

STATED CLERK'S SUMMARY AND REFLECTIONS OF THE FIFTY-FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Incredible Blessings of God's Grace

I shared in my report to the General Assembly (GA) the prayer that our church would sense its calling to be stewards of the incredible blessings of God's grace to us as a church. These blessings include continued growth that is now rare among denominations in our culture. Features of this growth include the reported numbers of 5,411 infant baptisms, 4,859 new child professions of faith, and 4,641 adult professions of faith. In addition to these blessings of faith, overall giving continued to grow beyond the billion-dollar mark as the Lord added new churches, ministers, and missionaries for his work.

We should not pretend that we can explain or deserve such blessings, but we can affirm that our forefathers did something special when they declared us to be Scriptural and Confessional and, at the same time, to have the Great Commission as our "top priority."¹ They also believed that prioritizing Christ's mission could keep us alive and flourishing. So far, they have been proven correct. We have had our share of controversy, but somehow our mission priorities have stayed intact and now mark us as a church that God has used to stand against the cultural tides and proclaim the gospel to a world that needs Jesus.

Stewarding the Blessings of God's Grace

Commissioners that came to help steward Christ's mission through the PCA formed the fourth-largest Assembly in our history, with 2,113 commissioners (1,459 Teaching Elders; 654 Ruling Elders), representing every presbytery. Our hearts were knit together in these priorities as we discussed important issues, fellowshiped together, and worshiped under the first-ever General Assembly hosted by four presbyteries - Blue Ridge, James River, Korean Capital, and Tidewater. We are thankful that our Korean American brothers and fathers led daily gatherings of morning prayer for the Assembly, as well as providing the culminating worship service on Thursday evening that included a 120-voice choir.

On the Assembly's opening evening, we celebrated three men who have labored long and faithfully in the church's pursuit of our Savior's priorities: TE John Robertson for serving 25 years as the PCA's business administrator, RE Ric Springer for serving as chairman of the floor clerks for 38 of the past 40 years, and TE Larry Roff for 50 years of service as the Assembly organist.

To lead it as Moderator, the General Assembly chose RE Steve Dowling of Southeast Alabama Presbytery. A technology executive, RE Dowling's experience dealing with complex issues and his 27-year career in the Marine Corps prepared him well to guide and direct the Assembly. He came to the chair with the goal of assisting the Assembly to express our unity, a goal he achieved with grace, wit, and a command presence as he led GA through its business to an adjournment before dinner on its next-to-last day.

¹ See the "Message to All Churches" adopted by the First General Assembly.

The Permanent Committees and Agencies all reported through their respective Committees of Commissioners. **Covenant College** and **Covenant Seminary** both reported enrollment increases. **Geneva Benefits** continues to grow the number of churches they serve within the PCA and without. **Reformed University Fellowship** (RUF) not only ministers to over 20-thousand students weekly on a growing number of campuses in the U.S. and worldwide, it also continues to be a pipeline for leadership in the PCA with over 195 former campus ministers serving the church as church planters, pastors, and denominational staff (with thousands more former RUF students in church membership and leadership). **Mission to North America** (MNA) continues towards its goal of planting another thousand churches by 2030. **Mission to the World** (MTW) reported a year of building toward the future, seeing its numbers of two-year/initial term missionaries and interns reach five-year highs. **Ridge Haven** reported ministering to 14,000 campers in 2023, announced the launching of a new Explorers Project, and opened new facilities at its Brevard Campus to extend its ministry even further. The **PCA Foundation** announced an increase in its assets of over \$56 million in the past year, even as it reported it had distributed approximately \$23 million to PCA churches and agencies in that same period. The **Committee on Discipleship Ministries** (CDM) reported that its discipleship and leadership training and conferences have been very well attended. The **Administrative Committee** (AC) announced the completion of the Spanish translation of the *BCO*, progress on a Portuguese translation, updates to the Korean translation, and God's extraordinary provision for the denomination as it celebrated its 50th anniversary. Through the committees and agencies, we see God's unmerited grace blessing us, holding us faithful to our mission priorities.

Amendments to the *Book of Church Order* and the *Rules of Assembly Operations*

The three amendments to the *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*) that were sent to presbyteries by last year's 50th General Assembly all received the required approval from two-thirds of the presbyteries to be considered by this year's GA. Two of these amendments (one to **amend BCO 8-2 and 9-3** to require officers' conformity to biblical standards for chastity and sexual purity; and another to **amend BCO 38-1** regarding how courts handle confessions with offended parties) had near-unanimous approval from the presbyteries and were approved without objection.

The **amendment to BCO 7-3** regarding titling of unordained persons in local churches was debated in some presbyteries where practices relating to diaconal functions and titles vary. This was most common in Korean-language presbyteries due to different ways that ordained offices are designated in the Korean language. After substantial discussion, the amendment passed but with greater awareness of the Korean concerns.

Four amendments to the *Rules of Assembly Operations* (*RAO*) were approved with overwhelming support. Two **amendments to RAO 16** came from the Committee on Review of Presbytery Records (RPR) clarifying the requirements for recording transfer and ordination exams in presbytery minutes. The other two came via overtures from presbyteries. **Overture 7** clarified that *RAO* amendments having to do with the nature or responsibilities of a permanent committee or agency must be referred to the committee or agency affected as well as to the Overtures Committee (OC). The affected committee or agency, then, must be allowed to give its advice to the Overtures Committee (OC) which will have the responsibility of making a recommendation about the amendment to the General Assembly. **Overture 14** amended *RAO* 4-21 to require enrollment data from Covenant College and Covenant Theological Seminary.

