Report of the 48th Annual General Assembly

St. Louis, Missouri

General Assembly is the annual meeting of “Commissioners” from all over the country sent by their churches. It is like a Congress in that there are Overtures that are submitted prior to the meeting which the Commissioners are then allowed to vote on. The Overtures can address many things, such as the operation of denominational committees like MTW and MNA, or it may address constitutional issues like changes to the Book of Church Order (‘BCO”), changes to the Rules of Assembly, etc. This General Assembly was of the largest ever with over 2,100 Commissioners (both teaching elders and ruling elders) with also the largest percentage of ruling elders (36%) attending in years.

While there is an Overtures Committee, if a particular Overture deals with a particular denominational committee, like MNA, the Overtures are referred to the Committee of Commissioners reviewing that permanent committee.

Overture 14 was one of those which went to the MTW Committee. The subject of this Overture was who may exercise authority over ordained elders (ruling and teaching) in the field. A number of missionaries commissioned a paper regarding the practice by MTW of allowing unordained men and women to exercise authority over ordained men in the field. MTW accomplished this by a changing the MTW rules. No other denominational committee, like RUF or MNA, allows non-ordained individuals to oversee ordained elders. The permanent committee for MTW requested that the Overture, which would restrict authority over ordained elders to other ordained elders, to be answered by the Assembly in the negative. However the Committee of Commissioners decided otherwise and recommended the General Assembly adopt the following language: *“All MTW leaders in line authority over church planting or 38 church development ministry shall be ordained elders.”*

The director of MTW, Lloyd Kim, presented the position of the Permanent Committee and a retired missionary who now works with RUF with its international students, presented a strong argument in favor of the Committee of Commissioners recommendation. While it was a close vote, the General Assembly adopted the recommendation of the Committee of Commissioners and rejected the request of the Permanent Committee. I think this can be viewed as a significant “push back” against the authority of the bureaucracy of the denomination.

Another significant vote at General Assembly regarded the request of the Presbytery Records Committee to refer the Committee’s complaints regarding Calvary Presbytery to the Standing Judicial Commission. The issue was that Calvary Presbytery had admitted a teaching elder who did not subscribe to a six day creation view point. While the presbytery admitted him as a teaching elder, it requested that it he not teach a view contrary to the six day creation viewpoint. Apparently, when the report of that reached the Presbytery Records Committee, the Committee rejected the presbytery’s report and requested further information. The presbytery asserted its right to control the admission of pastors to the presbytery and the conditions of their admission.

By a large majority, the General Assembly rejected the request for the Permanent Committee and approved the contrary position. Every presbytery has the right to set certain limits, without binding the conscience, on what its pastors may teach and preach within the boundaries of the presbytery. Again, this could be considered a significant response to the bureaucracy of the denomination in support of a presbytery. Several times, we heard the phrase, “grassroots Presbyterianism” and I think this is indicative that the majority of those at the Assembly wanted to assert themselves in support of this idea.

There were three very significant Overtures that came out of the Overtures Committee. The first of these that came to the floor was Overture 38. Overture 38 was to commend the 12 main statements of the Ad Interim Report on Human Sexuality to the denomination. At the 2019 General Assembly, an ad interim committee was formed to write a report on human sexuality. That report has both statements and pastoral content. A link to the report can be found here.

<https://pcaga.org/aicreport/> The Overture recommended the statements be approved by the General Assembly. This was not a difficult issue in Overtures and likewise it was not a difficult vote on the floor or Assembly to approve that Overture. Most commissioners seem to approve of the report.

The next Overture considered was for the General Assembly to approve Overture 23. Overture 23 had been the subject of several hours of discussion in the Overtures Committee. The Committee had passed a version of Overture 23 Tuesday afternoon before General Assembly started. However, that evening there was an effort by people opposing Overture 23 to revisit it to avoid a minority report. There were several discussions Tuesday night and Wednesday morning. The Overture Committee reconvened Wednesday afternoon to work through a revision of the previously approved Overture. It was this revision that made it to the floor of the General Assembly.

The revised Overture 23 sought to add the following to BCO 16-4: “Officers in the Presbyterian Church in America must be above reproach in their walk and Christlike in their character. Those who profess an identity (such as, but not limited to, “gay Christian,” “same sex attracted Christian,” “homosexual Christian,” or like terms) that undermined or contradicts their identity as new creations in Christ, either by denying the sinfulness of fallen desires (such as, but not limited to, same sex attraction), or by denying the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, or by failing to pursue Spirit-empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions are not qualified for ordained office.”

It was approved on the floor of General Assembly by a substantial majority vote.

Many in our church and in our denomination are aware of the so-called “Revoice” conferences and the so-called “Side B” proponents. Much of that debate regarding Revoice and Side B regards the nature of sin and whether an unnatural attraction is sin which requires repentance. By passing Overture 23 to amend the BCO, the denomination made a strong statement against the Revoice or Side B proponents. I believe this was a significant and telling moment for the denomination and I believe that many of the Commissioners in attendance were there to make a statement about that particular issue.

