



# FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

One West Harker Road | Fort Oglethorpe, GA | 706.866.2521 | [www.FPFO.org](http://www.FPFO.org)

July 6, 2021

Dear Congregation of the Lord,

Thank you for sending me to the General Assembly this year in Saint Louis. This was the largest assembly in the history of our denomination and one of the most significant in recent memory.

Here is a report and summary of many of the “acts and deliverances” of this year’s assembly. In some ways this is a followup to the [GA Preview letter from June 24](#).

## **I. God’s Goodness to the PCA**

The Lord was exceedingly kind to our branch of Christ’s church at this year’s assembly.

### **A. Statistics**

In 2020 more than \$1 Billion dollars was contributed to the PCA churches. Although the denomination realized a small decline in membership (300), more than 2,000 adults and 4,500 children were baptized in 2020. Additionally, there was a net gain of 13 individual congregations within the PCA. This includes newly particularized church plants as well as congregations joining the PCA from independency or such faith communions as the EPC (1) or the RCA (3).

### **B. The Assembly**

This year’s assembly was a unique experience for me because I was on the prevailing side of nearly every debate. It seems the increase in participation was the result of concerned folks throughout the PCA insisting their elders attend the assembly. There were more first time commissioners attending than normal, which again suggests many congregations were prepared to make the financial sacrifice to send elders to contend for the PCA.

God graciously chose to restrain the doctrinal drift within the PCA this year. There were a number of critical votes in which the denomination could move either in a more or less faithful direction. In all of these important votes, the assembly voted to strengthen our commitment to Reformed Faith and Practice.

### **C. The Composition of the PCA Assembly**

As I mentioned in my “GA Preview Letter,” the elders (and congregations) within the PCA break down - broadly speaking - into two groups: Reformed/Presbyterians and Broad Evangelicals.

The Reformed/Presbyterians are committed to our doctrinal heritage and the Westminster Standards as a faithful summary of the Scripture. The Broad Evangelicals have an appreciation for our Reformed Heritage and would express the doctrines of salvation generally in a God-centered (Calvinistic) way.

I’ll explain further about this on July 14 at 6:50 during our congregational forum on General Assembly. Understanding the groups within the PCA helps us to make sense of the competing visions for ministry within the PCA

## II. Some Acts and Deliverances

Historically the Stated Clerk of the PCA has published a document outlining all the actions (acts) and statements (deliverances) of the General Assembly. My report will not be so comprehensive, but will focus on a few of the major or critical matters taken up by the assembly this year in Saint Louis.

### A. Presbytery Examinations

There were a number of presbyteries (e.g. Northwest Georgia, Calvary Presbytery) that the Review of Presbytery Records Committee (RPR) wanted to be referred to the Standing Judicial Commission because they have instructed men who hold views that deviate from the Westminster Standards not to teach those deviant views. This year's assembly rightly decided a presbytery is free to restrict a man from teaching and preaching a view that is not consistent with Reformed Theology.

RPR alleged this practice violates Christian Liberty by "binding a man's conscience" not to teach what he believes is biblical. The General Assembly concluded this is not the case, but that the presbytery has the right to require that only faithful, Reformed doctrine be taught within its bounds.

This is an important victory for presbyterian polity; the council of elders (presbytery) has the right to determine the terms of admission to its membership and to require that all the preaching and teaching within its churches be consistent with our Reformed heritage.

### B. Ordination and Ministry

For some time Mission to the World (MTW) has been allowing unordained people to serve in leadership positions such as "Team Leader" with authority even over men called by the church to serve as "overseers" and ordained as elders. Several dozen MTW missionaries - both men and women - appealed to various presbyteries and congregations asking for help to rectify this "unpresbyterian" policy.

A number of presbyteries sent overtures to revise the MTW *Policy Manual* to require those in "line authority" with MTW be ordained elders (either teaching or ruling elders). Ultimately [Overture 14](#) came to the floor and was recommended by the Committee of Commissioners for MTW.

