

## STATED CLERK'S SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS ON THE 50th ANNIVERSARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

We gather as a true branch of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. We affirm our allegiance to Him as the sole Head of the Church and ... we remember that “the gates of hell shall not prevail” against His Church.

With these words taken from the “Message to All Churches” that announced the formation of the Presbyterian Church (PCA) in 1973, we began the business reports of this year’s 50th Anniversary General Assembly. As PCA Stated Clerk, I then went on to cite key declarations of the “Message” that continue to reflect our church’s commitment to be “Faithful to Scripture, True to the Reformed Faith, and Obedient to the Great Commission”:

First, **we declare** the basis of the authority for the Church.... The Bible is the Word of God written and carries the authority of its divine Author.... We declare, therefore, that the Bible is the very Word of God, so inspired in the whole and in all its parts, as [to be] ... the only infallible and all-sufficient rule of faith and practice.

**We declare** also that we believe the system of doctrine found in God’s Word to be ... the Reformed Faith as set forth in the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechisms*. It is our conviction that the Reformed faith is not sectarian, but an authentic and valid expression of Biblical Christianity.

**We declare** that the ultimate purpose of the Church is to glorify God. We believe this includes giving top priority to Christ’s Great Commission.... We ... deliberately inscribe on our Church’s banner, as she now unfurls it to the world ..., “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations....” We regard this as the great end of our organization, and obedience to it, as the indispensable condition of our Lord’s promised presence.

### **50th General Assembly Anniversary Celebration**

Gathering around these key declarations, the Jubilee Assembly of the PCA was characterized by wonderful celebration and a spirit of unity that distinguished this Assembly – with a near-record-attendance (approximately 2300 commissioners from over 1,100 churches) – from some contentiousness experienced in recent years. Despite the importance of the issues being discussed, we have never had so large a number of serious issues decided by such large votes that were so lopsided. The desire to honor the Lord’s faithfulness to our church, combined with the sobering effects of the recent loss of key leaders and the tragedy of the shootings at the Covenant School in Nashville, seemed to cause those who gathered in Memphis to want to come together for Christ’s testimony to one another and to the world.

Brothers and fathers from varying perspectives worked both before and during the Assembly to reach understanding that we pray will enable our church to move forward in Christ’s mission with renewed zeal and unity. We are Presbyterians because of our Biblical conviction that together we

can do far more for the Lord than we can do separately. Our Golden Anniversary's glorious worship services, fervent prayers, and respectful debates were a fresh expression of that conviction.

The Anniversary Celebration Committee, gathered from across the denomination this past year under the leadership of RE Jim Wert, worked diligently with the Memphis Host Committee of Covenant Presbytery to coordinate many efforts of celebration prayer, preaching, publication, and praise. The memorial publication of our history and celebration is being prepared by the *byFaith* editorial staff and will be available for free to all who ask as we complete this Anniversary year (requests can be made [here](#)).

No aspect of our Anniversary celebration was more blessed than the opening night recognition of the fathers and mothers who were responsible for the founding of the Presbyterian Church in America. A resolution of thanks was read to the dozen founders who attended our first General Assembly fifty years ago and were also present at this Golden Anniversary. After a standing ovation, each was presented with a "Resolution of Appreciation for Founders," which you can see [here](#).

### **50th General Assembly Anniversary Hallmarks**

As we sought to honor the Lord for His work among us this past half century, we made a special effort to assess our numbers. We are particularly thankful for the aid of our presbyteries' stated clerks who worked with the Administrative Committee to compile our numbers. The short story, for which we praise the Lord, is that we returned to our pre-Covid pattern of regular growth this past year. Until Covid the regular pattern of the PCA has been small but consistent growth every year. No single year has evidenced gargantuan growth, but at our 50th year we can mark that a denomination beginning with 240 churches now approaches 2000 particular and mission churches. Approximately 41-thousand original members has become almost 400-thousand present members. We rejoice for the Lord's provision of such blessing.

This blessing has been particularly noteworthy as the growth of almost all major denominations has slowed in recent years. Of particular note was the announcement of the Southern Baptists in May of this year that three million members had been lost since 2006 (or roughly 20 percent of their membership), with the loss of a half million in 2022 alone.

