

Actions of the 36th General Assembly

L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk, PCA

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America met in Dallas, Texas, June 10-12, 2008, hosted by North Texas Presbytery. A total of 1,185 commissioners attended, of which 881 were Teaching Elders and 304 were Ruling Elders. The assembly included ministry related seminars Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday that were well received and well attended. In addition to hearing annual reports from the ten Committees and Agencies, the assembly elected members of Committees and Agencies and acted upon overtures received from presbyteries.

TE Paul D. Kooistra Elected Moderator

Dr. Paul David Kooistra, Coordinator of Mission to the World, the international mission agency of the PCA, was elected as moderator on the first ballot. Other candidates were Dr. Tom Kay, Jr. and Dr. O. Palmer Robertson. Dr. Kooistra previously served as a staff minister in several churches, a professor at Belhaven College and Reformed Theological Seminary, and as president of Covenant Theological Seminary. He is a graduate of the University of Minnesota (B.A.), Columbia Theological Seminary (M.Div.), and the University of Alabama (Ph.D.). He and his late wife, Jan, (who went to be the Lord in April, 2008) are the parents of three children and seven grandchildren. Under his leadership, both CTS and MTW have experienced significant growth and progress. His recurring emphasis was that the Church is the family of God. That perspective was evident as he presided over the assembly with grace, humility, and good humor.

Interchurch Relations

- Approved the admission of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches and the Presbyterian and Reformed Church into the North America Presbyterian and Reformed Council.
- Approved the establishment of corresponding relations with the Presbyterian Church of Brazil and the Reformed Church of South Africa.

Deaconess Discussion

A major issue at this year's assembly was women's roles in local church ministries of mercy.¹ The present PCA *Book of Church Order* does not allow for women to be ordained as deacons but does allow for Sessions to appoint godly women to assist the male diaconate in mercy ministry (BCO 9-7). Some PCA churches call such women "deaconesses" to describe their function and some do not. Also, some PCA churches publically "commission" such women, but do not ordain them. There have been differences regarding the nature or necessity of

¹ Coming out the 16th Reformation there have been several practices regarding women's service in the Church doing mercy ministries in light of several New Testament passages and historical references from the history of the Early Church. Some Reformed/Presbyterian Churches had unordained women who were authorized by the church to work with the male deacons (see Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV., Ch. III, § 9 regarding the Reformed Church at Geneva), some conservative denominations have ordained deaconesses (e.g. The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America which has had women deacons almost 200 years) since it is not an office of the exercise of discipline, and still other denominations have neither ordained or unordained female deacons. One of the PCA's antecedent denominations, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod came very close to ordaining deaconesses shortly before the RPCES was received into the PCA in 1982. There have been differences in perspectives regarding the nature or necessity of ordination and the distinction between ordination and commissioning.

ordination and the distinction between ordination and commissioning. As candidates for ordination in the PCA have indicated that they differ with the PCA's present policy on deaconesses, as more churches have sought to involve women in mercy ministries, and as some churches have chosen not to ordain either men or women for diaconal ministry, the issue has come to the attention of the General Assembly by several overtures and a judicial complaint. The complaint (Case 2008-1, Session of Crossroads Community Church v. Philadelphia Presbytery) is before the Standing Judicial Commission. Overtures from several Presbyteries asked the General Assembly to take action on the issue:

- Philadelphia Presbytery (Overture 9) [seconded by Overture 15 from Western Canada, and Communication 2 from Northern California Presbytery] asked for the assembly to form a study committee to study the biblical evidence concerning the role of women in mercy ministries.
- Rocky Mountain Presbytery (Overture 17) then asked the assembly to expand the scope of the proposed study committee to include all matters regarding establishing guidelines where women may serve in the Church whether ordained or unordained.
- Central Georgia Presbytery (Overture 19) expressed the opinion that a study committee should not be formed and additionally asserted that "commissioning" people to do diaconal ministry is unwarranted.

