



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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2019 REPORT ON PCA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Dear Congregation,

Thank you for sending me as a commissioner to the 2019 PCA General Assembly in Dallas, Texas. This was the Assembly's last year on its "abbreviated" schedule. The hope for the abbreviated schedule was that it would lead to greater participation by Ruling Elders, which was reported not to have happened in the one year of the shortened schedule. Nonetheless, this year did see an increase in RE participation from 22% to more than 25%.

After this year, I continue to confess that the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) remains a fundamentally sound denomination, however there is a growing cacophony of voices advocating for a departure from the historic, biblical, and theological heritage of the PCA. So far, these efforts have largely been unsuccessful in achieving their goals, however their influence is growing. I will detail more below.

I believe any discussion about leaving the PCA at this point is premature. Any discussion regarding changing one's ecclesiastical communion should be serious and sober and not rash or reactionary.

I present my report below in five headings.

I. Benevolent Opportunities

A. Gospel Reformation Network (GRN)

I had the opportunity to attend the luncheon sponsored by the GRN. The GRN is a group of churches within the PCA that seek to promote gospel holiness and an historic commitment to the Reformed Creeds and Confessions with winsome and vibrant piety. This organization encourages elders and congregations to continue to hold boldly the faith once delivered to the saints and resist calls from both within the PCA and the culture to compromise or adjust our teachings.

Before the start of the Assembly, they sponsored a conference, "A Time to Stand," in which they promoted a biblical understanding of sexuality aimed to equip elders to both counsel and contradict calls to blunt our robust commitment to the infinite power of Christ to work faith, repentance, and new obedience in those whom God calls to Himself.

I recommend Session consider partnering with the GRN both prayerfully and monetarily to support the efforts of the GRN to both provide resources and encouragement to the PCA toward remaining faithful to Christ in our sexual witness and all areas of Christian holiness and doctrine.

Please visit their website: GOSPELREFORMATION.NET.

B. Andy Young, Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England & Wales (EPCEW)

I was able to have dinner with the newest church-planter in the EPCEW whom the Lord is using to plant a church in Oxford, England. He is seeking churches with whom to partner for the next 3-5 years who will support the congregation he serves while they organize. His goal and prayer are for the congregation to be financially self-supporting 60 months.

Oxford is a key city for world evangelism. Because people come from all over to study in Oxford, Andy has the opportunity to speak the gospel to them and into their lives. Andy explained that many folks come as atheists to Oxford, but with questions about Christianity and religion generally. Some of them try out the 'evangelical' churches in Oxford, but eventually end up in Roman Catholicism because of the rich tradition and liturgy present in the Roman Catholic Mass, but which is absent in the chaos of broad 'evangelicalism.' Currently, Oxford EPC is the only church presenting a gospel-centered, historically rooted, and theologically robust witness to Oxfordshire.

The EPCEW is a solid denomination, and I strongly recommend we consider partnering with Andy Young, Oxford Presbyterian Church, and the EPCEW. Their website is available [HERE](#).

II. Concerning Developments and Matters

A. Lack of Ruling Elder Participation

As with most of the greater courts of the church, it is difficult for ruling elders to attend. At this assembly REs were outnumbered by TEs by about 3:1. Their lack of participation means the denomination effectively tends toward clericalism with religious professionals making many of the main decisions.

B. Ecclesiastical Tyranny

It has long been a principle of Presbyterianism (cf. Acts 6, Acts 20) that the people of God have the right to elect those in leadership over them. In his discussion of the Ruling Elder, James Henley Thornwell warns the church about ecclesiastical tyranny (Collected Writings Vol. 4, pp. 64-65) and asserts the necessity of the parity of elders to prevent “ecclesiastical despotism.” Moreover, in a footnote he references the tendency of ministers with unchecked power to become ecclesiastical tyrants. The Lord Jesus Christ, when He gave His Church a government gave her both teaching and ruling elders (cf. I Tim. 4); this parity helps balance the church and promote the health of the church in both her peace and purity. But with the large number of Teaching Elders who are not accountable to sessions or congregations in any way, I think the health of the church is hindered.