However, the Coordinator of MTW, TE Lloyd Kim spoke against this overture. He argued the assembly should reject this policy change for three reasons. First the change was unnecessary since MTW has recently adopted a policy requiring that *ordinarily* those in leadership positions to be ordained elders. Second, he argued the language was unclear; he was not certain what "line authority" meant. Third, he argued requiring ordained elders to oversee the church planting and church development works of MTW would "hinder" the work of MTW. He closed by warning the assembly that to adopt Overture 14 would set a dangerous precedent within the PCA with the General Assembly setting policies for MTW.

While the coordinator's speech was well articulated and clear, it was distressing. The venerable TE David Coffin pointed out it is the prerogative of the General Assembly to set policies for the agencies of the PCA. It seems what TE Lloyd Kim characterized as a hindrance and dangerous precedent is simply presbyterianism functioning in a biblical way.

The assembly voted 54-46% to adopt Overture 14 and force a change within MTW to require those functioning as overseers of church plants and church development works to be elders.

It is important to note, however, that this policy can be revised by any subsequent General Assembly. We must not simply rest on this victory for biblical presbyterianism, but must continue to be vigilant within all the courts of the church (Session, Presbytery, and General Assembly), but more on that later!

## C. Human Sexuality and Sanctification

### 1. Study Committee Report

The Assembly received the report of the *Ad Interim Committee on Human Sexuality* with little objection. TE Greg Johnson of Memorial Presbyterian Church in Saint Louis **objected** to affirming the report because he did not believe the report adequately conveyed God's love for same sex attracted people and he called for the Church to apologize for the way she has treated same-sex attracted people. This was the only time TE Johnson spoke on the floor.

The Study Committee **report** is a brief and faithful (though not exhaustive) summary of the Bible's teaching on its subject.

### 2. Changes to the Book of Church Order

The Assembly adopted two overtures that propose changes to the *Book of Church Order* (BCO). The BCO is - essentially - the policy and operations manual for the PCA. The BCO is difficult to change; it requires a majority vote in the General Assembly, then ratification by 2/3 of the presbyteries, and finally a majority vote in the subsequent General Assembly.

#### a. *Officer Qualifications*

The Assembly adopted (78-22%) **Overture 23** to add the following paragraph to the BCO:

Officers in the [PCA] must be above reproach...Those who profess an identity (such as but not limited to, "gay Christian," "same sex attracted Christian," "homosexual Christian...") that undermines or contradicts their identity as new creations in Christ, either by denying the sinfulness of fallen desires or by denying the reality and hope of progressive sanctification....are not qualified for ordained office.

This addition to the BCO would strengthen the denomination's position against the encroachment of "Revoice" Theology and so-called "gay celibate" ("Side-B") Christians. This proposed change by the General Assembly must be ratified by the presbyteries and approved by next year's assembly in Birmingham, Ala.

#### b. *Officer Examination*

The Assembly also adopted **Overture 37**, which would strengthen examination requirements for officer candidates in the PCA. If ratified by the presbyteries and the Birmingham Assembly, the PCA will exclude anyone from church office who is known by a self-profession of his remaining sinfulness. It would bring changes to Chapters 21 and 24 of the BCO.

While Overture 37 as adopted by the Assembly does mention same-sex/homosexual desires, it does not fixate on them. It establishes the biblical principle that anyone who is known by or identifies with his sinful predisposition(s) is not suitable for church office.

This is important because at least one prominent minister in the PCA makes much of his unnatural sexual desires and others associated with Covenant Seminary also seem to make much of their unnatural desires even as they claim not to act on them. Rather than be known

by their union with Christ, their remaining, indwelling sin has become a prominent aspect of their reputations. Others have denied the sinfulness of homosexual desires unless acted upon.

