

# BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE **PRESBYTERY TOWN HALL MEETING** MARCH 10, 2012

## **PC-USA Historical Background**

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Historical Note on Mergers/Splits

1861 – the PCUS and the PCUSA split.

1958 – the UPCNA and the PCUSA formed the UPCUSA.

1973 – the PCA broke away from the PCUS. Key issues were confessional standards and a “coercive” polity. The PCA currently has 1800 congregations.

1981 – the EPC broke away from the UPCUSA. A key issue was the required ordination of women. The EPC has 300+ congregations.

1983 – the UPCUSA and the PCUS merged to form the PCUSA.

## **PC-USA Decline**

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Membership (UPCUSA and PCUS), 1967: **4,254,597**

Membership (PCUSA), 2010: **1,952,287**

- The PCUSA (both before and after “reunion”) has declined every year since 1967.
- In the 6 years of 2005-2010, the average annual loss rate was 2.6%. Presently we lose 175 Presbyterians a day.

Small churches less than 100 people account for 51% of the denomination.

Only 1500 of the 5439 small churches have an installed pastor / 40% of all churches have no installed pastor

The PCUSA began new congregations at an annual average of 20 in the last five years. In 2011, it was 12.

## **The Authority of Scripture & Confessions**

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The Book of Order *used* to say: “Insofar as Christ’s will for the Church is set forth in Scripture, it is to be obeyed.”

The New Form of Government (NFOG) *now* says: “Scripture teaches us of Christ’s will for the Church, which is to be obeyed.”

The Book of Order *used* to say: “Those who are called to office in the church are to *lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church*. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.” (Italics added)

In 2010, the General Assembly voted again to change this and presbyteries approved, 96-74. The NFOG *now* says: Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). *Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.*” (Italics added for comparison)

The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) in *Parnell* (April 2012) ruled that different interpretations of Scripture and the theological breadth of our confessions mean that no particular interpretation can be authoritative for the church. The responsibility to discern whether or not a candidate has departed from the “Essential Tenets of the Reformed Faith,” is left entirely up to the decision of the Presbytery, even when a candidate disagrees with Scripture and/or the Confessions.

## Salvation and Mission

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The NFOG opens with this line: “The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people.” As it stands, this presents salvation as a reality for all. At best, it is careless language; at worst, it introduces a different understanding of the mission of Christ and the church. Some call this a latent universalism.

The old Book of Order read: “The Church universal consists of all persons in every nation, together with their children, *who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live in a fellowship under his rule.*” The NFOG description of the men, women, and children who comprise the church has *deleted* the line, “who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.”

The old Book of Order read: “The Church is called to tell the good news of salvation by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ as the *only* Savior and Lord....” and “The Church is called to present the claims of Jesus Christ, leading persons to repentance, *acceptance* of him as Savior and Lord, and new life as his disciples.” (Italics added) But the NFOG reads: “In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God sends the Church into the world to share the gospel of God’s redemption of all things and people.”

The reference in the old Book of Order, which says “Jesus came to seek and to save the lost” (G-3.0102) is absent in the NFOG. Nowhere the in NFOG is Jesus Christ acknowledged as the “only Savior and Lord.”

## Membership and Governance

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The NFOG states, “In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism *regardless of . . . theological conviction.*” The former Book of Order acknowledged that we may have different theological perspectives “consistent with the Reformed tradition,” but no such limitation exists now.

The same paragraph of NFOG includes, “The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee *full participation* and representation in its worship, *governance*, and emerging life to *all persons* or groups within its membership.” This indicates that ordination to office is a right of membership without regard to one’s faith, manner of life, or giftedness, as the Scriptures teach. (Italics added)

## Reaction of the Global Church

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- In 2011, the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico voted to end its 139-year partnership with the PCUSA.
- The Independent Presbyterian Church of Brazil is questioning their partnership with the PCUSA.
- The Presbyterian Church in Ghana concluded its General Assembly in August 2011 with a communique that begins a “process” to “sever relationship with any partner church” that departs from Scriptural behavior.
- The African church is greatly concerned about the theological direction of the PC(USA).