We have a large number of Teaching Elders in the PCA who are not – and some who have never been – elected to office by a congregation of Christ’s people, but instead are called by presbyteries to various works (e.g. RUF, Parachurch organizations). Though these men have never been elected to or called by a congregation of Christ’s people to that office, they nonetheless wield great influence at the General Assembly level. We should ask ourselves whether this practice is right and prudent. It seems Teaching Elders who are not called by congregations occupy a disproportionate amount of time at the microphones each year at the Assembly.

C. Review of Presbytery Records (RPR)

By far the most troubling development at this Assembly was the Court’s decision to affirm the RPR Committee’s recommendation that presbyteries may not forbid men with views that deviate from the Westminster Standards from teaching those views. Historically, if a man held a deviant view, he might be admitted to presbytery on the condition that he neither teach nor spread his difference with the Standards. Presbyteries have historically done this when, in their judgment, such a view would create pastoral and/or theological discord or confusion within the bounds of the presbytery.

The RPR Committee recommended and this General Assembly agreed that such a prohibition violates the ‘liberty of conscience.’ I strongly disagree since the man is free to decline to accept a call to a church in which he may not be free to teach his view that is out of accord with the Westminster Standards and their summary of the Scripture. I believe this issue will lead to the PCA becoming more confessionally strict in some areas and theologically fractured. Should presbyteries abide by this new practice, the only option left to them will be to simply refuse to receive or ordain a man who has some view that is out of accord with the Standards.

Historically in the PCA, presbyteries have been allowed to show grace and charity to men with deviant views, by admitting them to the presbytery, but forbidding them from troubling the church by their views. The 2018 and 2019 Assemblies appear to want to end the practice of grace and charity toward those who dissent, but whose deviant views do not strike at the vitals of religion.

There is no rule forbidding presbyteries from forbidding the teaching of deviant views, but the General Assembly has for two years now cited them for doing so. This seems bound for the Standing Judicial Commission (SJC). It remains to be seen how SJC will treat this matter, since (ordinarily) only the SJC (and not the General Assembly) can force a presbytery to change her practice.

D. Sexuality

There were two elders who exposed themselves as “same-sex attracted” on the floor of the Assembly; they both affirmed their commitment to celibacy. One of them received cheers when he spoke against the Nashville Statement and shared emotional and anecdotal perspective (i.e. non-biblical and non-theological arguments) on the Nashville Statement.

There is ongoing discussion within the PCA about whether homosexual desire is sinful. The Scripture (Matt 5) and Westminster Standards (WCF 6; WLC 137, 138) clearly teach that not only are homosexual acts inherently sinful, but the desire itself is sinful and must be mortified.

There was particular objection to Article 7 of the Nashville Statement and how it calls those who conceive of themselves as gay Christians or SSA Christians to repent of that self-identification:

WE AFFIRM that self-conception as male or female should be defined by God's holy purposes in creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture.

WE DENY that adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception is consistent with God's holy purposes in creation and redemption.

There were those on the floor who argued that, by the logic of the Nashville Statement, we should urge folks who are disabled, etc. to conceive of themselves as 'able-bodied' because their bodies do not conform to God's purposes in creation and redemption. Such argumentation is deeply flawed as it compares two different sorts of dysfunction entirely: one that is morally neutral and another that scripture calls a "vile passion." Moreover, this argumentation reveals a deeply troubling perspective on sexuality held by some elders, i.e. that SSA desires are no different from being born with Downs syndrome or cerebral palsy. I find such argumentation highly offensive.

