

## **Actions of the Forty-Third General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America**

L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk

The Forty-third General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America met in Chattanooga, Tennessee, June 8-11, 2015 hosted by Tennessee Valley Presbytery. The Assembly had met at Chattanooga previously in 2005. Almost 1,400 commissioners attended; 1,086 Teaching Elders, and 308 Ruling Elders. Seventy-nine of the 82 Presbyteries were represented.

### **RE Jim Wert, Moderator**

Ruling Elders Jim Wert and Ric Springer were nominated for Moderator. Mr. Wert was elected. He and his wife, Emily, live in Atlanta, where he is a long-serving Ruling Elder at Intown Community Church and is active in Metro Atlanta Presbytery. A Harvard MBA with his own management consulting firm, he has extensive experience in consulting with faith based non-profit organizations. He served as a consultant to the Strategic Planning Committee of the General Assembly during the strategic planning process several years ago. Mr. Wert served as chairman of the Overtures Committee of the 2014 General Assembly. He led the Assembly through its business with care and efficiency.

### **Assembly-Wide Seminar**

An Assembly-wide seminar on **How to Advance Ethnic Outreach and Ministry in the PCA** was held Wednesday morning. The panel was moderated by **Dr. Bryan Chapell**, Pastor of the Grace Presbyterian Church of Peoria, Illinois, and former president of Covenant Theological Seminary. The panel consisted of a diverse cross section of PCA Teaching Elders. **Dr. Thurman Williams** is an Associate Pastor of Grace and Peace Fellowship, a multi-ethnic church in St. Louis, and formerly Pastor at New Song Community Church in Baltimore. **Pastor Al Guerra** is a PCA church-planter with the Chicago-Metro Presbytery, in Chicago, Illinois. A Cuban-American, he has served the Hispanic community over 34 years of ministry in different geographical areas of the nation such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Houston, Texas. **Dr. Alexander Jun** is involved as a Ruling Elder in Fullerton, California, a Professor of Higher Education at Azusa Pacific University, and former Professor at the University of Southern California. **Pastor Tom Anderson** has had an unusual ministry since 2009 as an Anglo pastor planting a church, Strong Tower Fellowship, in a low-income African-American neighborhood in Macon, Georgia. Many experts believe that within a few years there will be no ethnic majority in America. The seminar provided valuable insights into the increasingly multi-ethnic outreach and ministry of the PCA and stimulated interest in continuing the quest for a Church on earth that more closely resembles the Church that will gather on the Last Day.

### **Resolution regarding Civil Rights**

Dr. Sean Lucas, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Dr. Ligon Duncan, Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, introduced a Personal Resolution calling on the General Assembly, upon the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March and the Civil Rights Acts of 1965, to express repentance for the failure of some churches and Christians of that time (1960s) to stand in solidarity with African-American brothers and sisters and for failing to pursue racial reconciliation adequately. This became the single issue on which the Assembly spent the most time. The Overtures Committee discussed the matter for nine hours, consulting with some members of the newly formed African-American Presbyterian Fellowship. Sympathetic to the need to pursue corporate and personal repentance, and at the same time recognizing the complexity and gravity of racial sin, the Overtures Committee (OC) unanimously recommended that the matter be referred to the 2016 General Assembly for consideration.. Among the reasons the OC offered for the recommendation were that a perfected resolution could include specific suggestions for fruit of

repentance (Matthew 3:18; 2 Corinthians 7:10; *WCF* 15.5-6) and that deferring would give opportunity for repentance and to come up through the lower courts of the Church (Sessions and Presbyteries). In explaining its recommendation, the OC included these words: “For the sake of the peace and purity of the Christ’s Church, and in preparation for the 44<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, the Assembly encourages Sessions and Presbyteries prayerfully to consider any and all sins of racial prejudice and to pursue a proper course of action, humbly, sincerely, and expeditiously (Matthew 5:21-26; Ephesians 2:1-22; 4:1-32).”

The Assembly wanted to deal with the issue. The floor debate, lasting for about two hours, centered on whether it was wiser to address the issue immediately or take a year to develop a more comprehensive response. Among the many speakers, Dr. James M. Baird, one of the committee of twelve that had developed the process for founding the PCA, spoke at length, recalling that the founders of the PCA in 1973 were primarily concerned with the theological, spiritual, organizational, and legal aspects of founding a new denomination. He expressed regret that racial reconciliation had not been given proper priority at the time and that the founders had failed to take into account sufficiently the need for racial reconciliation. His remarks and his spirit were well received.