## Principles of Presbyterian Polity (1758)

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That when any matter is determined by a majority vote, every member shall either

1. actively concur with or
2. passively submit to such determination;
3. or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism. Provided always that this shall be understood to extend only to such determination as the body shall judge indispensable in doctrine or Presbyterian government. (*New Form of Government Page 26*)

The question being asked now is how long is “*sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate?*”

# BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE 220<sup>th</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY

## **PRESBYTERY TOWN HALL MEETING**

JULY 28, 2012

### **Election of Moderator/Vice Moderator**

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On the fourth ballot, Rev. Dr. Neal Presa was elected Moderator of GA220. He is currently the senior pastor at Middlesex Presbyterian Church in Middlesex, New Jersey, and will begin teaching classes on preaching and worship at New Brunswick Theological Seminary this fall. Considerable controversy arose concerning the confirmation of Vice Moderator Rev. Tara Spuhler McCabe. On April 28, Rev. McCabe solemnized the marriage of two women in Washington DC, in violation of the PC(USA) Book of Order. She resigned the office on Wednesday, and Rev. Dr. Tom Trinidad (Senior Pastor at Faith Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, Colorado) was confirmed to take her place.

### **Mid-Councils Commission**

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The General Assembly declined to follow the recommendations of the Commission on Mid Councils the previous General Assembly established. This General Assembly voted not to allow the creation of non-geographic presbyteries not to allow the elimination of synods in the PC(USA). Other significant parts of the commission's recommendations were either rejected or given to a new administrative commission for further study and recommendation.

### **Divestment**

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The Mission Responsibility Through Investment committee of the PC(USA) brought to the General Assembly a recommendation to divest from three companies - Caterpillar, Hewlett Packard and Motorola Solutions – in protest of the use of their products by Israel in the new settlements. This issue had a lot of energy and commissioners heavily lobbied on both sides. In a very close vote of 333 to 331, the General Assembly voted not to approve the divestment but instead to call for ways to “positively invest” in the region. In a related item the General Assembly issued a call to boycott products produced by Israeli companies in the Occupied Territories (particularly AHAVA Dead Sea Laboratories beauty products and Hadiklaim dates).

### **Marriage and Civil Union**

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The General Assembly rejected a motion that would have re-affirmed the existing word of the Book of Order defining marriage between “a man and a woman.” Yet, shortly following this in a very close vote (308 to 338), the General Assembly defeated a motion to change the definition of marriage to be between “two people” instead of “between a man and a woman.” Also, the General Assembly turned down a request for Authoritative Interpretation that would have permitted ministers to perform marriages in States where it is permitted by State law. The Assembly did approve a two-year “season of serious study and discernment concerning the meaning of Christian marriage.”

### **Book of Confessions**

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The General Assembly voted to approve a new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism, which will include scripture citations. This will be sent for approval by presbyteries. The General Assembly also voted to send The Belhar Confession, back to the presbyteries for another vote. The Belhar Confession was defeated by the presbyteries last year. The reason most give for defeating The Belhar Confession last time is a concern that it elevates unity above theological conviction and contains words that will likely be used to discourage dissent. Since both the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belhar Confession would be in our Book of Confessions it requires a super-majority vote by presbyteries for approval.

## Ordination Standards

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By a vote of 437-169, the Assembly refused to restore “fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness” to the *Book of Order*. That language was removed a year ago in voting by the presbyteries. The defeated language would have added to G-2.0104b “the commitment to live a chaste and disciplined life, whether in holy marriage between a man and a woman or in single life.”

By a vote of 329-275 the Assembly voted to propose an amendment to the ordination standard in G-2.0104a that the manner of life of church officers should “include repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace.” This addition will go to presbyteries for their vote to approve.

The Assembly voted approval of the following resolution with a notable deletion/addition: “The 220th General Assembly (2012) acknowledges that faithful Presbyterians earnestly seeking to follow Jesus Christ hold different views about what the Scriptures teach concerning the morality of committed, same-gender relationships. Therefore, while holding persons in ordered ministry to high standards of covenant fidelity in the exercise of their sexuality, as in all aspects of life, we [~~decline to take an action that would have the effect of imposing on the whole~~] **acknowledge that the** Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) [**does not have**] one interpretation of Scripture in this matter. We commit ourselves to continue respectful dialogue with those who hold differing convictions, to welcome one another for God’s glory, and not to vilify those whose convictions we believe to be in error. We call on all Presbyterians to join us in this commitment.”

## Polity and Confessional Standards

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Based on a prior ruling of the Moderator on another matter, a commissioner moved the Moderator to rule the overture changing the definition of marriage out of order because it contradicted the Book of Confessions in three separate places. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) was asked to respond. Referencing the Book of Confessions (BOC) the ACC indicated that in its opinion the BOC was not a rule book but rather a collection of theological statements with internal conflicts. On the other hand the ACC, discussing the Book of Order (BoO) said, the BoO “...contains the standards by which we operate. We have been asked occasionally if it is necessary to amend the Book of Confessions in order to amend a similar provision in the Book of Order. The answer is no.” The ACC then ruled that the marriage Overture was not in conflict with the BOC even though it directly contradicted it. Based on this opinion the Stated Clerk advised the Moderator who ruled that it was not out of order. Another Commissioner challenged the ruling and sent it to a floor vote where the Assembly voted 70% to affirm the view of the ACC.

