

ACTIONS OF THE 39th GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PCA

L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk

The **Thirty-ninth General Assembly** of the Presbyterian Church in America met in Virginia Beach, Virginia, June 7-10, 2011, at the Virginia Beach Convention Center, hosted by James River Presbytery. A total of 1,183 commissioners attended (901 Teaching Elders and 282 Ruling Elders). The Assembly met before some school systems had ended their academic years, which may have been a factor in a lower than usual Assembly attendance.

The PCA General Assembly is **more than a business meeting** acting upon the reports of the ten General-Assembly-level Permanent Committees and Agencies, other special committees, and the Standing Judicial Commission. Corporate worship with 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 are all important aspects of the PCA's annual gathering. Preachers for the three worship services were: Dr. Harry Reeder, Moderator of the Thirty-eighth General Assembly and Pastor of Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham; Dr. Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church of New York City; and Rev. Michael A. Campbell, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi.

Daniel Carrell, Moderator

A Virginian, Ruling Elder Daniel Carrell, was **elected Moderator**. RE Carrell is a member of the Session of the Stony Point Reformed Presbyterian Church of Richmond, Virginia, and is a practicing attorney. He is a graduate of Davidson College, the University of Oxford (a Rhodes Scholar) and the Stanford University School of Law. He has served as moderator of James River Presbytery three times. He has served on the General Assembly's Committee on Constitutional Business and is presently a member of the Standing Judicial Commission.

Funding the Support Services of the PCA

Background

The 38th General Assembly approved a plan for funding the Administrative Committee (AC) which would have required all churches and ministers to support the AC financially on an annual basis (1/3 of 1% of offerings [excluding capital campaigns] for churches, and \$100 for ministers). The enabling BCO 14-1 and 14-2 amendments, however, failed to receive the necessary Presbytery votes and therefore were not placed before the 39th General Assembly, thus ending the possibility of implementing the plan.

General Assembly Action

Six overtures and four communications to the 39th General Assembly suggested alternative funding plans for the AC. Two of these overtures and two communications specifically called for discontinuing the AC subsidy not only of *byFaith* print magazine but also byfaithonline.com, the PCA's internet voice, within a year.

The 39th Assembly **referred all overtures and communications dealing with AC Funding** (including *byFaith* magazine and byfaithonline.com) **to the Cooperative Ministries Committee (CMC)** sub-committee on AC Funding and subsequently to the AC. By action of the January, 2011, meeting of the CMC, the Moderator, Dr. Harry Reeder, had appointed a sub-committee on AC Funding to consider the various possibilities from differing sources and suggest a feasible AC Funding Plan to the CMC at its January, 2012, meeting as part of the CMC's role in facilitating long-range planning (*Rules of Assembly Operations [RAO] 7-3.c*). Since the CMC cannot make recommendations for action directly to the General Assembly, but must report through the appropriate Committee or Agency (*RAO 7-3 c*), the CMC

will make its recommendations to the AC. The AC, at its spring 2012 meeting, will act upon the CMC recommendations and make recommendations to the 40th General Assembly, which will be brought to the floor of the Assembly by the AC Committee of Commissioners (RAO 14-1).

Dr. Reeder, chairman of the CMC sub-committee, reported to the 39th Assembly that the sub-committee had met twice and decided to begin its work by (1) reviewing the mission and responsibilities of the AC, (2) seeking to discern what the indispensable responsibilities of the AC are, and (3) seeking to discern what the discretionary responsibilities of the AC are in order to come to informed and wise recommendations regarding AC Funding.

Insider Movement and Bible Translation

Background

Some missiologists have suggested that people who become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ – and who are in circumstances where the public baptism and joining a Christian church may subject a person to death, persecution, or being ostracized from their families and communities – that such Christian believers remain in their non-Christian religious communities (hence “Insider Movement”). Moreover, some missiologists who advocate Insider Movements suggest that translations of the Bible that cause offense to non-Christians (for example references to the Trinity, God as Father, the deity of Christ, Christ’s being the Son of God, etc.) be adjusted to be non-offensive. Insider Movement advocates think that such an approach enables people to become Christians without crossing cultural barriers.

