

PCA General Assembly 2021

Last week, the 48th Annual General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America convened in St. Louis, MO. The General Assembly (GA) is the highest court in the Presbyterian Church in America and is tasked with conducting business brought by lower courts including, but not limited to, the reception of overtures, deliverances, resolutions, and judicial decisions.

This year's GA consisted of 1,503 Teaching Elders (TE) and 613 Ruling Elders (RE) assembling to vote on 48 overtures which were submitted by various PCA presbyteries over the course of last year. This is a 500 commissioner increase from the last GA in 2019 (2020 canceled for COVID). These overtures are initially presented to an Overtures Committee who meet the same week of the Assembly. After being examined and debated by the committee, they are then passed on to the Assembly for a vote with a recommendation, unless ruled out of order, referred back to the presbytery, or answered by a similar overture originally submitted. **The General Assembly then votes on the overture, resulting in an *affirmative (voted for)* or a *negative (voted down)* decision.**

To be clear, an overture is an official communication submitted to GA from a lower governing body to a higher governing body, requesting to take a particular action, approve/disapprove, or endorse a particular statement/ resolution. Depending on the matter at hand, the decision can be binding or non-binding for both the lower courts and churches. For example, an overture requesting a Study Committee could be passed, yet even after the committee's findings and final approval, the results are to be taken simply as "pious advice," and are without binding and constitutional standing. With that said, any changes made via an overture to the Book of Church Order (to include the Form of Government, Rules of Discipline, and Directory of Worship chapters 56, 57, 58) are in fact binding upon churches and their elders.

If an overture is passed to change language in the BCO, a two-thirds vote is required by all presbyteries within the next year. The results are then presented to the following GA for a final vote. This exemplifies the difficulty in changing language in the BCO. Other overtures simply consist of nonbinding declarations or memorials.

My intention is to summarize the most important overtures of last week's GA. For the sake of brevity, highlighted overtures will be listed, followed by the resulting vote, and a short commentary on the issue at hand. Overtures listed without a number count were given a voice/hand vote. The list is not exhaustive, but seeks to give a general overview of the main and most debated overtures of GA 2021. To view a comprehensive list of the originally submitted overtures, along with accompanying text, see: [Resources - General Assembly \(pcaga.org\)](#) To view the overtures making it out of committee and to the Assembly as well as their voted result, see: [General Assembly Updates for July 1 - by Faith \(byfaithonline.com\)](#)

Excursus

1. Dr. Bryan Chapel was voted Stated Clerk of the PCA GA.
2. The Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault in the church was commended and granted an extension to complete their report through 2022 with a budget of \$25,000 given by an anonymous donor.

The following overtures are listed in order of “most debated and discussed” at GA 2021.

Overture 23

“Amend BCO 16 by Adding a Clause Which Prohibits Ordination for Men who Self-Identify as ‘Gay Christians,’ ‘Same-sex Attracted Christians,’ ‘Homosexual Christians,’ or Like Terms”

The Assembly voted in the **affirmative** as amended. The vote was **1438-417**. There was a lengthy debate on this overture as well as #37. Over the last three years gender and identity have become a divisive issue in the PCA. With these topics at the forefront of debate, it should be noted that no one that I am aware of has advocated for practicing homosexual men to be ordained or married in the church. The primary issues entail whether a person who identifies as same sex attracted —using the orientation language of the LGBTQ+ community— is qualified for office. Other issues include whether a Christian or candidate can ever see these disordered affections change within their lifetime.

The *Study Committee on Human Sexuality*, as well as overtures #23 and #37 are a direct result of these debates within the PCA. Because this overture constitutes a change to the BCO, a two-thirds majority vote will be needed by all presbyteries over the next year. If passed by two-thirds of the presbyteries over the next year, the assembly will then take a final vote at GA 2022 in Birmingham, AL.

The amended language will read as follows:

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.

Overture 37

“Amend BCO 21-4 and 24-1 Clarifying Moral Requirements for Church Office”

The assembly voted to answer Overture 37 in the **affirmative**. The vote was **1130-692**. The Overtures committee also issued a minority report that removed: *“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).”* But this report failed in a floor vote.

The affirmed amended language will read as follows:

BCO 21-4 e. 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 paragraph is *also* to be amended to BCO 24-1 for the election, ordination and installation of Ruling Elders and Deacons.

