

Actions of the 38th General Assembly

L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk

The Thirty-eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America met in Nashville, Tennessee June 29-July 2, 2010, at the Nashville Convention Center, hosted by Nashville Presbytery. A total of 1,311 commissioners attended (978 Teaching Elders and 333 Ruling Elders). In addition to acting upon the reports of the ten General-Assembly-level Permanent Committees and Agencies, other special committees, and the Standing Judicial Commission, the annual PCA General Assembly includes three evening worship services that include many non-commissioners, seminars on ministry and issues facing the Church, an exhibit hall of ministry resources, networking opportunities, fellowship renewal occasions, and gatherings of alumni and friends of colleges and seminaries.

Prior to the Assembly three issues stimulated considerable interest; (1) the Strategic Planning Report, originating in the Cooperative Ministries Committee (CMC) and coming to the floor through the Administrative Committee (AC), (2) the Overtures Committee Report regarding proposed amendments to the *Book of Church Order (BCO)* 9-7 relating to the role of unordained women who assist local church deacons in mercy ministry and (3) several overtures regarding a possible change in the current law governing homosexual individuals in the US military and how that could impinge upon the ministry of evangelical chaplains. The items turned out to be less controversial than some expected because of amendments made to the Strategic Planning Committee report by the AC on June 29 a few hours before the Assembly convened, extended discussion in the AC Committee of Commissioners over three days, and because of work of the Overtures Committee to come to an agreeable understanding on competing overtures to *BCO* 9-7. One of the Themes set forth in the Strategic Planning Report was “Civil Conversation,” with a goal to “. . . enter into civil conversations about the best ways to advance the PCA’s faithfulness to biblical belief, ministry, and mission.” For the most part, charitable discussion characterized the Assembly’s deliberations on difficult issues. The overtures concerning chaplaincy came to the floor from the Committee on Mission to North America and were adopted without any speeches in the negative.

Dr. Harry Reeder, Moderator

The Reverend Doctor Harry L. Reeder, III, Pastor of the Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama was elected without opposition. Dr. Reeder is a graduate of Covenant College, Westminster Theological Seminary, and Reformed Theological Seminary. He is a trustee of Westminster Theological Seminary and Birmingham Theological Seminary. He previously served as Pastor of Christ Covenant PCA in Matthews, North Carolina, and has helped numerous churches through his Embers to Flame church renewal ministry. Pastor Reeder is also a published author. Dr. Reeder’s presiding epitomized charitable discourse.

Strategic Planning¹

Since 2000 the PCA has been involved in an ongoing process of Strategic Planning on how best to minister the Gospel in our changing culture. From 2000-2005 that was done through a sub-committee of the AC. For 2005-2006 there was an ad interim committee for that purpose. The

¹ Strategic Planning arose in a military context in WWII, was carried over into business, and has been used by other groups such as churches. “Strategic Management” is actually a more current term that is used to describe strategic adjustments to rapidly changing conditions.

General Assembly in 2006 created the Cooperative Ministries Committee (CMC) and gave it the ongoing task of long range planning. The CMC is composed of the ten chairmen of the General Assembly Committees and Agencies, the ten Coordinators and Presidents of the General Assembly Committees and Agencies, and the six most recent moderators of the General Assembly (advisory members). The CMC is required to make recommendations to the General Assembly through a Permanent Committee or Agency. Since the Strategic Planning recommendations affect all ten committees and agencies, the recommendations came to the Assembly through the AC because all committees and agencies have voting members on the AC. The AC met on April the 8. After that meeting, the Strategic Planning information was posted on the AC web site (pcaac.org) and byfaithonline.com. (For fuller information on this and other issues, visit www.pcaac.org). Though there was discussion of the plan on some Internet blogs, less than a dozen contacts were made directly to the AC. AC members and staff conferred with contacts who had offered decorous and reasoned criticisms and initiated conversations with others. As a result, several clarifying changes to the report were made by AC permanent committee before the Assembly convened. The AC committee of commissioners met over a three-day period and considered the report at length. The document recommended that the Assembly focus in the upcoming year on three major themes and related goals, approve means to accomplish those goals, and authorize the responsible entities and persons to proceed with implementation. The AC also recommended that the means be voted on individually and that the funding proposal for the AC be voted upon separately. The three themes and related goals were:

- **Theme #1: Civil Conversation**
Goal: Establish places to enter into civil conversations about best ways to advance the PCA's faithfulness to biblical belief, ministry, and mission.
- **Theme #2: Increased Involvement**
Goal: Increase involvement by providing more opportunities to utilize a greater variety of people and life experiences (especially younger leaders, women, ethnic leaders, and global Church representatives) in discussions concerning PCA ministry direction and development.
- **Theme # 3: In God's Global Mission**
Goal: Find ways to participate corporately in God's Global Mission with exemplary unity, humility, and effectiveness, bringing sound biblical understanding to the largest expansion of Christianity in world history.

Strategic Planning took more floor time than any other item at the Assembly (approximately six hours, requiring a rare late-night session). Overall, the Assembly voted over twenty times on parts of the Strategic Planning Report. Most of those votes were by obvious or substantial majorities. Two items required a counted vote, but were approved ("Formalize a CEP Women's Ministry organization for women in vocational ministries." [vote: 422-397]) and, ("Develop a credible and rigorous alternative credentialing process for men from disadvantaged constituencies, enabling them to attain the same ordination standards of a traditional M.Div. seminary graduate." [vote: 425-409]). One of the means, ("Establish means for voluntary certification of men and women for non-ordained vocational ministries"), failed in a close, but uncounted, vote. After the Strategic Planning portion of the AC report, Dr. Joseph Pipa, President of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, entered a protest into the minutes, alleging that the report was deficient in biblical data and that *RAO 7-3 c.* required that the report come to the floor through each of the ten Committees and Agencies separately rather than only through the AC. One hundred twenty-eight of the registered commissioners signed the protest.

Funding the Support Services of the PCA

When the PCA was founded in 1973, the PCA made the funding of the essential support services of the denomination (the Administrative Committee) a totally separate request to churches. Other denominations fund administrative costs either through a unified budget or administrative fees for services. Though a higher percentage of churches contribute something to the AC than to any other Committee or Agency of the General Assembly, less than half of the churches support the AC at all. Funding all General Assembly ministries was studied in 2000-2006 as part of the strategic planning process. Moreover, the 2006 General Assembly directed the CMC and AC to consider the issue. After considerable deliberation, the CMC unanimously recommended to the AC to ask the General Assembly to change the method of funding only for the AC because of its uniqueness in providing support service to the entire denomination, but to retain the current practice for funding of the other General Assembly Committees and Agencies. The funding proposal, approved by a substantial margin, stipulated that local churches would be expected to pay 1/3% (one-third of one percent) of annual tithes and offering (excluding capital campaigns and special projects) as an annual registration fee and that ministers would pay \$100 as an annual registration fee for the support of the AC. Voting in the General Assembly would be tied to paying the annual registration fee. The General Assembly Commissioner's Fee (\$400/per commissioner) would be eliminated under this proposal. Presbyteries would be expected to pay an annual \$500 fee to underwrite the costs of Presbyteries hosting the annual General Assembly meeting. Amendments to the *Book of Church Order* 14-1 and 14-2 required to enact the plan were initially approved by the 38th General Assembly. If the *BCO* changes are now approved by two-thirds of the Presbyteries and subsequently by the 39th General Assembly, an amendment to the *Rules of Assembly Operation (RAO)* 4-11 will be offered at the 2011 Assembly stipulating that the church registration fee could not exceed 4/10% (four tenths of one percent) without the consent of a majority of Presbyteries. In adopting the proposal, the PCA, as a connectional Church, would be moving away from "representation without contribution."