The PCA’s Mission to the World (MTW) has taken the position that people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ should not continue to practice non-Christian religions but should become part of the Church, and that Bible translations that remove from the text references to God as “Father” (*pater*) or Jesus as “Son” (*huios*), so as to alter the doctrines of the Trinity, the doctrines of the person and work of Christ, or the doctrine of Scripture, are unfaithful to God’s revealed Word.

General Assembly Action

Overture 9, from Potomac Presbytery, “A Call to Faithful Witness,” not only reiterated the position MTW has taken, but also called for a study committee to be established to give further study to the issue. The MTW Permanent Committee, to whom the overture was referred, did not think a study committee was necessary since MTW has previously taken a position that is consistent with the Scriptures and PCA doctrinal standards, and because numerous resources are already available. The Assembly **adopted an amended version of Overture 9, authorizing the Moderator to select a seven-member study committee** to be named later. The study committee is to be financed by contributions to the AC designated for that purpose.

The PCA’s Membership in the National Association of Evangelicals

Background

The National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) was formed in 1942 initially so that evangelicals would have greater opportunity for religious broadcasting. Later, the NAE expanded its ministry to post-war relief efforts and other ministries. Presbyterian and Reformed evangelicals worked with evangelicals from other theological traditions to form the NAE as an association of evangelical denominations, local churches, institutions, organizations, ministries, and individuals. The 1st General Assembly (1973) approved the affiliation of the Committee on Mission to the World with the NAE in order to benefit from the services and expertise of the Chaplains Commission, the World Relief Commission, and the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association. In 1986, the 14th General Assembly approved the PCA’s entering into full membership of the NAE. Through the NAE the PCA is also related to the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA). Under the WEA the PCA participated in the formation of the World

Fellowship of Reformed Churches in 1994, which later became the World Reformed Fellowship. Since 2006 the PCA Stated Clerk has served as the Chairman of the NAE Board of Directors and Executive Committee and an *ex officio* member of the Board of World Relief.

General Assembly Action

Central Carolina Presbytery sent Overture 12 to the 39th General Assembly asking that the PCA withdraw from the NAE at the soonest possible date. The General Assembly **approved** the recommendation of Interchurch Relations Committee (IRC) and the Committee of Commissioners on Interchurch Relations **that the IRC study the issue after receiving written comments** by February 1, 2012, from Sessions and Presbyteries and report to the 40th General Assembly. The grounds offered for the recommendation were: 1) the IRC has not has time to study the issue, 2) there is no urgency to make a decision, 3) assertions made and conclusions drawn in the overture need to be evaluated to come to the soundest bases for decisions on ecumenical relations, and 4) it is wise periodically to evaluate ecumenical relationships.

Strategic Planning

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. The 38th General Assembly approved three themes and related sets of goals and means to accomplish the goals.

The 39th General Assembly **adopted a fourth theme, “Practical Presbyterianism.”** The goal of theme four is “to foster a cordial and practical commitment to the ‘formal values’ of the PCA, i.e., the Doctrinal and Governmental Standards, for *use in ministry*, as opposed to merely theoretical affirmation in the vows of ordination and church membership.” **Means 1-4** for accomplishing this goal, which were **approved**, include having Assembly seminars annually on theological and church polity issues, working toward all newly planted churches participating in financial support of PCA ministries, developing a curriculum on PCA doctrinal standards, and adding “proof” texts to the *BCO*. **Means 5 and 6**, which involve revising the *BCO* Rules of Discipline, as well as revising and approving as part of the Constitution the Directory of Worship section of the *BCO*, were **recommitted** for further study.

A PCA Response to Same-sex Marriage

Iowa Presbytery had sent **Overture 8**, “Grant *BCO* Chapter 59, ‘Solemnization of Marriage’ Full Constitutional Status,” expressing the concern that PCA chaplains, ministers, and churches need as much support as possible from their denomination as they stand in opposition to same-sex marriage (so-called). The Assembly **responded by adopting a statement** that the PCA Constitution, through its doctrinal standards, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* Chapter 24, the *Westminster Larger Catechism* 137-139, and the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* 70-72 speaks clearly to the PCA’s understanding of the nature of marriage [“Marriage is to be between one man and one woman”]. Further, the second ordination vow (*BCO* 21-5, 2) makes clear that all Teaching Elders (ministers) in the PCA are bound by *WCF* 24, *WLC* 137-139, and *WSC* 70-72 even when in the service of the civil magistrate. (PCA ministers are *not* permitted to conduct same-sex marriage ceremonies under any circumstances).