You may recall at a previous General Assembly TE Johnson **likened** unnatural sexual desires to conditions that are in themselves morally neutral and simply products of the fall, e.g. being born with a handicap. This common comparison is deeply flawed; while homosexual desires *are* a product of the fall, they are *not* morally neutral.

The proposed changes to the BCO would bar anyone from church office who refuses to acknowledge the sinfulness of unnatural desires as well as anyone who is not seeking to mortify all the desires of the flesh as well as those who make much of their sinful desires.

#### **D. Addressing Anti-Asian Racism**

In the wake of the shootings at massage and nail salons in Atlanta this spring, several presbyteries passed overtures entreating the assembly to denounce racism against Asians and express solidarity with Asian American communities.

The Overtures Committee recommended prayer for these matters and reminded the assembly of previous reports and statements already adopted by the PCA denouncing racism. The recommendation of the Overtures committee is consistent with the nature of church power, which is exclusively ministerial and declarative.

### **III. Continuing to be Concerned Presbyterians**

#### **A. Pray**

We should thank God for his kindness in preserving the PCA from doctrinal drift and compromise with the culture at this year's assembly. Ask God to continue to enable His Church to withstand the assaults of worldliness and instead present a winsome, glorious, and united contrast to the world as we call all people to repent and find new life in the Lord Jesus.

#### **B. Presbytery**

The gains made at General Assembly must be ratified by the presbyteries, so we need to commit to send two Ruling Elders to every presbytery meeting to represent the congregation and vote on the changes passed by the assembly when our presbytery takes them up.

Additionally, next year's assembly in Birmingham will be crucial, so we should plan to send two ruling elders to General Assembly then as well.

Related to the above, we should pray asking God to raise up additional men to serve as elders in this congregation. Presbytery and General Assembly require a considerable investment of time. If we have more ruling elders, that enables more men to share in that load.

#### **C. Peace**

One of the things that struck me in the debate on the floor of the General Assembly as well as in the social media comments that have followed the assembly is the tone of fear, suspicion, and bitterness that seems to characterize the speech and comments of the progressives related to the Assembly.

Additionally, during the assembly we were repeatedly "warned" about the danger of failing to adopt positions advocated for by more progressive members of the PCA. It seems many on the progressive wing, especially those employed by PCA Agencies, may be operating from a position of fear and suspicion.

However, when we speak about the actions of the General Assembly, we must remember Christ remains as head over His body. Regardless of how the votes go at any given assembly, we know Christ will preserve a faithful remnant of His church; we know there will always be “false sons” within the Church, yet the Church will prevail because Christ has promised never to leave or forsake His Bride.

#### **D. Patience**

It is evident a number of progressives within the PCA left General Assembly angry, afraid, and embittered because of the actions of this year’s assembly. Let us commit to stay the course and continue to be actively involved in the courts of the Church as a congregation.

There is a meeting in September sponsored by the Gospel Reformation Network to continue to plan for the future of the PCA and the witness of the Reformed and Presbyterian congregations within her. I hope to attend that meeting.

Our commitment to Christ and his Truth must not waver, because our hope in Christ is both our joy and our comfort.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

The PCA remains a sound denomination and if the actions of the 2021 General Assembly are ratified, the result will be a more faithfully Reformed and Presbyterian communion than it was last year.

If we as a congregation - along with those of similar conviction - continue to be involved in all the courts of the church and hold the members of the PCA accountable to her biblical and confessional standards, I believe we will soon see two things.

We will, on the one hand, witness departures by those who were not “of us” as they grow frustrated with our commitment to uphold the standards of the denomination; they will begin to affiliate with more like-minded, progressive faith communions.

On the other hand, I believe we will experience growth as our convictions and commitments attract others by the proclamation of the whole counsel of God and make diligent use of the ordinary means of grace that God has given to us for that purpose.

I hope you’ll be able to attend the July 14 forum on the 2021 General Assembly here at FPFO where we will discuss these matters further.

Your pastor,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan Biese". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Ryan Biese