## Other Actions

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- Gradye Parsons was elected to a second term as Stated Clerk without opposition.
- A New hymnal, “Glory to God,” was approved for us in the denomination.
- Voted to challenge the denomination to establish 1001 new worshipping communities over the next 10 years.
- General Assembly asked the Board of Pensions to consider sharing its benefits program with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians as well as other possible partners.
- General Assembly directed the Committee on the Office of General Assembly to study presbyteries’ ability to pay obligatory per capita funds;
- The General Assembly approved a statement that corporal punishment is never appropriate in the discipline of children-neither in the classroom nor by parents.
- General Assembly approved a resolution encouraging participation in the Words Matter project of the WCC, an offshoot of the 1993’s “Re-Imagining” campaign, which among other ideals seeks to extricate “Lordship” language from denominational theology and worship due to its masculine/dominating connotations.
- The General Assembly did not take any action in response to the Presbytery of the Redwoods’ refusal to follow the order from the GAPJC to rebuke Jane Spahr (for performing same-sex ceremonies).
- The General Assembly refused to take any action to amend the opening sentences of the new Form Of Government which many believe supports a theology of universal salvation.

# BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF PRESBYTERIANS / ECO SUMMER 2012

## Fellowship Beginnings

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### The White Paper

The publication of the "White Paper" on January 7, 2011 written by 7 pastors in large congregations in the PC-USA followed by the publication of an open letter to the PC-USA on February 2, 2011. What did these papers say? **The PC-USA is "deathly ill."**

*Thesis: We believe we will not survive without drastic intervention. We are ready to do something different, TO THRIVE as the Body of Christ. We call others of like mind to envision a new future for congregations who share our Presbyterian, Reformed, Evangelical heritage. If the denomination has the ability and will to move in this new direction, we will rejoice. Regardless, a group of us will change course, forming a new way for our congregations to relate.*

## Fellowship Mission / Values

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Mission: To build flourishing churches that make disciples of Jesus Christ

### Passions for Mission

1. A clear, concise theological core to which we subscribe, within classic biblical, Reformed/Evangelical traditions, and a pledge to live according to those beliefs, regardless of cultural pressures to conform;
2. A commitment to nurture leadership in local congregations, which we believe is a primary expression of the Kingdom of God. We will identify, develop, and train a new generation of leaders – clergy and laity;
3. A passion to share in the larger mission of the people of God around the world, especially among the least, the lost, and the left behind;
4. A dream of multiplying healthy, missional communities throughout North America;
5. A pattern of fellowship reflecting the realities of our scattered life and joint mission, with regular gatherings locally, regionally, and nationally to excite our ability to dream together.

### Organization for Mission

1. A minimalist structure, replacing bureaucracy with relational networks of common purpose;
2. Property and assets under stewardship of the local Session. Dues/Gifts for common administration should only allow and enable continued affiliation among these congregations;
3. Rather than large institutions, joint ventures with specialized ministries as congregations deem helpful PC(USA) World Mission may be a source of joint support, aspects of the Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Foundation, Presbyterian Global Fellowship, Presbyterians for Renewal conferences, Outreach Foundation, etc.;
4. An atmosphere of support for congregations both within and outside of the PC(USA).

## Fellowship Options

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TIER 1: Remain in prophetically but go "Missional" (232 pastors, 184 churches so far)

- 100 % PC(USA), Support and Nurture through the Fellowship

TIER 2: Become a Union Congregation (or Presbytery)

- Requires 75% vote of Congregation (or Presbytery), Requires approval of Presbytery (or Synod)
- Dual Citizenship in PC(USA) and ECO, Both Constitutions would apply, logistics to work out

TIER 3: Dismissal into the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians (157 pastors and 93 churches so far)

- Requires 75% vote of the Congregation (approval of Presbytery's Gracious Dismissal Policy)

*Annual gatherings and regional meetings of the Fellowship would include those in ECO as well as those affiliated with the Fellowship*

## Fellowship Foundation Documents

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### Fellowship Covenant

Signing of The Fellowship Covenant is required of all who would be members (pastors and/or churches) of the Fellowship and for all who would be members (pastors and/or churches) of the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians.