The Overtures' Committee (OC) Majority Report was that no study committee be formed (as proposed in either Overture 9 or 17). A Minority Report, submitted by about 40% of the members of the OC, asked that there be a study committee on the women's roles in diaconal ministry only (Overture 9), providing biblical and historical evidence as well as pastoral advice. The proposed committee was to include scholars representing a range of opinion. After the longest discussion of any issue at the assembly, the Minority Report requesting a study committee was not adopted and the Majority Report was adopted by a margin of about 60% to 40% of those present and voting. Overture 19 from Central Georgia was answered by referring to the assembly's action on Overture 9. The Majority Report advised Presbyteries to send up specific BCO amendment proposals (BCO 26-2) or references (BCO 41) to the General Assembly.² [For some helpful historical sources see <http://www.pcahistory.org>.]

Other Overtures

In other actions the General Assembly:

- Agreed to send to Presbyteries a proposed amendment to BCO 57-5 to reword membership vows as requested by the Presbytery of the Blue Ridge (Overture 4).
- Approved a tribute to TE Wm. B. Leonard, Jr. and a memorial to the late RE Robert C. Cannada, Sr.
- Approved the division of Evangel Presbytery to form an additional Presbytery to be named North Alabama Presbytery (or some other name that suites its members). **The new Presbytery will be the PCA's 77th Presbytery.**

² It should be noted that the discussion centered on diaconal work (mercy ministries), *not* on the office of Elder. In a Presbyterian system of Church Polity Elders (both Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders) govern the Church (BCO 1-5; 1-7; 4-3; 12-1; 13-1; 14-1). Deacons do not govern the Church (BCO 7-2) but have an office "of sympathy and service" (BCO 9-1) that is exercised under the supervision and authority of the Session (BCO 9-2). BCO 9-7 states, "It is often expedient that the Session of a church select and appoint godly women of the congregation to assist the deacons. . ." A local church must have at least two Elders to be organized by Presbytery as a particular church (BCO 5-9) but is not absolutely required to have deacons (BCO 5-9; 9-2).

- Approved amendments to the Rules of Assembly Operations (RAO 14-6 k.; 14-9 g.; 15-9 e.; 14-9 e.; 15-8 c.) to expedite business.
- Revised the boundaries of Northwest Georgia, Tennessee Valley, Piedmont Triad, and Western Carolina Presbyteries at their requests.

Standing Judicial Commission

All judicial matters that come before the General Assembly are committed to the Standing Judicial Commission of the assembly (SJC). The SJC reported that it had received nineteen cases since the last General Assembly, twelve of which had been handled by the time of the meeting of the assembly with seven still in process. In an historic and solemn occurrence, the SJC reported that it had conducted a trial March 6, 2008 against Louisiana Presbytery (Case 2007-14)³ having indicted the Presbytery for failure to find a strong presumption of guilt in the theological views of one of its ministers TE J. Stephen Wilkins.⁴ The Presbytery pled guilty to that charge and the SJC imposed the censure of admonition to the Presbytery. In the presence of the assembly, the Moderator, Paul Kooistra, formally administered the admonition with Dr. James Jones representing the presbytery.

PCA Growth

The PCA has grown to a reported membership of 342,041, with 1,666 churches (including mission churches) in seventy-six Presbyteries. Eighteen churches were added to the denomination in 2007. Over 10,200 professions of faith were reported. MTW has 594 long-term missionaries, 136 two-year missionaries, 342 interns, and sent out 6,006 people on short-term mission trips in 2007. MTW now works with 584 national partners. MNA reported that the PCA placed 53 church planters in 2007. There are now 172 PCA-endorsed chaplains, many of whom served in the Iraq-Afghanistan war zones in 2007. Reformed University Ministries (RUM) now works on 117 campuses in the USA. Seven new campus ministries were added in 2007; seven more are slated for 2008. Covenant College reported an enrollment of 1,343 students in 2007 with a new residence hall and a new academic building now being used. Covenant Theological Seminary also reported record enrollments with students coming from 46 states and 21 countries. CTS is on track to complete its \$25 Million Capital Funds Campaign in December 2008. The Administrative Committee reported that *byFaith* magazine has won the First Place Award from the Evangelical Press Association for the Best Denominational Magazine in America for the second time in three years. CE&P reported that they conducted WIC Leadership, Directors of Women's Ministries, Youth World Awareness, and Equip leadership training conferences over the past year. CE&P is developing alternative electronic training applications that will assist local churches. PCA Foundation reported asset growth to \$51.7 million with ministry disbursements of \$9,594,000. PCA Retirement & Benefits, Inc., reported asset growth to a record \$318.6 million, with \$301,934 disbursed in Ministerial Relief.