This May, the combined northern and southern Presbyterian churches from which we separated ourselves 50 years ago also reported a loss of 400-thousand members (our total church size) in the last six years alone. That factors to a total loss of approximately four million members from our mother denominations in the 50 years since our founding. And, lest we be tempted to high-five our advances, we must remember that our present growth tends to be in churches of the Sun Belt, who are benefiting from the Covid-migration from Northern cities, with eastern, midwestern, and smaller churches of the south experiencing significant losses.

As the demographers study the churches of our nation, the general report is that most churches are still 20 percent down in attendance since Covid. Virtually no denomination is immune to the consequences. Particularly acute is the loss of young people. Currently only 14 percent of those 18-34 years of age attend any church of any kind. The need for prayer, mission-mindedness, covenant-children priorities, witness to family and neighbor, and appreciation for the immigrant

populations that are re-spiritualizing our nation (as European immigrants did previously in our history) has never been more evident.

This year of renewed growth should be celebrated with the realization that one year of post-Covid growth does *not* a pattern make. However, we thank our Lord for increases in professions of faith among adults and children, accompanied by increases in adult and child baptisms. One particularly hopeful statistic is the significant growth of our ministry candidates and licentiates. Bucking almost all national trends, we see a new generation readying to assume leadership of a Bible-believing, Confessionally-faithful church (see our five-year statistics summary [here](#)). We are one of the older evangelical denominations in terms of our membership, but our pastoral leadership is significantly younger than that of most evangelical and main line denominations. We give thanks for future leaders committed to Biblical fidelity.

Key provisions of the Lord that we celebrate this year include:

- We have almost 600 long-term missionaries in 100 nations, and over 1000 national partners.
- We are again planting churches at the rate of one every two weeks with plans to increase that rate. Covid slowed us down, but we are trending up again, and we have more pastors in the pipeline for church planting next year than at any time in our church's history.
- We have 180 campus ministries on U.S. soil, 23 ministering exclusively to foreign students, and a half dozen in foreign nations. By the Lord's wondrous provision, there are now 20-thousand college students in a Bible study with a PCA campus minister every week of the school year.
- For the first time, our total contributions exceeded \$1-billion which represented an increase of approximately \$40-million over the previous year.

Reports from all the PCA Permanent Committees and Agencies were communicated throughout the week of General Assembly in the PCA's online magazine, *byFaith*, and can be reviewed [here](#). These blessings must be stewarded with faithfulness to Christ's mission and humble gratitude for God's provision. There is no basis for any triumphalism or credit to our abilities. We are sinners saved by faith alone in Christ's grace alone. We bend our knees in humility, lifting our hands to praise our God for what He has done to bless our proclamation of His sovereign providence and pledging our commitment to His Word and Christ's mission.

[Note: Statistics taken from Permanent Committee and Agency Informational Reports and the 5-year Summary at the end of the Stated Clerk's Report in the General Assembly Commissioner Handbook.]

### **50th General Assembly Anniversary Decisions**

The PCA GA chose TE Fred Greco, pastor of Christ Church in Houston Metro Presbytery, to be the Moderator of its Golden Anniversary Assembly. TE Greco began his working career as an attorney before training as a minister. His resulting parliamentary expertise combined with good humor and extensive knowledge of our *Book of Church Order* served the Assembly exceedingly well, as it navigated complex matters – and adjourned before dinner on its next-to-last day.

### ***Book of Church Order Amendments***

Twelve *Book of Church Order (BCO)* amendments were sent to presbyteries this past year by the Forty-Ninth General Assembly (GA). Two did not receive the required approval from two-thirds of the presbyteries. The remainder passed the presbyteries by significant margins and were overwhelmingly approved by a majority of 50th GA commissioners.

Most of the amendments that passed were refinements of our disciplinary procedures or of our ordination credentialing standards. One approved amendment makes the decision of a presbytery's discipline commission the final decision of the presbytery. Reflecting recent years' work by the Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault (DASA) study committee, the GA approved several other changes to the *BCO* relating to the protection of alleged victims in disciplinary trials.

