

STATED CLERK'S SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS ON THE 49TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Grace and Peace to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

At the close of the 49th General Assembly, a summary of the Assembly's key actions was made available to you through our denominational magazine (see <https://byfaithonline.com/byfaith-report-actions-of-the-49th-pca-general-assembly/>). Following up on that informational report, I have been asked to prepare, as the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), this more reflective summary of our 49th General Assembly for our leaders and churches.

I am writing this summary as I represent our church at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil. One of the inspiring moments came the night that Presbyterians from Haiti led us in worship. The Haitian churches are the fruit of Presbyterian missions from Brazil, and their ministry that evening resulted in applause and tears of approval from the mother churches of Brazil. The reason I hope this picture of mission multiplication inspires you is that the Brazilian Presbyterian Churches are from our roots – and their current leaders have been trained by our missionaries and schools. As thousands of Presbyterian leaders in Brazil welcomed Presbyterian representatives from Haiti, India, Nepal, Angola, New Zealand, Portugal, Korea, Paraguay, South Africa, and Iraq, we were witnessing the multiplying influence of our church by God's blessing and for His glory. The forces of secularization, persecution, poverty, pandemics, and our own debates and distractions have not prevented our Sovereign Lord from doing His saving work.

I rejoice in the vision of Presbyterians gathering from around the world because it helps me lift my eyes beyond our immediate concerns and controversies to the eternal work that God can and *is* doing through a church faithful to His Word and mission. There is a temptation to be consumed by a present issue or cause that dominates the debates of our Assembly and think that the fundamental work of the church is about winning some procedural vote or defeating some brothers on a matter whose specifics we may not even recall five years from now. Perhaps that is why no party or segment of our church had the privilege of having all things go their way at this General Assembly. No one gets to do a victory lap and gloat over their triumphs—every group had some encouragements and some disappointments. If we are faithful to our beliefs in God's sovereign Lordship over His Church, we will believe that this is ultimately for our good and Christ's glory.

As I reported prior to our Assembly, the major debate facing us was how we should apply the standards of Biblical sexuality. Unlike in many denominations that have conceded to cultural trends, no PCA leaders are advocating abandonment of biblical morality or approving homosexual practice or desire. We demonstrated our foundational commitments when we virtually unanimously approved a Study Report on Human Sexuality at last year's General Assembly. We committed with one voice to fidelity regarding Scripture's standards for marriage and sexual expression. Still, we have struggled to *apply* our standards to ordination requirements if a man pledges and practices sexual obedience but honestly acknowledges some degree of same sex attraction. Despite statements in the Study Report that attempted to clarify our stance on this, we have subsequently differed among ourselves about whether the same sex attraction itself should disqualify from church office.

Last year’s attempts to make constitutional statements about these matters failed to pass in our presbyteries because an insufficient number deemed the proposed wording or procedures appropriate for our *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, which, along with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, serves as our constitution. So, we are trying again this year. We prayed that the Biblical unity and fidelity we affirmed in the Study Report would be evident in the decisions of this Assembly. That prayer was clearly answered as teaching and ruling elders of differing perspectives met for unifying prayer, mutual confession, and honest conversation ahead of the Assembly and, then, during the Assembly worked together to pass Overture 29—which is a clear ordination standard that requires personal commitment to Biblical purity and progressive sanctification. The vote for Overture 29, amending *BCO* 16, was overwhelming, and the proposed amendment will now go to the presbyteries for the next step of *Book of Church Order (BCO)* approval.

Some felt that Overture 29, as it dealt with ordained leaders, was still not strong enough. So Overture 15 was proposed, saying that “those who describe themselves as homosexual and claim to practice celibacy by refraining from homosexual conduct, are disqualified from holding office.” This overture narrowly failed in the Overtures Committee (which makes *BCO* recommendations to the Assembly), but then narrowly passed by way of a Minority Report on the General Assembly floor. This proposal to amend *BCO* 7 will now also go to the presbyteries for their consideration as to whether it is appropriate for our constitution. As I said to our churches prior to the Assembly, we would prefer to be without controversy, but still we praise the Lord that none of us want to do less than Scripture requires. It is good to be in a denomination where faithfulness to God’s Word remains the priority of all.