E. The National Partnership

Since 2013, the ominously titled, "National Partnership" has had increasing influence within the denomination. The organization began as an invitation-only, "confidential" group (i.e. secret society) that advocates for more emergent and theologically broad positions within the PCA. Their organization is led by such men as TEs Mike Khandjian and James Kessler and seeks to "whip" votes on the assembly floor (TE and former PCA Moderator George Robertson was also one of their leaders until his transfer to the EPC, a denomination that ordains women and believes in tongue-speaking and ongoing private revelations). Due to business sessions continuing Thursday night and Friday morning, it appears as though their numbers may have been somewhat reduced. Nonetheless, their presence was strongly felt at the Wednesday morning and afternoon sessions.

F. Women in Leadership at Mission to the World (MTW)

TE Lloyd Kim, with whom I shared a flight to Atlanta, is the coordinator of MTW and has recently allowed 19 non-ordained men and women to serve in director and/or other leadership capacities within MTW. These positions include oversight of ordained men.

This year there was an overture to clarify that leadership positions within MTW may be filled only by ordained men, however that overture was 'recommitted' for next year. One of the objections against adopting the overture was that the non-ordained people currently serving in leadership roles would have to take pay cuts and demotions should the overture be adopted by the Assembly.

There were a number of elders who were forced to take pay cuts and demotions when this change occurred as a result of their convictions and principles against allowing women and other non-ordained people to exercise oversight of church officers.

The overture came as a result of a plea for help by MTW missionaries impacted by TE Kim's new policy.

III. Neutral Developments

A. Membership in the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)

The PCA stated clerk has for years served as the Chairman of the Board for the NAE. Membership in the organization costs \$25,000 annually. The NAE presumes to speak for evangelicals, but takes up leftist political positions (e.g. advocating against capital punishment) and consists not strictly of classically 'evangelical' faith communions, but also denominations rooted in heresies (e.g. anti-trinitarianism, annihilationism, faith-healing, etc.).

The progressive wing of the assembly prevailed in the vote urging us to remain supportive and members of the NAE as they argued our membership reflects the unity of the body of Christ and to withdraw from this organization would be schismatic and overly narrow.

Membership in the NAE is obviously concerning, and good stewardship principles suggest the PCA ought to reevaluate her membership in such an expensive organization. However, because there has been no change in our status, I have categorized this matter as neutral.

B. Study Committee on Domestic Violence

Many of the overtures concerned domestic violence and a desire for a study committee to provide pastoral advice to the church for “protecting against these sins and for responding to them.” We will await next year’s report to see whether this study committee produces helpful material or merely spends \$25,000 to recommend resources already available.

C. Study Committee on Same-Sex Attraction (SSA)

Elders from across the philosophical and theological spectrum of the PCA desired a study committee dealing with SSA. I remain unconvinced that study committees are helpful. Often (in recent years) they simply diagnose ongoing practices rather than provide truly helpful counsel and pastoral tools for addressing the topic at hand. At worst, study committees codify the existing practices or views and provide a sense of official standing to the practice or view it identifies (e.g. the “Creation Study Report”).

Many seemed to go to the microphone to say we needed a study committee so as not to rely on the reports of other bodies (e.g. Central Carolina Presbytery (PCA), Missouri Presbytery (PCA), RPCNA, ARP, RPC-ES, etc.). We do not yet know the composition of the study committee, so we have little indication as to whether this committee will produce a helpful or schismatic report.

IV. Encouraging Developments

A. Adoption of the Nashville Statement

While the Nashville Statement is certainly neither comprehensive nor perfect, it is an excellent starting point in its summary of the Bible’s teaching on human sexuality. It takes a position contrary to that of the so-called “Revoice” movement, declaring that the Bible teaches homosexuality – whether the act, ‘orientation,’ or desire – is inherently sinful and must be repented of because of the grace of and through the power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The vote to adopt the Nashville Statement was nearly overwhelming (60% in favor), however a large number of commissioners spoke against it because they viewed it as ‘hurtful’ to the feelings of homosexual people and those who experience same-sex attractions. TE Greg Johnson of Memorial PCA in Saint Louis, on social media, marked with sadness that the PCA commended the Nashville Statement, but he was consoled by the fact that many of those who spoke against the Nashville Statement were old; he seemed to suggest the progressives need simply wait a little longer before they will be able to control the PCA’s official position on human sexuality. He has since deleted the remark and apologized.