Much of GA debate in recent years has revolved around how to apply the Bible's standard of sexual purity to our ordination requirements (particularly regarding those who confess same-sex attraction but promise celibacy). The *BCO* amendments on this subject that fathers and brothers worked together to approve at last year's GA were easily approved by the presbyteries and this year's GA. The amendment that divided us at last year's GA – though it passed with a majority vote of that Assembly – did not receive the required approval of two-thirds of the presbyteries and, thus, was not before us to approve at this GA.

### **Overtures Decisions**

We had a significant number of overtures to the 50th GA to consider in this Golden Anniversary year. In addition to the usual overtures relating to presbytery boundaries, thirteen overtures dealt with standards for credentialing, titling, or disciplining ordained officers. Six overtures dealt with how the GA processes reports from its Special or Permanent Committees (and Agencies). Two dealt with how the denomination should address social issues relating to racial discrimination and to gender dysphoria. Two overtures were concerned with who may participate in disciplinary processes, and two dealt with inter-denominational associations or communications. Untypically, four of the overtures that were before this GA had been turned down by presbyteries but were re-submitted by individual church sessions. A complete listing of the overtures is on the [PCA General Assembly website](#). Daily reports on the Assembly's disposition of the overtures can be found [here](#).

In blessed displays of our unity around core commitments during this 50th Anniversary GA, most of the debates in the Overtures Committee (which makes recommendations to the GA regarding overtures from presbyteries and local sessions) and on the floor of the Assembly regarding the disposition of this year's overtures were resolved with overwhelming votes of agreement. An unprecedented number of overtures that seemed to be the result of reactions to perceptions of how the PCA should respond to political, social, or internet discussions were not approved or were "recommitted...without prejudice" to the bodies that sent them.

Overtures that were watched by many inside and outside our church asked the GA to make decisions about Transgender procedures, Critical Race Theory, and the titling and participation of non-ordained persons in church.

**Overture 12**, which asked the GA to petition the government to end sex-change procedures for minors, was amended to empower the Moderator to appoint a commission to draft a

“humble petition” (*WCF* 31-4) for the PCA Stated Clerk to send to specified federal government officials, condemning the practice of surgical and medical gender reassignment for minors. Presbytery clerks were urged to send similar petitions to state authorities.

**Overture 18**, which asked the GA to reject “secular social justice” and Critical Race Theories, was answered in the negative, with the understanding that the PCA has addressed racism from a Biblical perspective in previous Assemblies and study reports.

**Overture 26**, which asked the GA to amend *BCO* 7-3 regarding titling of unordained persons in church ministries, was answered in the affirmative as amended. The new language that will be sent to presbyteries for approval is as follows: "Furthermore, unordained people shall not be referred to as, or given the titles of the ordained offices of pastor/elder or deacon."

**Overture 15**, which asked the GA to change the *BCO* to say that “No woman shall preach, exhort, or teach at a public worship assembly, including assemblies or chapel services where men are present,” was deemed to have inadequate definitional clarity, and was recommitted to its originators without prejudice.

Again this year, the overtures receiving the most attention prior to GA were those relating to how we apply the Bible’s standard of sexual purity to our ordination requirements. However, with this past year’s departure from the PCA of TE Greg Johnson and the Memorial Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, the heat around this issue seemed dissipated. As a result, one overture, with two *BCO* amendments regarding such issues, passed the GA this year with overwhelming approval and little debate.

These GA-approved amendments to the *BCO* standards for officers were presented in **Overture 23**. The changes, which received overwhelming support and will be sent to the presbyteries for consideration this year, are in the underlined portion of the character standard for elders below:

He that fills this office should possess a competency of human learning and be blameless in life, sound in the faith and apt to teach. He should exhibit a sobriety and holiness of life becoming the Gospel. He should conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity in his descriptions of himself, and in his convictions, character, and conduct. He should rule his own house well and should have a good report of them that are outside the Church. (*BCO* 8-2; similar change was approved for *BCO* 9-3, relating to Deacons)

The agreement among most brothers and fathers who worked across previous differences to pass these latest *BCO* amendments was that this standard should be approved by the presbyteries in this coming year and become a “period” on this discussion that has been so difficult for our church. Not all will agree, but there is hope that the church may be given some rest on this subject so that we may better apply ourselves to the mission of Christ that we all want to be our highest priority.

