

***How things have changed, are changing and a forecast of what's ahead  
in the Presbyterian Church (USA)  
updated September 2013; edited by Carmen Fowler LaBerge  
Presbyterian Lay Committee***

Note: This presentation will avoid references to individuals and to unofficial groups, sizable though they might be, in order to focus on statements and policies of the General Assembly, its commissioners and agencies.

**Membership losses**

Membership (UPCUSA and PCUS) 1967: **4,254,597**  
Membership (PCUSA), 2012: **1,849,496**

The PCUSA (both before and after “reunion”) has declined every year since 1967.

Recent yearly declines:

2012:	102,791 members or 5.26% (incl. >100 congregations)
2011:	63,804 members or 3.2% (incl. 96 congregations)
2010:	61,047
2009:	63,027
2008:	69,381

Visit <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/research/statistics-reports-and-articles/> for direct access to PCUSA research services documents and reports.

Looking at [Table 1](#) of the 2011 Comparative Statistical report (latest year available), the PCUSA was steadily declining by about 60,000 members per year. At that loss rate, the PCUSA would cease to exist in 32.5 years. If the 2012 losses of >100,000 were not an anomaly but portend of an accelerated decline, the viable timeline shortens. However, we all know Presbyterians who will most certainly still be around in 32 years, so it's not quite that simple.

In 2011 the PCUSA's membership fell for the first time below 2 million (1,972,287). In 2012 it fell to 1,849,496 and will likely be 1.5 million by the 2016 General Assembly. That estimate is reached by taking into account three factors: church closures, church dismissals and disaffiliations, and the non-membership nature of new worshipping communities who use the metric of participation, not membership.

Table 1 of the Comparative Statistics exposes the reality of shrinking congregations. Years 2012 through 2016 have been added as a projection of the ten year trend of the average size of a PCUSA congregation contracting by 2-3 members/year.

# of members Per congregation	2001	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Median	117	115	111	109	107	105	103	100	97	95	93	90	88	85	83	81
Mean	226	221	217	214	212	208	204	199	195	191	187	183	179	175	171	167

In addition to the struggle of congregations, presbyteries are struggling as well. Some presbyteries are graciously dismissing churches to both the EPC and ECO. Other presbyteries are choosing instead to tenaciously defend the denomination's implied trust over all local church assets. Since 2007 the Presbyterian Lay Committee has documented information about the realignment of 337 churches with 150,000 members. This does not include those Presbyterians who have "walked away" to form or join other congregations.

An updated chart is available at: <http://www.layman.org/discern/faqs-and-urgent-issues/>

Combining the trends of church closures, denominational departures and congregational decline, a realistic projection of 1,447,639 members at the end of 2016 is warranted.\* The PCUSA will likely enter 2017 with roughly 8,000 congregations with an average membership of 167 and total denominational membership under 1.5 million.

(\*Assuming very conservative estimates that each presbytery closes an average of 1.5 churches per year, another 100 churches per year are dismissed or disaffiliate, and churches continue to decline in overall membership at the 10 year trend rate.)

For more information about PCUSA demographics check out:

<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/snapshot-presbyterians-powerpoint-presented-ga-201/>

To combat the psychological downer of these annual reports, some suggest that the denomination find a different metric than membership. But as one pastor once said, "Numbers matter to me because people matter to God." Let us not forget that the early church viewed numeric growth as a sign of the Lord's hand of favor. Acts 11:21 says, "The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." In Acts 2:42-47 we catch a glimpse into the life of the early church, concluding with the affirmation that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

### *Big churches*

[Table 6](#) of the report is worth a look. Of the 15 largest congregations, two have been dismissed, a third is seeking dismissal and a fourth is actively in discernment.

#6 First Houston, TX is in a season of discernment

#10 Menlo Park, CA is seeking dismissal to ECO

#14 First Colorado Springs, CO has been dismissed to ECO

#15 First Orlando, FL has been dismissed to the EPC.

Drilling down a little further into the list:

#16 First Greenville, SC has been dismissed to ECO

#39 Eastminster Wichita, KS has been dismissed to the EPC

#60 Danville Community, CA has been dismissed to the EPC

#74 First Edmond, OK has been dismissed to ECO

#82 Chapel Hill in Gig Harbor, WA has been dismissed to the EPC

#85 First Kingwood, TX is seeking dismissal

Why are individual members and entire congregations seeking fellowship in other expressions of the Church and severing ties with the PCUSA?

**DEGRADING OF THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE: once our sole authority, now subordinated to conscience**

**In General**

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." (G-1.0100c) The New Form of Government (NFOG) *now* says: "Scripture teaches us of Christ's will for the Church, which is to be obeyed." (F-1.0203) It is now "Christ's will" which is to be obeyed, in distinction to "Scripture." This may seem like splitting hairs, but the implication is that there's a hierarchy of authority, and that Christ's will trumps the Scriptures.