Actions on Overtures

In addition to the usual overtures relating to presbytery boundaries and the proposed *RAO* amendments, eight overtures addressed amendments to the Rules of Discipline. Five overtures sought to require **background checks** for church officers. Four sought amendments to the *BCO* regarding the responsibilities of presbyteries: two dealing with **transfers of ministers**, one on **teaching elders' presbytery membership**, and one adding **care of teaching elders** to the duties for which presbytery has the power to act. Another overture sought to add the responsibility of living in obedience to the Great Commission to the **duties of the Session** in *BCO* 12-5. Similarly, another addressed **how committees and agencies set policies** (*BCO* 14). Two overtures addressed the dissolution of pastoral calls. Two sought to grant at least part of ***BCO* 53 (“The Preaching of the Word”) full constitutional authority**. And two addressed **gender issues**—one seeking amendment to *BCO* 7 and one commending the letter of the commission in response to Overture 28 to the 50th General Assembly. Four overtures were turned down by presbyteries and were then submitted by church sessions. One sought a study committee regarding **the book, *Jesus Calling***. 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](#).

Of the 29 overtures referred to the Overtures Committee, 22 were approved with overwhelming votes of agreement (80% or higher). The unity of the Assembly was displayed in that the Committee's recommendations on only six of thirty-five overtures were debated, with only one minority report presented.

Overture 1, which asked the Assembly to amend *BCO* 35-1 and 35-8 to allow non-theists to testify as witnesses in ecclesiastical courts, was answered in the negative. Brothers differed whether ecclesiastical courts should allow testimony from those who do not acknowledge any accountability to God, or to what degree our courts should have every avenue open to pursue the truth of matters before them. The margin of the vote was 950-750-34.

Overture 3 sought to grant ***BCO* 53 “The Preaching of the Word” full constitutional authority**. Following debate in which all sought to safeguard the preaching of the Word in our churches, the Assembly decided that it was best not to add more constitutional language than is already present in the *BCO*. The overture failed by a narrow margin (857-906-13).

Overture 13 was amended and answered in the affirmative, commending the biblical faithfulness of the **letter regarding gender reassignment** in minors written by the commission of the 50th General Assembly, while leaving it to the discretion of each court to determine whether and how to share the letter with civil magistrates.

Overture 17 sought to amend the *BCO* to *require background checks* for all officers. The Assembly desired to affirm the wisdom of such a policy without making specific mandates that can be affected by varying local or federal laws. So, the GA answered the original overture in the affirmative after amending it so as not to amend the *BCO* but to have this GA *encourage* all Presbyteries and Sessions to adopt policies for conducting background checks of all candidates for office.

Overture 26, which asked the Assembly to **expand the representation of accused persons** before church courts, was amended and passed. The new language being sent down to presbyteries seeks an appropriate balance between broadening those who may represent an accused person to ensure adequate assistance, and safeguarding against experts in ecclesiastical law being brought in to overmatch local courts.

Overture 33, which sought a study committee to **examine the book, *Jesus Calling***, authored by now-deceased MTW missionary Sarah Young, was amended to ask the Committee on Discipleship Ministries (CDM) and Mission to the World (MTW) to give the 52nd GA brief reports regarding their relationship with the book.

In all, four overtures requesting amendments to the *BCO* were approved (overtures 2, 21, 26, and 27). Two amend *BCO* 13-6 regarding transfer exams. Overture 26 (above) amends *BCO* 32-19 to expand the representation of accused persons before church courts. One amends *BCO* 43-1 to allow complaints against judicial processes but requiring them to be adjudicated only after the final disposition of the judicial process to which they pertain.

Other Decisions

In 2023, the 50th General Assembly, acting on the provisions of our *Book of Church Order (BCO 40-5)*, cited Metro New York Presbytery to appear before the Standing Judicial Commission (SJC) regarding a church within its bounds that had allowed a woman to preach. As part of that process, the SJC gave the presbytery guidance on proper steps to address its violations and directed the presbytery to report its actions to the Committee on Review of Presbytery Records (RPR). At its meeting this spring, RPR recommended to the GA that Metro New York consider additional steps. GA agreed and cited the presbytery to appear again before the SJC for further review of the matter.

Two other presbyteries were cited to appear before the SJC under the provisions of *BCO 40-5* that deal with unresolved matters of constitutional concern. One presbytery was cited for multiple years of failing to properly handle men's stated differences or provide required minutes for review and responses to previous reviews. The other presbytery was cited to appear and explain matters related to dissolving a congregation and acquiring its assets.

PCA Perspective

Last year, on the 50th anniversary of the PCA, we honored our founders for commitments that we hold dear. The week before GA, our nation honored those who gave their lives at Normandy 80 years ago for the freedom to express those commitments. Both evoke in us gratitude and obligation as we consider provision through sacrifice. I think of my wife's father who was part of the "diaper brigade," given only two weeks training before being sent to shore up the front lines for the Battle of the Bulge. He was one of very few in his company who survived. Believing in the Lord who had preserved him, he later became a Presbyterian elder and helped lead his church out of unbiblical liberalism into our ranks. Because of his faithfulness, I have a wife, children, and grandchildren who live in freedom and faith. I give thanks for what has been entrusted to me and, with you, sense the obligation now to steward such extraordinary blessings of God's grace through this church.

The sacrifice and faith of forefathers stirs obligations in us for the present priorities of Christ's body above those of person and party. Increasingly, there seems to be a genuine desire to deal biblically with our differences so that we may unite in mission and, by God's grace, further our founders' efforts for the spread of the gospel and the nurture of God's people.

Overall, the PCA's membership and funding show healthy increases this past year—perhaps demonstrating a post-Covid “pattern” in development. We pray that all of these blessings are indicative of the Lord's grace enabling humble obedience to Christ's mission, and we pray that he will equip us to be faithful in stewarding the growth that is his special blessing to the PCA. It is still a good time to be in the PCA!

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