A motion to deal with the resolution immediately by sending it back to the OC (which would have required another day of committee work and Assembly deliberations) failed. The OC recommendation to refer the resolution to the 44<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was approved. The only available procedural option for any immediate action was to register a protest, and such a protest was registered, confessing the church’s “involvement in” and “complicity with” racial injustice during the Civil Rights period, committing its signers to truth and repentance over the next year, and urging local congregations to do the same. Over 200 commissioners signed the protest. Both before the vote on the committee recommendation and after the reading of the protest, extensive periods of earnest prayer were held. *This writer has attended every General Assembly the PCA has ever had. In his opinion, the periods of prayer and expressions of repentance and brotherly love on the Thursday evening session of the 2015 General Assembly were the most evident and powerful work of the Holy Spirit at any PCA Assembly heretofore.*

## Overtures

Many of the more thoroughly debated issues that come to the Assembly come through the Overtures Committee. The PCA General Assembly is non-delegated. That is, every PCA church may send at least two Ruling Elders and all of its Teaching Elders, if they so desire. The Overtures Committee (OC) is a quasi-delegated assembly within the non-delegated General Assembly. Each Presbytery may send a Ruling Elder and a Teaching Elder to the OC. This year there were fewer overtures than usual, six of which were referred by the Stated Clerk to the Overtures Committee. There were also five personal resolutions introduced as new business, accepted by the Assembly, and referred to the OC.

- One overture proposed an amendment to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* to provide for final binding decisions to be rendered by Presbytery Judicial Commissions. The Assembly did not approve the proposed change.
- Two overtures asked the General Assembly to form a study committee to prepare proposals to amend the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms* regarding the details of Sabbath observance. The Assembly did not approve the formation of this study committee.
- One overture proposed an amendment to a baptismal vow parents take (*BCO* 56-5, Q. 3) at the covenant baptism of a child in order to eliminate any reference to dedicating children in the baptismal rite. The Assembly did not approve the amendment because the term had been used in the *BCO* since 1894 and *BCO* 56-4 requires that the presiding minister explain covenant baptism before it is administered.

- Another overture asked the Assembly to amend the *BCO* to require ordained officers (Teaching Elders, Ruling Elders, and Deacons) to testify in trials when an officer is accused of doctrinal error. The Assembly did not approve this *BCO* change.
- Still another overture proposed a *BCO* amendment that would have required Ruling Elders or Deacons who have not been in active service for three years to be considered for divesture from office without censure. The Assembly did not approve the amendment.
- The Assembly approved one Presbytery overture and three Personal Resolutions asking the Assembly to express appreciation for the lives of four men who have died in the past year: TE John W. King, RE Richard Chewning, TE Tom Cheely, and TE J. Robert Fiol. Moreover, a resolution commending TE Jim Smith for his long-term service as chairman of the floor clerks was approved.

### Interchurch Relations

The PCA relates to other denominations and ecclesiastical organizations through the Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC). The IRC is guided by the biblical and confessional teachings on the nature, unity, and mission of the Church recognizing that the PCA is a small part of the Church Universal.

- Representatives of other denominations and organizations from North America and abroad gave words of greeting to the Assembly.
- Since 1989 the PCA has exchanged ecclesiastical observers with the General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Over the years the PCA and EPC have transferred back and forth members, ministers, and churches. Both denominations are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and the World Reformed Fellowship. The successive Stated Clerks of the PCA and EPC have enjoyed cordial relationships since the formation of the EPC in 1981. The Assembly approved the recommendation of the IRC to recognize that the relationship that has existed between the PCA and the EPC since 1989 is that of corresponding relations, one of two levels of ecclesiastical interchurch relations now recognized in the PCA. Corresponding relations allows for the exchanging of greetings and letters of encouragement with other evangelical denominations and may include the exchange of official observers at the broadest assemblies as well as communications on issues of common concern. Fraternal relations are primarily with some fellow denominations in the North American Presbyterian Reformed Council and some international denominations.
- The IRC reported that the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico is interested in developing grass-roots church planting partnerships with PCA churches, networks, and Presbyteries in order to facilitate cooperative efforts, particularly in church planting.