Any question whether there is significance to the distinction mentioned above was removed at the 220th General Assembly, where commissioners were heard repeatedly saying that we must not require "obedience to Scripture," after all, who knows how some might interpret it? One overture, from Kiskiminetas, asked to include the phrase "under the authority of Scripture" in the Book of Order. Another, from Wyoming, wanted officers to be willing "to lead a life in obedience to Scripture." These were overwhelmingly rejected. In addition, references to Scripture were given no weight, were not wrestled with, were in fact ignored.

The General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) in *Parnell* (April, 2012) ruled that different interpretations of Scripture mean that no particular interpretation can be authoritative for the church. The responsibility to discern the truth and to adhere to Scripture is thereby eroded. All interpretations are treated as being on the same level. No allowance is made for faulty hermeneutics; no passion is exhibited for the truth. The church is forced to order its life according to the lowest common denominator.

## In Particular

The above referenced erosion of the authority of Scripture has multiple consequences.

### Concerning Salvation and Mission

The 2008 General Assembly modified a report which acknowledged that Jews, Christians, and Muslims worship a “common God.” Even so, the Assembly approved a call “*To encourage congregations of these faiths to celebrate religious holidays together, setting aside days of worship during which there can be congregational suppers, and dialogue groups.*”

Such a call, to celebrate religious holidays together and days of worship, seems careless at best. It fails to grasp what the Scriptures teach of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, the wonder of his work, and the glory of his mission. That Christians should mingle in the holidays and days of worship of Muslims shows a disregard for their faith and our faith.

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.” (F-1.01) As it stands, this seems to present 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 NFOG description of the men, women, and children who comprise the church (G-1.0102) has *deleted* the line, “who profess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,” which is in the former Book of Order at G-4.0101 and G-4.0103. The former BOO 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.*” (Old Book of Order, G-4.0101 and 4.0103) The new BOO reads, “The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presupposes the fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ.” (G-1.0102) Standing alone, this last statement isn't bad -- but changes mean something.

The old Book of Order read, “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.” (G-3.0300b) (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.” (F-1.0302d) The necessity of a response of faith is now absent, though the Scriptures make it plain (“For by grace are you saved through faith....” Ephesians 2:8). The question is **why** delete these references to professing faith in Jesus, or the need to accept Jesus? Again, changes mean something.

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....” (G-3.0300a). There is no reference in NFOG to Jesus Christ as the “only Savior and Lord.”

The old Book of Order read, that “Jesus came to seek and to save the lost” (G-3.0102). This statement is absent from the NFOG.

### Concerning Membership and Governance

The NFOG states, “In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of . . . theological conviction.” (F-1.0403) Regardless of theological conviction?? The former Book of Order acknowledged that we may have different theological perspectives “consistent with the Reformed tradition” (G-4.0403), but no such limitation exists now. Again, adherence to the Scriptures seems to be discounted.

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)

NOTE: An overture to the 220th General Assembly from the Presbytery of Mississippi to amend the above paragraph and specify that participation in membership and governance is for “all believers” failed in committee on a vote of 4-40, and failed in the Assembly plenary on a voice vote!

### Concerning Ethics and Discipline

In 2006, the General Assembly meeting in Birmingham, AL, adopted the report on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, which allows governing bodies to decide for themselves whether particular candidates for ordination must adhere to the biblical and constitutional standard of living either in fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. The concern about this action is that it endorsed disobedience to Scripture.

In 2008, the General Assembly acted to declare that the Definitive Guidance of 1978 and the Authoritative Interpretation of 1993 are null and void. “Interpretive statements concerning ordained service of homosexual church members by the 190<sup>th</sup> General Assembly ...and all subsequent affirmations thereof, have no further force or effect.” This Assembly also voted to amend the Book of Order regarding ordination standards (failed in the presbyteries, 78-95). The concern is that these General Assembly actions disregard biblical teaching.

In 2010, the General Assembly voted again to change the ordination standards of the Book of Order and issued what became Amendment 10-A (to delete the requirement of “fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness”). That amendment *passed* in the presbyteries, 96-74. That same Assembly urged the Board of Pensions to extend medical and pension benefits to same-sex domestic partners of covered members of the plan. That same Assembly narrowly defeated an effort

to amend the Book of Order by redefining marriage as a relationship between any two persons (the vote was 324-348).

NOTE: Efforts at the 220th General Assembly to restore biblical ordination standards or to ensure relief of conscience to those aggrieved by the actions of the 219th General Assembly and the Board of Pensions, *were all defeated*.