Communication to the Government of the United States

Three overtures and a personal resolution dealt with the possible repeal of the current law governing homosexual individuals in the military. In response the General Assembly directed the Stated Clerk to send a letter to the President and key military leaders containing the following (which will be posted in full on <http://www.pcaac.org> and <http://www.byfaithonline.com>):

The PCA is gravely concerned over the potential repeal of the current law governing homosexual individuals in the military. Should this repeal occur we fear that the free exercise of the faith of our chaplains will be jeopardized. This repeal may go so far as to force the resignation of our currently serving chaplains from the military as well as the service of military members from this denomination. . . . We humbly recommend that you consider the ramifications for religious freedom that legislation in this regard may have. It is of utmost importance that you take all necessary measures to insure that our chaplains are free, without censure, to preach, teach, and practice in accordance with the beliefs of this denomination. We plead for this for the good of the nation, for the good of the chaplains who serve the nation on behalf of their church, for the good of the military members from this church who serve in our armed services, and for the protection of the constitutional principle of the free exercise of religion.

Seminars

Fifty-eight seminars on issues and ministry training were offered covering an array of subjects. The two most highly attended seminars, with seating for 1,000 each, were “The PCA Strategic Plan” led by Drs. Bryan Chapell (President of Covenant Seminary) and Roy Taylor (PCA Stated Clerk) and “The PCA – A Way Forward: What We Can All Agree On and Why We Should Stay Together” led by Drs. Tim Keller (Pastor of Redeemer-NYC) and Ligon Duncan (Pastor of First-Jackson, MS). Doctors Keller and Duncan, two of the PCA’s best-known pastors, described to a standing-room-only crowd their own spiritual journeys and growth in their relating to other Christians outside the PCA and how that affects their relating to fellow believers in the PCA. The spectrum of views between those two pastors represents the vast majority of the PCA.

Overtures

- Several overtures dealt with BCO 9-7 on unordained assistants to the deacons. Overtures from Central Carolina, Eastern Carolina and Westminster Presbyteries would have made BCO 9-7 more restrictive regarding women. Overture 10 from Northern California would have broadened the issue. Overture 16 from Tennessee Valley would have affirmed unordained deaconesses. The Assembly took a *via media* by adopting a revision of Overture 7 from Evangel Presbytery to add to BCO 9-7 regarding men and women appointed to assist in mercy ministries, “These assistants to the deacons are not officers of the church (BCO 7-2) and, as such, are not subjects for ordination (BCO 17).”
- Two overtures regarding proposed changes to BCO 5 regarding procedures for organizing a particular church were adopted and sent down to the Presbyteries for vote.
- An amended version of an overture from NW Georgia Presbytery to Affirm the Ordinary Means of Grace (the Word, the sacraments, and prayer) was adopted both to affirm the ordinary means of grace and to engage in strategic planning using not only biblical principles but also common grace insights that are not contradictory to the Bible.

PCA Statistical Changes

Total membership and the number of churches increased; other items decreased. Churches and missions: 1,740, an increase of 47. Total membership: 346,408, an increase of 5,556. Total professions of faith: 10,082, a decrease of 253. Total Family Units: 135,230, a decrease of 309. Sunday School Attendance: 105,477 which is 4,175 fewer than in 2008. Per capita Giving: \$2,392, a decrease of \$116. Per Capita Benevolences: \$437, a decrease of \$38. Total Reported Contributions: \$699,348,062, a decrease of \$17,522,849. One percent or more for North American denominational annual growth is above average. 2009 PCA growth rate was 1.6%.

Days of Prayer, Offerings and Events Suggested for PCA Churches

- October 2010, a Month of Prayer for Global Missions (MTW).
- October 17, 2010, Covenant College Sunday. Prayer for CC.
- The 2011 Women in the Church Offering is for Covenant Theological Seminary
- A special offering for MTW Compassion Ministry to be taken in 2010, date set by Sessions.
- November 14, 2010, a Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church Worldwide (MTW).
- Annual Thanksgiving Offering for MNA Mercy Ministries and Ethnic Training
- December 2010, Offering for Ministerial Relief (PCA-RBI).
- February 20, 2011, Ridge Haven Sunday, Day of Prayer for RH.
- April 17-June 7, 50 Days of Prayer for the General Assembly coordinated by MNA & CEP.
- **The 39th General Assembly will convene June 7, 2011, in Virginia Beach, VA.**