### Progress of PCA Assembly-level Ministries

- **Dr. Lloyd Kim**, a veteran missionary to Cambodia, **was elected as Coordinator of Mission to the World**, the first Asian-American to serve as a coordinator. He holds a Ph.D. in New Testament from Fuller Theological Seminary.
- **Reformed University Ministries** reported that campus ministries were begun on eleven new campuses in 2014 and that five new ministries are to be launched in 2015.
- The Assembly approved an **Administrative Committee's** proposal that the 2018 Assembly convene on Wednesday afternoon and adjourn on Friday noon, shortening the Assembly.
- The **Committee on Discipleship Ministries** reported that their name change better reflects their role in helping PCA churches fulfill the Great Commission to make more and stronger disciples.
- **Mission to North America** reported that the Coordinator, **Dr. James C. Bland**, will retire in 2016. It also reported the division of Palmetto Presbytery into three South Carolina Presbyteries.

- **Covenant College** reported that 100% of the class of 2014 had been admitted to their first or second-choice graduate schools. A \$19 million dollar renovation-construction two-year project is underway. The college is ranked the #6 regional college in the South by *US News and World Report*. Churches that give \$10 per member to Covenant College qualify for the college's Church Scholarship Promise program.
- **Covenant Theological Seminary** reported that after two years of full-time equivalent enrollment decline, enrollment was up 25% over 2013. The M.Div. revision is in its second year of operation.
- **The PCA Foundation** received \$13.2 million and distributed or granted to ministries \$7.7 million in 2014. The majority of the grants were to PCA ministries and churches.
- **PCA Retirement & Benefits, Inc.**, has launched ServantCare, an accessible, affordable and confidential counseling resource to PCA ministers and their wives. ServantCare is provided by the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation to PCA Presbyteries.
- **Ridge Haven Conference Center** served 3,500 campers last summer, 1,700 fall guests, and 1,400 winter guests. The lake has been expanded by 30%, additional docks have been installed, and an additional 4.5-acre recreational complex is being developed.

### **Book of Church Order Changes**

The Assembly gave final approval to four *BCO* amendments: *BCO* 5-2, regarding establishing mission churches; *BCO* 8-6, regarding the powers of an evangelist; *BCO* 18-7, regarding withdrawal of endorsement of a candidate for ministry; and *BCO* 43-3, 8 & 9, regarding complaint procedures. These amendments were initially approved by the 42<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly and subsequently passed by the requisite 2/3 of the presbyteries.

### **PCA Statistics for 2014**

A number of our larger churches and growing younger churches did not file annual reports in 2014. So our actual statistics are probably better than our reported statistics. Our statistics are mixed, with some increases and some decreases. Some statistics for 2014 as compared with 2013 are:

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| • Churches and missions – 1,831, an increase of 23       | • Total membership– 358,516, a decrease of 1,318, - .99%.                   |
| • Churches transferring in or organized – 22             | • Total Family Units – 136,849, a decrease of 477                           |
| • Churches dissolved or transferring out – 11            | • Sunday School Attendance – 96,623, a decrease of 2,680                    |
| • Total professions of faith – 9,425, an increase of 299 | • Per capita Giving – \$2,708, an increase of \$89.                         |
| • Candidates for ministry – 545, an increase of 179      | • Per Capita Benevolences – \$451, a decrease of \$1                        |
| • Licentiates – 129, an increase of 41                   | • Total Reported Disbursements – \$766,520,059, an increase of \$17,300,662 |
| • Ministers – 4,556, an increase of 140                  |   |
| • Communicants – 281,790, a decrease of 977              |   |
| • Non-communicants – 72,170, a decrease of 481           |   |

### **Suggested Prayer, Offerings and Events**

- Prayer for Covenant College as determined by local sessions.
- November 2015, a Month of Prayer for Global Missions (MTW).
- A special offering for MTW Compassion Ministries on a date chosen by local sessions.
- November 8, 2015, a Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church Worldwide (MTW).
- Annual Relief Ministry Offering (RBI).
- 2015 PCA Women in the Church Love Gift (CDM) for Reformed University Ministries.
- 50 Days of Prayer leading up to the 44<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (CDM & MNA).
- *The Assembly approved the request that churches contribute to the Administrative Committee on the basis of 0.35% of total tithes and offerings (excepting capital campaign projects).*
- **The Forty-fourth General Assembly will convene in Mobile, Alabama, June 21, 2016.**