### Theology Project

The Theology Project is a document consisting of three parts that outlines the theological core of the Fellowship of Presbyterians. “Three things are necessary for the theological work of the church to flourish and in return for theology to help the church to flourish – adoption of theological confession with utmost sincerity, articulation of the confession with great clarity, and forming structures that sustain those convictions.”

## Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO)

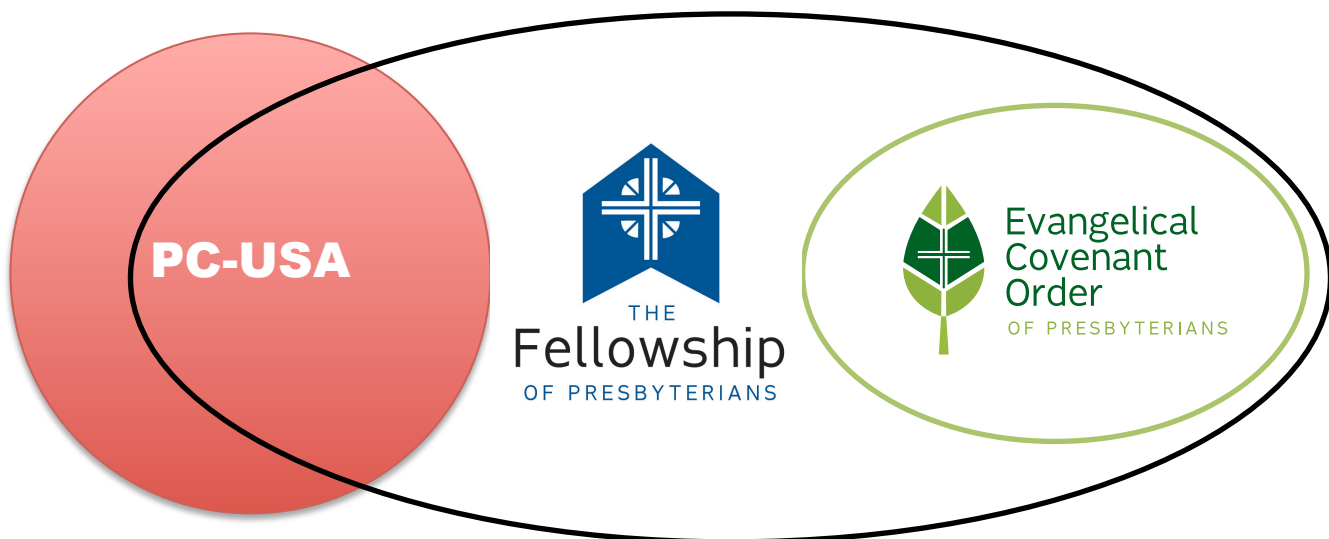
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### Characteristics of ECO Polity

1. Defined core theology and behavioral expectations.
2. ECO is concerned with ecclesiastical matters and therefore property is not held in trust.
3. Voting is done in parity at all levels and only when people are connected with a local congregation.
4. Church is redefined.
5. Elders and deacons can be deployed for greater ministry
6. Emphasis on the role of members as covenant partners
7. Greater local flexibility – Deacons, Elders and Pastors
8. Presbyteries also have greater freedom
9. Missional Affinity Network
10. Accountability, support, and encouragement
11. Flatter structure with an emphasis on God’s work within the local congregation

### ECO specifics

- ECO is accepting applications from pastors and churches.
- Member churches of ECO will contribute 1% of Annual Budget to its mission
- ECO has a Medical Plan & Retirement/Pensions specifics available for research





A PASTORAL LETTER FROM  
**PRESBYTERIANS FOR RENEWAL (PFR)**  
FOLLOWING THE 2012 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

WRITTEN BY PFR  
WEDNESDAY, 11 JULY 2012 13:05

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you from God our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ.

If General Assemblies were evaluated strictly on the basis of actions taken, the 220th GA in Pittsburgh might be seen as one of the more “moderate” in the past decade. From start to finish, however, this Assembly proved the PC(USA) has entered a new and alarming chapter in its history with sufficient momentum to continue on this current trajectory into the foreseeable future. As more than one member of the PFR GA Team sorrowfully observed, “I don’t know this denomination anymore.”