Another *BCO* amendment, proposed in **Overture 13**, that actually resulted in the most time of debate for the Assembly, related to witness testimony in disciplinary trials. Our historic standards for ecclesiastical (not civil or criminal) trials prohibit the testimony of those who do not believe in God. A large number of commissioners questioned whether this was still proper in a culture where 1) those traumatized by abuse in the church might not still affirm their faith, or 2) so many people no longer affiliate with any religion. However, a larger number of commissioners believed that those who will not affirm belief in God are not qualified for trustworthy testimony in a church court. The historic standard was maintained.

### **Committees of Commissioners Reports**

The Permanent Committees (AC, CDM, MTW, MNA, RUF) and Agencies (Covenant College, Covenant Theological Seminary, Geneva Benefits, PCA Foundation, Ridge Haven) of the PCA report to the GA through Committees of Commissioners (CoCs), whose members temporarily represent their individual presbyteries. One issue that has received attention in recent years is how these CoCs that meet for only a few hours at GA should relate to the Permanent Committees and Boards, which are elected by GA to oversee the work of the Permanent Committees and Agencies throughout the year. A second related issue is how the Permanent Committee's or Agency's employment practices with regard to teaching elders should relate to the presbytery in which the teaching elder's ministerial credentials are held.

On the first issue, one overture this year (Overture 7) was perceived by the Permanent Committees and Agencies to require that their minutes show how any relevant policy adopted in their history bears on every business item reported. If that were the case, CoCs, which only meet briefly at GA with temporary presbytery representatives, would be obliged to research and certify how every Permanent Committee and Agency had complied with all of its historic policies (on matters of law, finance, employment, accreditation, etc.) in each of its actions.

All ten Permanent Committees and Agencies thought that this requirement would not only create significant new workload for their staffs, but would also be impossible for CoCs to accomplish in their few hours at General Assembly. Further, the Permanent Committees and Agencies responded that this procedure would be unconstitutional in that it confused the ongoing and complex oversight responsibilities of the GA-elected Permanent Committees and Boards with the temporary review responsibilities of the CoCs as described in our *Rules of Assembly Operations (RAO)*.

Some GA commissioners became concerned that this response might indicate that the Permanent Committees and Agencies were trying to avoid GA accountability. The Overtures Committee, however, largely settled this issue by amending the original overture to indicate that the required, annual reporting relates to significant (i.e., "material") *new* policies and to recorded responses to *specific* GA instructions. The Permanent Committees and Agencies heartily agreed that they should report such matters. So, for clarity and peace, the GA approved the overture as amended (i.e., with amended language for the proposed *RAO* change).

This first issue of how Permanent Committees and Agencies report to the GA became more focused this year because some commissioners felt that the PCA Foundation (PCAF) and Reformed University Fellowship (RUF) needed to report matters differently in their reports to GA. However, the GA overwhelmingly agreed last year and, again, this year that the Foundation had acted and reported properly regarding its estate-planning practices.

Still, this reporting issue and the second issue about employment and ministerial credentialing, became the subject of significant GA discussion relating to RUF because it employs Teaching Elders as campus ministers. To accomplish this, RUF historically has arranged for affiliation agreements with presbyteries who hold the ministerial credentials of the campus ministers that RUF employs.

RUF's rapid and blessed expansion to many parts of the country and world under different administrations has resulted in affiliation agreements that have not always been clear about who

has the respective employment and ecclesiastical authority over individual campus ministers. This lack of clarity has created status complications and legal liabilities for ministers, RUF, and the presbyteries. So, RUF sent representatives to all RUF-affected presbyteries this past year to present the need for a new, standard affiliation agreement. In addition, RUF Coordinator Will Huss set up zoom calls with all RUF Committee chairmen from the affected presbyteries to answer questions.

The agreement seeks to affirm RUF's employment responsibilities while clarifying that the presbyteries retain authority for the campus ministers' ecclesiastical status and church discipline. According to RUF Coordinator Will Huss, most affected presbyteries who received the presentation and were able to meet prior to GA have already adopted this new agreement or plan to do so in the fall. So, the contents of the agreement were not the main issue at this year's GA.