Overture 14

“Revise MTW Manual”

The Assembly voted to answer Overture 14 in the **affirmative**. The vote was **961-814**. Mission to the World (MTW) is the Foreign Missions Agency of the PCA. Several missionaries took the floor to debate the manual and practice of MTW does not align with the standards of church planting on foreign soil. Those who debated in favor of the overture said that MTW has opened church planting and development ministries to men and women who are not ordained elders. This contrasts with other PCA ministries such as Mission to North America and Reformed University Fellowship. With the passing of this overture, the language inserted into the MTW manual is as follows:

All MTW leaders in line of authority over church planting or church development ministry shall be ordained elders.

Overture 1
“Amend BCO 8-7 Regarding Chaplains”

The Assembly voted to answer Overture 1 in the **negative**. The vote was **1285-415**. This overture would have added language to the BCO indicating that chaplains in the PCA must go through the endorsing agency approved by the Assembly. Currently the approved agency is the *Presbyterian and Reformed Commission on Chaplains (PRCC)*. Those who are in support of the newly added language argue that chaplains who choose another endorsing agency would find themselves without the backing of the established organization. Currently the PRCC is the only agency used by confessionally reformed churches. Because this overture failed, chaplains are free to choose another endorsing agency outside of the PRCC and thus could be susceptible to conflict within their ranks given the lack of military alignment with their vows in the Westminster Standards.

Overture 38
“Commend Human Sexuality Report”

The Assembly voted to answer Overture 38 in the **affirmative** (by show of hands). The link to the 12 main statements of the report can be found here: [Overture-38-Commend-Human-Sexuality-Report.pdf \(pcaga.org\)](#) For the entirety of the report see: [AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf \(pcaga.org\)](#) This report has had a significant impact on helping elders this last year understand the historically Reformed and theological underpinnings of confessional and biblical standards of human sexuality.

The following three items are overtures recommending that the Assembly form Study Committees for a variety of topics and issues. All the overtures for these Study Committees were voted down. Study committees are expensive, time consuming, and not binding. If a Study Committee is approved, the moderator of that Assembly chooses the committee members, and they are given a time frame and budget to complete the task. The Assembly then votes at the designated time whether to commend the report.

1. The Assembly voted to answer Overture 32, “Form Study Committee for Biblical Ethics in Digital Media” in the **negative**. The vote was **1340-227**.
2. The Assembly voted to answer Overture 36, “Appoint Study Committee regarding White Supremacy” in the **negative** (by show of hands).
3. The Assembly voted to answer Overture 47, “Appoint Study Committee on Critical Race Theory” in the **negative** (by show of hands).

Overture 31
“Amend BCO 22 Process for Assistant to Associate Pastor”

The Assembly voted to answer in the **affirmative** as amended (by show of hands). The language of this amendment gives clarity to the election of Associate Pastors.

The amended language will read as follows:

BCO 22-2 The pastor and associate pastor are elected by the congregation using the form of call in BCO 20-6. *An existing assistant pastor may be elected by the congregation as an associate pastor at the recommendation of the Session without the election of a pulpit committee.* Being elected by the congregation they become members of the Session.

Overture 18
“Amend BCO 24-1 to Clarify that a Session has the discretion on the timing of some parts of the Exam of Officer Nominees”

The Assembly voted to answer in the **affirmative** as amended (by show of hands). This overture gives the Session discretion on the timing of some parts of the exam of officer nominees.

Overture 27
“Amend BCO 36 to Require Public Excommunication”

The Assembly voted to answer in the **negative** (by show of hands). Grounds: Courts should retain the discretion currently given by our *Rules of Discipline* as to how they will administer and/or announce the censure of excommunication.

Overture 48
“Repudiate Anti-Asian Racism”

The Assembly voted to answer in the **affirmative**. The vote was **1374-107**. The Assembly voted to commend the following statement:

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.

The following overtures were received and accepted by the Assembly in agreement with the Overture Committee's recommendations. In a general sense these overtures could then be considered limited in debate or division. [Updates from Overtures Committee for June 29 - byFaith \(byfaithonline.com\)](https://byfaithonline.com)

Overtures: 5, 6, 16, 19-21, 26, 28, 29, 30, 33-35, 40, 41, 43, 45, 46.

Overtures for the GA's *Rules for Assembly Operation* (RAO) and debate on the Review of Presbytery Records (RPR) are not included.

Pastor John Bennett