
Update on the Noteworthy Actions of the 49th General Assembly

The 49th GA of the Presbyterian Church in America met from June 21-23 in Birmingham, with a record number of commissioners in attendance. Tim Anderson and Blake Denlinger attended on behalf of Northwoods. There was a great deal of fellowship, worship, prayer, and discussion during the assembly. Overall, the outcomes were encouraging and reflected a desire for the PCA to hold fast to our founding principles as a denomination that is faithful to the scriptures, true to the reformed faith, and obedient to the great commission. However, with respect to some of the challenges facing the PCA, this year's assembly did not prove to be as decisive as many expected. A few of the more significant actions of the assembly are listed below. Please feel free to ask Blake or Tim if you have any questions, and please continue to pray for the PCA!

Withdrawal from the National Association of Evangelicals

For many years the PCA has been a member of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE). A few of the leaders of the NAE are ordained PCA elders. However, there has been a growing movement in the PCA in recent years to withdraw from the NAE for three main reasons: First, the PCA General Assembly is competent to speak for the PCA; we do not need the NAE to speak for us. Second, membership in the NAE is expensive and therefore not wise stewardship. Third, because the NAE presumes to speak for her member organizations, the PCA's membership may link us with political lobbying and theological positions that we do not wish to support. After some vigorous debate from those who believed that unity with other believers would be better expressed by remaining and seeking to retain influence in the NAE, the assembly voted to withdraw (60% to 40%).

Petition to End Abortion

The Assembly directed the Stated Clerk to send a letter to our national leaders containing the following language: "...We who love our nation, in the name of God who alone is sovereign, call upon you to renounce the sin of abortion, to repent of the complicity in the mass slaughter of innocent unborn children, who are persons in the sight of God, and to reverse the ruinous direction of both law and practice in this area..." This was adopted unanimously by our General Assembly one day before the SCOTUS decision overturning *Roe v. Wade* was announced.

Report on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault

In 2019 the General Assembly approved a study committee to look into domestic abuse and sexual assault. Specifically, the committee was instructed to prepare an annotated bibliography of resources "related to child abuse and sexual assault, domestic abuse and sexual assault, and domestic oppression." Among the seven members of the committee were two brothers from our own presbytery: Kelly Dehnert (a ruling elder from Lander) and Shane Waldron (pastor of Rocky Mountain Presbyterian Church in Westminster, CO) This year the committee presented its 220-page report, which provides an in-depth exploration of how Scripture and the Westminster Standards define abuse. The report then offers advice and best practices in a variety of situations that pastors and congregations might face. If you are interested in reading the report, you can find it at: <https://pcaga.org/aic-report-abuse/>

Clarification of Oversight and Original Jurisdiction

While this issue may seem obscure, it may prove to be the most significant action of the GA. There are currently two instances in which a group of presbyteries have petitioned the GA to take over from lower courts cases of discipline concerning pastors, one focused on doctrine and one focused on public scandal. The current language in the *Book of Church Order* (BCO) permits two or more presbyteries to *ask* the GA to assume “original jurisdiction” over a case if the lower court “refuses to act.” But it is difficult to determine what “refuses to act” means. Does it mean “fails to investigate” or “fails to investigate thoroughly” or “fails to indict” or something different entirely? Therefore, the GA approved an overture to amend the BCO on this point. The new language increases the threshold for action by requiring a request from 10% of presbyteries, but gives less discretion to the higher court regarding whether to take the case: if the lower court has failed to bring charges in a matter of doctrine or public scandal and the required number of lower courts request it to do so, the higher court *must* take up the matter. Like all BCO changes, this will need to be approved by two thirds of the presbyteries and next year’s GA to become official.

Strengthening Character Requirements for Ordination

In recent years, the PCA has expressed strong agreement that homosexual practice and desire are sinful and should be repented of and mortified, as all sin should be, in the life of all believers. We should be grateful for this continued consensus. But the PCA has been engaged in internal debates over the best way to define and apply character requirements for those seeking ordination (whether as pastors, ruling elders, or deacons), particularly in the case of men who have struggled with homosexual attraction. In response, two BCO amendments were approved by the GA.

The Assembly voted by a wide margin (90% in favor) to amend BCO Chapter 16 to clarify that officers “...must affirm the sinfulness of fallen desires, the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, and be committed to the pursuit of Spirit-empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions.”

By a much narrower margin (54%), the Assembly voted to amend BCO Chapter 7 to include the following language: “Men who describe themselves as homosexual, even those who describe themselves as homosexual and claim to practice celibacy by refraining from homosexual conduct, are disqualified from holding office in the Presbyterian Church in America.”

Like all BCO changes, these will need to be approved by two thirds of the presbyteries and next year’s GA to become official. In light of its narrower margin of approval at GA, the second change is unlikely to make it into the BCO. But, regardless of the fate of these amendments, we should pray that the PCA will stand firm on these issues, doing our best to ensure that those ordained to office are men with repentant hearts and godly character who are indeed “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2), not according to the changing standards of culture, but according to God’s unchanging word.