It was surprising how the “National Partnership” was able to dominate and carry the votes earlier in the day, but not so late in the evening.

B. Non-Ordained Persons on Committees and Agency Boards

For several years, there has been a concerted effort to reduce the proportion of the boards and committees of the General Assembly that is comprised of elders. This year the Assembly again debated and rejected several overtures (one of which was from our presbytery) attempting to dilute the boards with non-ordained people, thus allowing for fewer presbyters on those boards and committees.

These attempts are harmful because they seek to loosen our commitment to Presbyterianism (i.e. rule by elders) by placing folks who are neither members of a court nor eligible to serve on a court to the committees of that court. Moreover, one of the roles of the permanent committee boards and agencies is to oversee the operations of their respective agencies. Oversight within the church is a function of the elders especially when it comes to exercising that oversight authority over men.

Those in favor of this overture argue the committees and boards are not exercising authority since they largely do not make policy, but they primarily and merely make recommendations to the General Assembly for the policy the permanent committees and agencies carry out. While that is factually true, the Assembly rarely deviates from the recommendations made by the permanent committees. Additionally, many of the committees and boards of the PCA have advisory boards that are made up of all sorts of people, including non-ordained folks.

V. Matters for Prayer

A. Apparent Anger

Obviously, I cannot see into the hearts of the men at the microphones, however it appeared to me that many of those arguing for progressive positions were filled with emotion and even anger especially Thursday night and Friday morning. Additionally, a significant number of ‘arguments’ made on the floor were little more than anecdotes designed to appeal to the elders’ emotions. We should pray future Assemblies will be characterized by patience and temperate speech and with sound, biblical arguments.

B. Small, Steady Growth

The PCA continues to grow slowly, but steadily. We should praise God our small branch of His Kingdom is vibrant and that He is drawing sinners to Himself and blessing the ministry of Word and Sacrament within our congregations, His churches.

C. Commitment to Reformed Theology

Although the PCA was founded as a denomination “true to the Reformed faith” and officially adopted the Westminster Standards into her constitution, a large portion of the churches and elders were neither fully committed to a Reformed, Westminsterian piety and theology, nor did they have any idea what it meant to be Reformed or Presbyterian. The PCA has been well-described in three groups (though sometimes five!): the progressives, moderates, and “TRs” (totally Reformed or thoroughly Reformed). TE Bryan Chapell’s taxonomy is somewhat helpful to understand this (weblink: [HERE](#)).

The moderates are – for the most part – politically and culturally conservative, but not committed to robust Reformed theology and instead prefer a more ecumenical, “big steeple” approach to church life on the presbytery and general assembly level as well as in the local church. As such, it appears the moderates will vote with the “progressives” on matters such as Review of Session Records, but vote with the “TRs” when it comes to matters of human sexuality and women on boards.

We also see the result of a lack of robust Reformed theology in the chaotic worship services that typically take place during General Assembly. Rather than the simple praise of God, preaching of God’s gospel, and prayer toward God, GA worship services are often more like rock concerts or Romish Masses, with professional musicians and singers offering praise and the people of God standing mute.

We should pray the Lord will draw many to know the beauty, simplicity, and freedom that accompanies a robust commitment to Reformed Theology in all of life: parenting, piety, worship, polity, and shepherding. We should also pray the Lord will enable us to be winsome in our speaking and conversations seeking to promote the system of doctrine that is contained in the Scriptures and summarized in the Westminster Standards.

Thank you again for sending me to represent our presbytery and congregation. I look forward to discussing these matters with you.

Respectfully submitted,

Ryan F. Biese