Our commitment to God’s Word and care for God’s people was apparent in this year’s major Study Committee Report on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault (read the report [here](#)). The report was two years in the making and was received with much gratitude by the Assembly. As much as we might choose to think that abuse issues are only the concerns of Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist churches, that would not be realistic. The effects of the Fall touch us all, and we must be well-informed and prepared to defend God’s people by the precautions we take and the disciplinary procedures we employ. The Study Committee gave wise, caring, and respectful advice for churches, and the Assembly took important steps to address disciplinary procedures for our troubled times (Overtures 2021-40, 2021-41).

The other matter of significant debate that this Assembly addressed was whether the PCA should remain in the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), the national fellowship that spans a broad spectrum of churches and organizations that agree to affirm the truth of Scripture. Since the PCA began, we have wrestled with what level of affiliation to have with churches and organizations that are not exactly like us. When does an affiliation move from mission *cooperation* to mission *compromise*? Our founders established an Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) to make deliberative recommendations regarding such associations for these times of increasing cultural challenge and church division.

This year the IRC recommended staying in the NAE for the purposes of witness and influence, but the Assembly voted to leave for purposes of witness and purity (Overture 3, adopted as

amended by the IRC Committee of Commissioners). At least three times in our past 50-year history, staying in the NAE has been put to a vote and passed by roughly a 60/40 percentage. This time, however, the Assembly voted to leave by roughly a 60/40 percentage. Since the reasons were contested and the vote later protested, we should not be surprised if there is some future vote on the same or similar issues. A church committed to Christ's truth and mission in a complex world will rightly wrestle with drawing the line between mission cooperation and mission compromise.

The nature of these issues that stretch our wisdom and our fellowship should be assessed in light of the values they affirm. Men of good conscience are seeking to be faithful to God's Word and Christ's mission. While we may differ on how best to apply God's Word, none of us want to stray one inch from God's truth or back one inch from Christ's mission. Such commitments will be worth celebrating when we gather in Memphis next year for our 50th Anniversary. The Anniversary Committee is already engaged with representatives from around the PCA in planning that milestone occasion.

A key aspect of our celebration will be providing commemorative publications, detailing the PCA's history, ministry, and our prayers for the future. We will be using all of this year's issues of *byFaith*, the denomination's quarterly magazine, to spotlight key ministries, documents, and leaders that have been formative of the PCA we treasure. If you will let us know your or your church's contact information, all issues will be provided to you for free. You can have these commemorative issues sent to you without charge or obligation by requesting them at <https://www.pcaac.org/50thcontact/>.

An easy way to contribute to our celebration would be to ask your church clerk or pastor to send in your church's membership statistics for 2022. Instructions will go out to your church in December. It would be wonderful—a great means of praising God for His grace to the PCA—to have an accurate understanding of where we stand in membership and mission support after 50 years of working together for Christ. Assessing our current membership and resources will also help us plan for future faithfulness.

So, two action steps: 1) request your Jubilee editions of *byFaith* magazine, and 2) encourage your church's leadership to send in your membership and mission support statistics for this Jubilee year.

As we move toward our Jubilee Anniversary, we praise the Lord that even the nature of our debates indicates that none of us want to do less than Scripture requires. We remain a people of the Word with a heart for the nations. For a world that cries out for gospel hope in so many ways, God is providing this church with resources and commitments needed for the advance of Christ's mission. The Holy Spirit will do His work among and through us as we are faithful to His Word, zealous for His mission, and charitable toward His people. Treating one another with love and respect in a time of challenge will help equip us to proclaim His gospel of hope and peace to a world of sin and strife. May our faithful God so use the PCA to honor Christ.