The 220th General Assembly forwarded to the 173 presbyteries for their affirmative or negative vote 11 proposed amendments to the denomination's constitutional documents. A majority of presbyteries accepted the proposal to replace the Heidelberg catechism with a new translation. A majority also accepted the requirement that any presbytery sending an overture to the 221st GA must now secure a second presbytery's concurrence. [Everything passed, except](#) the amendment that would require those being ordained to repent of sin and make diligent use of the means of grace.

Only amendment 12-B which sought to clarify the ordination standards of the denomination was voted down by majority of presbyteries in the PCUSA. The current language of the *Book of Order* says that the life of the ordained "should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world." The amendment would have added a new sentence: "This includes repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace."

What we choose to change and what we choose not to change says much about our mutual beliefs and expectations. What does it say about the PCUSA that a majority of presbyteries are willing to limit the minority voice of one presbytery by requiring concurrences for every overture but placing no limits on the business that might be generated by denominational agencies, entities and advocacy committees? What does it say about the PCUSA that a majority of presbyters voting in a majority of presbyteries do not believe that those being ordained should live lives marked by "repentance of sin and diligent use of the means of grace?"

A recent commentary by presbytery Stated Clerk Ed Koster is worth reading on the subject the degrading of discipline: <http://pres-outlook.org/opinion3/guest-commentary3/18553-descent-into-a-pickle.html>

### **DEGRADING OF THE CONFESSIONS: Part I of the Constitution of the PCUSA**

A major concern is that the Confessions of the church have been reduced to the status of museum pieces. A major step in this direction was taken in the *Parnell* decision referenced above. The Confessions were referenced along with Scripture as having no binding effect on the church wherever any difference can be found (and even where no difference is found).

An overture to the 220th General Assembly from the Stockton Presbytery would have used language from the Heidelberg Catechism to speak of the kind of life expected of officers of the church ("to live chaste and disciplined lives"). This simple overture, rooted in the Confessions, received no serious consideration in committee, was defeated in

committee by a vote of 13-36-2, and was defeated on a voice vote in the Assembly plenary (again, without serious consideration).

A commissioner to the 220th General Assembly asked on the plenary floor whether a proposal to change the definition of marriage should be ruled out of order since it is in conflict with several Confessions of the church (Westminster, Second Helvetic, Confession of '67). The Chair of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution opined that the Book of Confessions cannot be taken as binding on the life of the church and advised that the motion was not out of order. The Stated Clerk then echoed that advice, and the Moderator ruled that the motion was not out of order. The failure of the motion to redefine marriage on a vote of 308-338 was a surprise to all and offers no encouragement to commissioners grieved that the Confessions have been relegated to irrelevance.

### **DEGRADING OF THE BOOK OF ORDER: Part II of the Constitution of the PCUSA**

A candidate for Vice-Moderator of the 220th General Assembly was revealed as having violated the Constitution of the church by performing a wedding service for two women in Washington, D.C. The candidate for Moderator, who had nominated his Vice-Moderator, supported her continued candidacy. The Assembly elected them both.

The Book of Order thus seems to have binding power only when some wish it to have such authority and to be relegated to irrelevancy whenever folks wish to ignore it. It is not only ever-changing, but selectively applied even when it is clear.

Scripture has been eroded. The Confessions have been eroded. The Book of Order has been eroded.

The Moderator of the General Assembly, Neal Presa, has posted a video to discuss this concern: <http://pres-outlook.org/news-and-analysis/presbyterian-news-service/18133-breaking-news-nature-of-confessions-in-the-reformed-tradition-for-the-pcusa-a-video-discussion-by-neal-d-presa.html>

*All of the above have left many asking the question, "What does it mean to be Presbyterian (PCUSA) anymore?" -- which might lead one into a conversation about the essentials...*

### **DENIAL OF RELIEF OF CONSCIENCE**

In a variety of ways, numerous overtures to the 220th General Assembly sought to ensure relief of conscience to congregations and presbyteries that find themselves aggrieved by the changing positions of the PCUSA. These overtures were in the following areas:

-- Presbytery boundaries. These proposals would have given congregations opportunities to order their lives and mission together with like-minded congregations.

-- Board of Pensions coverage for abortions. An overture from the Presbytery of Washington asked for the option of a health plan that would not cover abortion except in case of a threat to the life of the mother.

-- Board of Pensions coverage for same-gender domestic partners. An overture from the Stockton Presbytery asked for the option of a separate benefits plan that would not provide this coverage for congregations that object to it.

All of these proposals were soundly defeated.

Make no mistake: the new Book of Order (NFOG) still says many good things. But it doesn't say some important things the old Book of Order said. And once more, changes mean something. There is a clear move further and further away from obedience to the Scriptures in the new Book of Order, in the deliberations of commissioners to the General Assembly, and in rulings by judicial commissions of the church.