For now at least, this new territory can be defined more clearly by ethos than by action. There was no PUP Report coming out of this Assembly, no radical revisions to the constitution that will be debated in presbyteries this year; there were no floor demonstrations, no protests, not even a street wedding. In the most controversial areas, the majority of commissioners backed away from aggressive action:

- A well-orchestrated and emotionally charged attempt to demand US corporate divestment in the State of Israel failed, as did the far more provocative attempt to characterize actions of Israel as a form of apartheid.
- Institutional preservationists turned out in droves to ensure that any remaining vitality in the report of the Mid-Councils Administrative Commission was removed—self-preservation trumping vision, mission, and even common sense.
- A new translation of the Heidelberg Catechism was approved, bringing the PC(USA) in line with other members of the Reformed family. That is a very good thing. But by vote of the same committee, Belhar is back for reconsideration despite rejection by the presbyteries just one year ago.
- In the most hotly contested issue before this Assembly, the redefinition of marriage by Authoritative Interpretation, constitutional change, or both, was ultimately repurposed into two years of additional study guided by resources from the Office of Theology and Worship.

PFR will be offering more in-depth analyses of these and other actions.

But the real story of the 220th General Assembly was not in vote counts. From the liturgical draping of the cross in rainbow stoles during opening worship to the soap opera surrounding the vice moderatorial election, from commissioners openly challenging one another to greater defiance of our polity and Confessions to several instances of agenda-driven preaching, it was abundantly clear that, no matter what our constitution might say, an increasing number of ordained Presbyterians will behave as they see fit. Any bridge remaining over the gaping divides in the PC(USA) would appear to be scheduled for demolition by the hubris of the Left, even as the rhetoric of “unity” and repeated moderatorial attempts at collegial interaction punctuated the docket.

Of almost equal concern was a pervasive atmosphere of “summer camp” at this meeting of the largest Presbyterian body in North America. Simple decorum befitting the Body of Christ joined biblical faithfulness and ecumenical sensitivity as seemingly disposable accessories.

Throughout this Assembly, many members of the General Assembly Mission Council staff (now known as the Presbyterian Mission Agency staff) seemed concerned over the actions and attitudes of the Body. Hunter Farrell, Director of World Mission warned commissioners of the impact a change in the definition of marriage would have on global partnerships. Other positive GAMC initiatives like the establishment of 1001 new worshipping communities in the next decade offer hope. But these efforts may face an uphill climb. Many faithful people are working at various levels of our denominational structure and need support and prayer as they continue Christ-honoring ministry within an increasingly unstable environment.

Now that the 220th General Assembly is history, what clarity has been gained? The “official” teaching on marriage has not changed, but it appears that neither will it be upheld. We lost a unique opportunity for thoughtful and creative presbytery and synod restructuring that would have gone a long way toward rebuilding trust and unity across the theological divides. Instead, we remain saddled with an outdated bureaucracy that will increasingly cripple presbyteries, frustrate visionaries, and undermine effective ministry. And, once again, we must live with the embarrassment of loudly debating things we do not begin to understand in the Middle East.

What is clear is the determination of the Left to press their ideological agenda with disregard for both the constitution of the PC(USA) and the collateral damage their actions are causing to individuals, congregations, presbyteries, and our witness within the global Church.

What message has this Assembly sent to congregations in discernment about their continued affiliation with the PC(USA)? Realistically, there is little hope for any dramatic change or reversal of denominational direction in the near future. To quote a popular expression, “It is what it is.” The PC(USA) “train” has left the “station” of orthodoxy and is headed into an undefined future where, seemingly, anything is possible. Individuals and congregations who are skittish about the risks and challenges of transferring their affiliation to a different denomination must understand that continuing on with the PC(USA) is not for the faint of heart either. In the decision of affiliation there is no *status quo*—there is no easy path. The only question is where is God calling you to engage in ministry?

Those who choose to remain in the PC(USA) will clearly be a “mission of presence and witness” characterized by “...Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” We will need these gifts in abundance, as well as intentional biblical accountability with one another and with trusted brothers and sisters beyond the PC(USA), if we are going to live well into this call. It seems clear that ours will be a voice of increasing opposition to denominational statements and trends. If nothing else, this Assembly confirmed the unique role of The Fellowship of Presbyterians in maintaining the unity and integrity of an evangelical and Reformed witness across denominational lines.

But there remains a clear and unique role for PFR in this increasingly foreign mission field of the PC(USA). The networks and opportunities we can offer to the most vulnerable orthodox Presbyterians, small membership congregations as well as evangelical women in leadership and seminarians, are more crucial now than ever before. It is also incumbent upon PFR to avoid making similar mistakes to those we saw in Pittsburgh. We must be willing to restructure and even risk the future of the “organization” in order to strengthen and ensure the effectiveness of the ministry we can offer.

Finally, we all must be crystal clear in our focus on Jesus Christ as he is revealed in Scripture and in our commitment to proclaiming the good news of Christ with confidence and unshakable joy. “Rejoice in the Lord always... Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

*Philippians 4:4-7*