Book of Church Order Changes

Final Approval Given by 39th GA to Amendments Approved by Presbyteries:

- Amend *BCO* 5-2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10 and 11; add new 5-5 and renumber subsequent sections, regarding the process to particularize a mission church into an organized church.
- Amend *BCO* 9-7 to specify that assistants to deacons are not candidates for ordination.
- Amend *BCO* 15-2 to specify the quorum of a Presbytery Commission.

- Amend *BCO* 37-7 to transfer jurisdiction of judicial cases when an accused person relocates (carried over from 37th Assembly under *BCO* 26-6).
- Amend *BCO* 13-6 to require ministers transferring from other denominations to specify their differences with the *Westminster Standards* (carried over from 37th Assembly under *BCO* 26-6).

Proposed Amendments not Adopted by 39th General Assembly

- A proposed amendment to *BCO* 5-3 to provide temporary governance of mission churches in several ways was ruled out of order on the ground that the amendment to *BCO* 5-2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10 and 11; add new 5-5 and renumber subsequent sections had been enacted.
- Proposed amendments to *BCO* 14-1 and 14-2 to enable the implementation of the AC Funding Plan that were approved by the 38th General Assembly failed to receive the necessary Presbytery votes and therefore were not placed before the 39th General Assembly.

Proposed Amendments Sent Down to Presbyteries by 39th GA for Voting

- The 39th General Assembly gave initial approval to a proposed amendment to *BCO* 19-11 to allow Presbyteries to accept portions of another Presbytery's examination of a transferring intern. The proposal will be submitted to the Presbyteries for a vote.
- The 39th General Assembly gave initial approval to a proposed amendment to *BCO* 12-4 to allow Presbyteries to appoint a commission to serve as an interim session of churches that no longer have a quorum for a session, provided the congregation requests or concurs with the action. The proposal will be submitted to the Presbyteries for a vote.

Rules of Assembly Operations (*RAO*) 16-3.e.5 was amended to require that ministers' and ministerial candidates' stated doctrinal differences with the *Westminster Standards*, expressed in their own words, be included in Presbytery minutes.

Several amendments to the Manual of the Standing Judicial Commission (SJCM) were adopted.

PCA Statistical Changes as of December 31, 2010

Total membership and the number of churches increased; other items decreased. Churches and missions: 1,757, an increase of 17. Total membership: 346,814, an increase of 414. Total professions of faith: 10,803, a decrease of 279 from the previous year's level. Total Family Units: 137,263, an increase of 2,033. Sunday School Attendance: 103,911 which is 1,566 fewer than in 2009. Per capita Giving: \$2,486, an increase of \$94. Per Capita Benevolences: \$451, an increase of \$14. Total Reported Contributions: \$678,150,048, an increase of \$24,259,293. There has been only one year in which there was a reported decrease in PCA membership (2008, when one of our largest churches had a major roll revision). Since its beginning in 1973 the PCA had several years of being one of the fastest growing denominations in North America. The 2010 PCA reported growth rate was positive, (.2%), but that is not as high as in previous years. Seventeen mission churches were organized as new particular churches in 2010. The 39th General Assembly approved forming two new Presbyteries; one is a Korean-language Presbytery.

Suggested Prayer, Offerings, and Events

- October 16, 2011, Covenant College Sunday. Prayer for CC.
- November 2011, a Month of Prayer for Global Missions (MTW).
- November 13, 2011, a Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church Worldwide (MTW).
- Annual Thanksgiving Offering for MNA Mercy Ministries and Ethnic Training.
- December 2011, Offering for Ministerial Relief (PCA-RBI).
- The 2012 Women in the Church Love Gift Offering is for Mission to the World.
- A special offering for MTW Compassion Ministry to be taken in 2011, date set by Sessions.
- Prayer for Ridge Haven Conference Center staff, ministries, and needs.
- May 5-June 17, 50 Days of Prayer for the General Assembly, coordinated by MNA & CEP.
- **The 40th General Assembly will convene June 19, 2012 in Louisville, Kentucky.**