### **RESPONSE FROM THE OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

On May 30, 2013, the OGA posted:

---

#### *Misrepresentations about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

"The Office of the General Assembly has had an increase in the number of inquiries about printed materials from outside of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), being distributed within congregations, that ascribe to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) beliefs and standards which are meant to show that the church is no longer worthy of support. Over the past years the list of these misrepresentations have varied little and most have been answered in detail in the religious press, study papers adopted by the church or by specific action of the General Assembly. Whenever possible, the Office of the General Assembly directs those who inquire about specific conclusions drawn by these papers to resources which give a broader understanding of the issues.

Typically the materials being circulated focus on four broad areas of concern, each of which speaks to the core of who we are as a denomination and a covenant community. In response to these recent inquiries, we remind the church about who the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is both historically and in our current ministry."

[http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/misrepresentations\\_about\\_pcusa\\_may\\_2013.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/misrepresentations_about_pcusa_may_2013.pdf) Related PowerPoint presentation:  
<http://www.pcusa.org/resource/pcusa-building-unity-and-community/>

## **LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 220TH GA IN 2014**

As we turn our collective attention to the [221st General Assembly meeting](#) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to be held in Detroit, Mich. June 14-21, 2014, what the PCUSA professes to believe and what she practices in the living out of her common life are important questions to ask.

The 220th GA also adopted a statement that “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” and that “the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) does not have one interpretation of Scripture in this matter.” However, the constitution of the PCUSA in both parts, *The Book of Confessions* and *The Book of Order*, affirms that marriage is ordered by God in Creation, affirmed by Jesus Christ and sustained by the Holy Spirit. As ordered by the GA, the Office of Theology and Worship has prepared a study of marriage affirming those foundational truths. Those standards will most certainly be challenged at the 221st GA where commissioners will be asked to redefine marriage accommodating the evermore confused sexual culture in which we live.

We can also expect several reports with recommendations to emerge from special committees, task forces and advocacy committees of the denomination.

### **Overtures and other business already in the pipeline**

Eight overtures have been received by the Office of the General Assembly for the 221st G.A. Information received from the OGA confirms that "A *Book of Order* amendment that went into effect on July 7, 2013 states that overtures from presbyteries will require a concurrence from at least one other presbytery (see G-3.0302d) before being referred to the assembly. The overtures below, received before July 7, do not require a concurrence."

- *Overture 001 On Amending G-2.0104b. by Replacing “Guided by” with “Obedient to” in Reference to Scripture and the Confessions—From the Presbytery of East Tennessee.*
- *Overture 002 On Amending G-2.0504b. to Require Participation in the Benefits Plan of the PC(USA)—From the Presbytery of Kiskiminetas.*
- *Overture 003 On Issuing a Request to Teaching Elders to Participate in the Administrative Costs of the Church by Paying Per Capita—From the Presbytery of Albany.*
- *Overture 004 On Directing the Board of Pensions in the Distribution of Pension Benefits of Church Leaders and Administrators of Churches Leaving the PC(USA)—From the Presbytery of Tropical Florida.*
- *Overture 005 On Amending G-3.0106 to Allow Presbyteries to Limit Payments of Per Capita—From the Presbytery of Detroit.*

- *Overture 006 On Amending G-4.0206a. Regarding the Sale or Encumbrance of Property Given to a Local Congregation as a Gift—From the Presbytery of Lake Michigan.*
- *Overture 007 On Taking Meaningful Action to Reduce Gun Violence—From the Presbytery of National Capital.*
- *Overture 008 On Publishing the Current List of Churches Certified as Relief of Conscience Churches—From the Presbytery of National Capital.*

Information received from the OGA indicates that "All future overtures from presbyteries will require a concurrence. The overture title will initially start with 'NC' to indicate that the overture needs a concurrence. Once a concurrence is received the 'NC' will be deleted and the concurring presbytery information will be added."

While additional overtures are expected, the majority of business that comes to the G.A. originates with the advocacy committees, entities and agencies of the General Assembly itself.

In the meantime Presbyterians across the country are seeking to be faithful to God's calling in the communities where He has planted them to be salt and light.

I Timothy says that the Church is to be a pillar and support of the truth. That means that the Church is to show the world what God and Godliness look like. The continuing distraction of denominational infighting can have the effect of robbing the local church of her primary witness. You must vigilantly guard against that threat.

Issue a call to prayer...

Issue a call to prepare...

Issue a call to persevere...

Issue a call to patience...

Issue a call to practice the faith, moment by moment, bearing fruit in and out of season...all to the glory of God.

#### ABBREVIATIONS USED

NFOG -- New Form of Government. Since July, 2011, this is the current Book of Order.

BOO -- Book of Order

Old Book of Order -- A reference to the Book of Order replaced by the NFOG.

220th General Assembly -- The General Assembly that met June 30 - July 7, 2012 in Pittsburgh, PA. Since 2004 the General Assembly has met every two years.