³ BCO 40-6 provides that a Session or Presbytery as a body may be tried in a manner similar to that of an individual. That has not been done in American Presbyterianism since the 1830s, however.

⁴ The issue of so-called "Federal Vision Theology" a.k.a. "Auburn Avenue Theology" has been before the assembly in five instances in the last two years, A Memorial from Central Carolina Presbytery (Case 2006-2), an overture from Suncoast Presbytery (Overture 22, 2006), a Complaint (Case 2007-8, TE James Jones et. altera v. Louisiana Presbytery), an ad interim study committee on Federal Vision Theology and New Perspectives on Paul appointed by the 34th General Assembly and reported to the 35th General Assembly, and finally, Case 2007-14, the PCA v. Louisiana Presbytery. Mr. Wilkins left the PCA for the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches before proceedings against him could begin.

Ridge Haven Conference Center Dilemma

Though Committee and Agency annual reports to the assembly are usually upbeat, this year's RH report was quite serious. RH Administrator, Mo Up De Graff, reported that Ridge Haven is facing difficult circumstances with a combination of a financial shortfall, a decline in camper registrations, deferred maintenance, a large-group cancellation, a depletion of financial reserves, and staff turn-overs. Camp fees have been raised and staff salaries have been reduced in order to deal with the difficulties. A survey was conducted among the assembly commissioners to gauge their opinions about the future options for Ridge Haven. A recommendation from the RH Committee of Commissioners was approved that the General Assembly direct the Cooperative Ministries Committee to make an evaluation of Ridge Haven's situation and make recommendations to the RH Board that will be reported to the 37th General Assembly (RAO 7-3). The assembly asked that churches give to help cover Ridge Haven's Water and Sewer Upgrades (\$184,354.09) mandated by the State of North Carolina.

Book of Church Order Changes

- An amendment to the BCO 12-1 and 12-2 to Change Quorum Requirements for Session meetings was approved by Presbyteries and given final approval by the General Assembly (BCO 26-3) and is now in effect.
- A proposed amendment to BCO 57-5 to reword membership vows was given initial approval and sent down to Presbyteries for a vote (BCO 26-3).

Special Days, Offerings and Events Recommended for PCA Churches

- September 14, Seniors Ministry (Grandparents and Senior Citizens Day) (CE&P).
- October 2008, a Month of Prayer for Global Missions (MTW).
- October 12, 2008, Covenant College Sunday. Prayer for CC.
- The 2009 Women in the Church Offering is for the AC/SC.
- A special offering for MTW Compassion Ministry to be taken in 2008, date set by Sessions.
- November 9, 2008 A Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church Worldwide (MTW).
- November 2008, Thanksgiving Offering for MNA Urban and Mercy Ministries.
- December 2008, Offering for Ministerial Relief (PCA-RBI).
- February 15, 2009, Ridge Haven Sunday, Day of Prayer.
- May 4-10, 2008, Week of Prayer coordinated by CE&P.
- **The 37th General Assembly will convene June 15, 2009, in Orlando, Florida.**

A Word of Thanks and Request

The Administrative Committee/Office of the Stated Clerk provides the administrative services and legal structure for the PCA to minister cooperatively as a denomination. All churches, presbyteries, and denominational ministries benefit from the ministry of the AC/SC. Therefore, we request that all PCA churches consider supporting the AC/SC through the *per capita* giving of Partnership Shares or *proportional* giving (for example, one-half of one percent of local church offerings). **We appreciate your support for this needful ministry.**

L. Roy Taylor, Stated Clerk PCA