Following the passage of Overture 23, the Assembly took up Overture 37. Overture 37 was brought before the Overtures Committee and it was amended by the Committee to make it a broad based list of items which every officer candidate, whether deacon, elder or candidate for the ministry coming before presbytery should be required to address. This Overture amends the BCO for both the examination of candidates for presbytery (BCO 21-4) and examination of officers by the session (BCO 24-1). It read as follows:

“In the examination of the candidate’s personal character, the presbytery shall give specific attention to potential notorious concerns, such as but not limited to relational sins, sexual immorality (including homosexuality, child sex abuse, fornication, and pornography), addictions, abusive behavior, racism, and financial mismanagement. Careful attention must be given to his practical struggle against sinful actions, as well as to persistent sinful desires. The candidate must give clear testimony of reliance upon his union with Christ and the benefits thereof by the Holy Spirit, depending on this work of grace to make progress over sin (Psalm 103:2-5, Romans 8:29) and to bear fruit (Psalm 1:3, Gal. 5:22-23). While imperfection will remain, he must not be known by reputation or self-profession according to his remaining sinfulness, but rather by the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 6:9-11). In order to maintain discretion and protect the honor of the pastoral office, Presbyteries are encouraged to appoint a committee to conduct detailed examinations of these matters and to give prayerful support to candidates.”

The BCO section on elders and deacons being examined before the session was very similar.

This Overture also had what is called a minority report. A minority of the members of the Overtures Committee may submit a minority report as a contrary proposal to General Assembly in response to the proposal by the majority. In this instance, the minority were upset about certain phrases in Overture 37 and the concern that they might be misconstrued or misused by a presbytery or church to exclude people who identify as gay or same sex attracted. Some of the concern expressed by the minority was that Overture 37’s amendments to the BCO might require candidates to be silent about these issues rather than being open and honest about them.

Overture 37 was passed out of Committee by approximately two-thirds to one-third vote. When it was brought to the floor, there was a strong statement in favor of it by a member of the Committee and there was an equally strong argument against it presented by the minority group.

Despite the minority opposition, the vote in General Assembly was in favor Overture 37 as proposed by the Overtures Committee.

Because Overture 23 and 37 are amendments to the Book of Church Order, two-thirds of the presbyteries must approve of the proposed changes to the Book of the Church Order in order for next year’s General Assembly to accept those changes by a simple majority. Thus, this is a long process and is far from being settled. However, I was encouraged by the substantial majorities in favor of these changes to the Book of Church Order. I think that indicates that the “grassroots” Presbyterians are generally conservative in outlook and not in favor of the “Revoice” or “Side B” proponents.

The other Overture that had a lot of discussion was Overture 48. Originally it, as well as two others, sought to address violence against Asians, whether by a statement or by a study committee. There was a general sense that study committees, like the recent one on sexuality, need to be focused on spiritual and doctrinal issues. Some rule changes were passed to help address that in the future.

The Overture Committee proposed the following language to the Assembly in Overture 48: “The report of the Ad Interim Committee on Racial and Ethnic Reconciliation to the 46th General Assembly speaks clearly both to the reality of the Imago Dei in all people and to the sin of racism, particularly when it affirms: a) the vision of the redeemed in Revelation 7:9-11, where all nations and ethnicities are fulfilled in Christ; b) the image of God is reflected in all people; and c) the image of Christ reflected in His body. (M46GA, Appendix V, but especially p. 599.) At the same time, we recognize the pain, and, at times, violence, that the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community has experienced, particularly due to events of the past year. We express our grief together with our AAPI brothers and sisters over the pain and suffering that has occurred, whether this has happened due to unbiblical religious claims, racist pride, or any other cause. We, finally, assure our AAPI brothers and sisters of our love and support, and of our desire to walk together in ways that reflect the commitments of the Racial Reconciliation Report.”

Unfortunately, this came before the Assembly as one of the last items on Thursday night and took us past midnight. This probably deserved more attention, as it became clear that this is a very serious issue for our Asian brothers and sisters. Several Korean pastors spoke about the fear in their congregations and communities. While the statement was welcomed and passed by a large majority, I suspect this may get some additional attention next year in Birmingham.

You can find video all of the worship services and the business meetings at this link:

<https://livestream.com/accounts/8521918/events/9731338?fbclid=IwAR1XHnHWTT_VJtWv8d1d6kMFdRa0Jv2wZnGLirbkawSGPFNQyYd_l0qs39U>

Your Commissioners, John Kinser, Justin Leslien, Elliott Everitt, Tony Rodriquez, Christopher Marks and I, enjoyed our time in St. Louis and were blessed to be part of the 2021 General Assembly.

Ruling Elder Jay Strickland