The issue that received more discussion in the RUF CoC was how the Permanent Committee reported the new agreement. The CoC concluded that the new Affiliation Agreement should have been in the report of RUF's recommendations for GA to approve, and not merely appear in the minutes of RUF's business meetings.

To satisfy these concerns, RUF officials agreed to add the new Affiliation Agreement to its recommendations for next year's GA. However, because of the potential liabilities that need to be addressed, RUF received permission from GA to continue to encourage presbyteries to adopt the new Affiliation Agreement in the meantime. GA Moderator Fred Greco, with the agreement of the Chairman of RUF Permanent Committee and the Chairman of the RUF CoC, ruled that instances of presbyteries adopting the new Agreement were not dissolved by the action, that additional presbyteries could adopt the new Agreement, and that RUF could not take any action unilaterally voiding existing RUF agreements in presbyteries until after the 2024 Assembly. This was understood to be in place by virtue of GA's acceptance of the CoC's report and the newly adopted *RAO* standard on reporting policies.

### **Treasuring our 50th Anniversary Privileges and Mission**

As we honor the Lord in this Golden Jubilee Assembly for His faithfulness and provision, we also confess that we are sobered by the loss of key leaders, stricken by attacks on our children, and, perhaps, tempted to be cowed by the onslaughts of our world's evident fallenness. How could we not be? We have lost stalwarts of our church and faith: Harry Reeder, pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church, the birthplace of the PCA; Tim Keller, pastor, thought leader, and church planter; Steve Smallman, who pastored our nation's leaders at McClean Presbyterian Church before becoming president of World Harvest Mission; Marvin Padgett, ruling elder, who led Great Commission Publications, Reformed University Fellowship, and our Interchurch Relations Committee; and, Carl Wilhelm, ruling elder, mission leader, and CFO of Mission to the World.

The loss of these and other leaders in local ministries, combined with the tragic loss of covenant children and those who taught them at the Covenant School in Nashville, has made us mindful that this world is as fallen, and we are as fragile, as the Scriptures teach.

Yet, as daunting as are the challenges of these earthly realities, they serve to turn our hearts to the eternal promises that first rallied our forefathers to Christ's cause. We remember and claim the scriptural promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. We do

not trumpet this Anniversary as though *we* achieved anything. We humbly confess, “Thus far has the Lord led us” and “apart from Him we can do nothing” – but “in Him all things are possible.” How can this be? “Because we are persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor power; nor things present or things to come; nor height or depth or anything else in all creation shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

In that confidence, those who were first among the forefathers of this tradition declared the faith that was a protest against this present darkness in the Council of Speyer in 1529.

**It was a time**, that the established church spurned biblical Christianity;

**It was a time**, that the general populace was ignorant of the basics of saving faith;

**It was a time**, that civil government was the instrument of oppression against God’s people.

In short, **it was a time**, such as our time; but, **it was also the time** for the church to arise and declare anew its convictions against this world’s corruptions.

Our forefathers did not surrender hope or truth or mission. Instead, those who were the first to be called Protestants, gathered in Speyer to protest the wrongs of church and culture by proclaiming Christ’s grace and truth with these stirring words:

We are resolved, with the grace of God, to maintain the pure preaching of God’s holy Word ... without adding anything that may be contrary to it. This Word is ... the sure rule of all doctrine and of all life, and can never fail or deceive us. He who builds on this foundation shall stand against all powers of hell. And all human vanities that are set up against it shall fail before the face of God.

For this Protestant tradition, we express our most profound gratitude and, on the 50th Anniversary of this branch of Christ’s church, gladly reaffirm our allegiance to this sacred protest. Our stand for Scripture, Confession, and Mission is not merely our complaint against the powers of darkness, it is our proclamation of the light of salvation by which the lost are won, our souls are preserved, and our church is blessed. In this light, we proclaim our devotion and our cause: Sola Scriptura, Sola Fides, Sola Gratia, Solus Christus, Soli Deo Gloria. Here we stand. By God’s grace, we shall do no other. God help us. Amen.