCA operates and is governed.

C. Committees and Leadership

It is undeniable the NP has been effective at installing NP members onto the committees of the denomination as well as swinging the moderator votes in their favor. We have already noted the Stated Clerk of the PCA was considered by them to be a member of their secret faction. In 2018 the documents convey a sense of celebration at the change in six years:

The leadership of the PCA was further clarified this week. The people leading this denomination are: Irwyn Ince, Alex Jun, Lloyd Kim, Derek Halverson, Howie Donahoe, Larry Hoop, Bruce O’Neil, Sean Lucas, Mike Khandjian. That’s a good group. We are in good hands. That’s an incredible change from six years ago when we started the NP (p. 282).

However, terms end and times change. While they have been successful at gaining control of several key committees, we have already noted how the influence of the NP may have reached

its zenith: recall above the statement, “some of our committees, like SJC” have been repopulated with “less healthy” (in the view of the NP) members of the PCA.

That was written in response to the 2019 General Assembly. In 2021, the General Assembly elected almost none of the candidates recommended by the NP. The 2021 Assembly was the most well-attended General Assembly in PCA history; it appears people in the PCA have taken notice of the course set in secret by the NP (it took several years) and that course is being soundly rejected.

V. Conclusion

A. Final Assessment

The dedication, resources, reach, and commitment of the NP to impact the courts of the PCA are undeniable. Yet, when looking at the big picture, what have they gained in nearly a decade of secret politicking and maneuvering? Indeed, they helped the denomination take action regarding racial reconciliation and minister to victims of abuse. But what progress have they made on their specific goals of creating a place in which 1) celibate “Gay Christianity” is tolerated, 2) non-ordained people are functioning in leadership capacities, and 3) theological-broadness is acceptable?

As we have seen, the recent Assemblies have resoundingly defeated all those main causes of the NP. Yes, the NP has managed to have people friendly to their faction elected and appointed to positions, but as the documents reveal, much of that is simply because no one else volunteered for a particular slot on a committee from that presbytery. As more elders participated in the life of the Assembly, candidates other than those endorsed by the NP were elected (remember the note sent out desperately pleading for their men to join the assembly hall and start voting).

After nine years of machinations, the PCA is arguably more solid than she was before the National Partnership began. After the 2021 General Assembly, one NP member reflected:

[A]t this assembly the side representing our views was significantly outnumbered. We will have to take that to heart and consider what it means for the next years. There will be conversations in the weeks and months ahead about how we best steward our place in this denomination (p. 439).

The NP and the key progressive causes it represents have been soundly defeated for two consecutive assemblies and this was all before their operations and tactics were exposed to the light to this extent. Even if two-thirds of the presbyteries fail to ratify the BCO changes this year, the trajectory of the PCA seems to be moving in a direction opposed to the goals of the NP.

As long as we can continue to work with and flourish as part of Tennessee Valley Presbytery (TVP), your Session believes now is a wonderful time to be part of the PCA. Now is the time to redouble our efforts at fostering confessional integrity, biblical fidelity, and joyful piety.

B. Commitments of the Session

1. Christ-Centered Focus

We believe Christ is king and head of the church and are comforted by God’s control over all that happens in the PCA. We believe exalting Him will help navigate the differences with our brothers in the NP and help us to move forward together in unity, transparency, and grace.

2. Vigilance

The tactics and machinations of the NP have convinced the Session we need to be alert and attuned to events taking place in the PCA and TVP. We recommend the members of the congregation likewise take note of magazines and journals discussing the events and concerns of the PCA and share your thoughts with us. We will seek to be aware of the health of the PCA as well as her sister reformed and presbyterian communions such as the ARP, OPC, and others.

3. Participation

In planning the budget for 2022 we will strive to make funds available to send two of our Ruling Elders as well as Pastor Biese to the General Assembly in Birmingham. We also recognize the importance of attending presbytery to vote on who will represent TVP on General Assembly committees as well as to examine candidates for pastorates here in our region.

4. Prayer

We commit to pray for the health and faithfulness of the PCA regularly and more fervently than we have in the past. Our beloved denomination is at a crossroads, but we trust her King will preserve a faithful remnant for Himself.

5. Love

We commit to love our fellow elders in the denomination and work with them in the open for the glory of Christ and the peace and purity of His Bride. The documents reveal many in the NP have great love for the Church and Christ's people and affection for those with whom they disagree, and - while we do not condone their methods and secrecy - we are committed to working with and showing love and grace to all in the PCA who will deal justly and in truth.

Thank you for allowing us to minister to you as your Session. We have attempted to concisely summarize and assess the main points of these documents, so if you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

Your servants in Christ,



David Bosshardt,
Elder

Wil Davis,
Elder



Herman McConathy,
Clerk of Session

Ryan Biese,
Moderator

Adopted by Act of Session November 16, 2021.