

Overture on Confessing Covenantal and Generational Sins during the Civil Rights period

Whereas, the 43rd General Assembly considered a personal resolution Civil Rights remembrance and deferred action on it until the 44th General Assembly meeting in Mobile, Alabama; and

Whereas, in the 1973 “Message to All the Churches,”¹ the founding generation of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) expressly declared our denomination to be the “continuing church” of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), saying, “We have called ourselves ‘Continuing’ Presbyterians because we seek to continue the faith of the founding fathers of that Church,”; and

Whereas, a “continuing church” inherits not only the faith of the predecessor organization, but also the larger history of the Church from which it descends, whether that history is honorable or dishonorable; and

Whereas, the members of the PCA are increasingly aware that during the Civil Rights period², **many** of our founding denominational leaders³ and churches not only failed to support, but also actively worked against racial reconciliation in both church and society through sins of commission and omission, including: barring African Americans from worship services⁴; misusing and twisting the Bible to support racial segregation; participating in and defending white supremacist organizations; and failing to speak out against state-supported segregation and to support efforts to secure access to basic human and civil rights^{5 6}; and

Whereas, the 30th General Assembly adopted a resolution on racial reconciliation that confessed “covenantal, generational, heinous sins” connected with unbiblical forms of servitude, but did not deal specifically with the covenantal, generational, heinous sins committed during the much more recent Civil Rights period, which betrayed the visible unity of all believers in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-22), the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:31), and the image of God in all people (Genesis 1:27); and

Whereas, the 32nd General Assembly adopted a pastoral letter on “the Gospel and Race,” but in doing so, adopted a statement that did not directly acknowledge our sins against African Americans that many of our founding leaders and churches displayed during the Civil Rights period; and

Whereas, our denomination’s unwillingness to speak truthfully about our failure to seek justice and to love mercy during the Civil Rights period significantly hinders present-day efforts for reconciliation with our African American brothers and sisters and their participation in the PCA; and

Whereas, the General Assembly recognizes that the sins of racism and racial injustice—not only toward African Americans, but also toward other racial minorities—are not simply past sins, but continue to be sins with which our churches and congregants wrestle; and

Whereas, God has once more given the PCA a gracious opportunity to show the beauty, grace, and power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ through confession and through the fruits of repentance: such as, clarity that racism is a sin requiring formative and corrective discipline; growing into cultural intelligence regarding minority cultures; establishing interracial friendships and partnerships inside and outside our denomination; renewing our church's commitment to develop minority leadership at the congregational, presbytery, and denominational levels; and encouraging a denomination-wide vision for and commitment to a more racially and ethnically diverse church in the next twenty years;

Be it therefore resolved, that the 44th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America does recognize and confess our church's covenantal and generational involvement in and complicity with racial injustice inside and outside of our churches during the Civil Rights period; and

Be it further resolved, that this General Assembly also confesses our continued sins of racism and failure to love brothers and sisters from minority cultures in accordance with what the Gospel requires; and

Be it further resolved, that this General Assembly recommits itself to bear fruit in keeping with our repentance, seeking appropriate courses of action and reconciliation humbly, sincerely, and expeditiously, for the glory of God and the furtherance of the Gospel; and

Be it finally resolved, that the General Assembly urges the congregations and presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in America to study this action as well as the PCA position paper on the Gospel and Race, to confess their own particular sins and failures regarding racial injustice as may be appropriate, and to seek to bring forth fruits of repentance for the Gospel's sake within their own local communities.

¹ The original “Message to All the Churches” was sent by the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America. The founding of the PCCSA was December 4, 1861. The founding of the PCA was December 4, 1973. Many historians agree this was more than coincidence. (See Joel Alvis’ *Southern Presbyterians and Race*)

² In the South, Gallup found that 80% of whites in 1964 disapproved of civil rights legislation, while 31% outside the South disapproved.

(https://books.google.com/books?id=kKv8PXwIiFkC&pg=PA237&lpg=PA237&dq=civil+rights+gallup+polling+1960&source=bl&ots=-TTg7n7EbO&sig=odTF9mCzMqJkuPH2xZoRYCDPYaI&hl=en&ei=HkLgS-WcFpKwNtWsmKsH&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result#v=onepage&q&f=false)

In 1963, 2/3 of whites polled by Gallup stated blacks and whites were treated equally and 90% said blacks had the same educational opportunities as whites. *Gallup Social Audit, Black-White relations in the United States, 2001 Update*.

³ Dr. Patterson, chair of the Steering Committee and pastor of First Presbyterian Jackson, had elders who were members of the Citizen's Councils in Jackson. Those were KKK front groups. First Presbyterian Jackson denied African-Americans membership under Patterson. They founded their Christian day school the year after the Civil Rights Act (1964) passed, which is not a coincidence as the CRA made it explicit that school segregation was now federally illegal. (See: *Open Friendship in a Closed Society*)

Dr. Jim Baird, who pastored First Presbyterian Jackson following Dr. Patterson, admitted he “did nothing” to help his African-American brothers during the Civil Rights era in his speech/confession at General Assembly in 2015. See full transcript:

<https://pastortimlecroy.wordpress.com/2015/06/16/transcript-of-rev-jim-bairds-speech/>

G. Aiken Taylor worked with Earl Johnston, a pro-segregationist, to gather information to undermine civil rights in his articles that ran in the *Presbyterian Journal*. Taylor also cited MLK speaking at Montreat as a reason to leave the PCUSA. (See: *Mississippi Praying*)

John Edwards Richards distributed a sermon that promoted segregation, had it bound and mailed to ALL PCUS sessions in 1965. He joined the PCA as a TE when it began. He later included that sermon as evidence for why the PCUSA was corrupt in his history of the PCA, *The Historical Birth of the Presbyterian Church in America*, that was sold by our denominational book store as recently as 2005. See: <http://highlandspastor.blogspot.com/2015/06/the-imaginary-racism-in-pca.html>

GT Gillespie, former president of Belhaven College (now University) and pastor in Jackson (his church joined the PCA), distributed "Why Segregation is Scriptural" to the Synod of Mississippi in 1954. Link: <http://digilib.usm.edu/cdm/fullbrowser/collection/manu/id/1864/rv/compoundobject/cpd/1880>

Gillespie was an influence in the movement to leave the PCUS during his time and wrote for the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, including “A Southern Christian Looks at the Race Problem” where he declares Brown v Board of Education to be a “tragic mistake” because of race mixing at schools. (*SPJ* 6/5/1957) He is one of "ours" even if he died before 1973, and Belhaven College was the majority alma mater of the original signers of the “Message to All the Churches” with 30 out of the 79 TEs present at the 1st GA.

Morton Smith - wrote numerous articles supporting segregation. His book "How the Gold is Become Dim!" cites civil rights as one of the reasons to leave the PCUS. You can read his "The Racial Problem Facing America" (*Presbyterian Guardian*, October, 1964) on this pro-segregation website:
<http://tribalthecocrat.com/2014/03/dr-morton-h-smith-the-racial-problem-facing-america/>

Nelson Bell and the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* - see the paper, delivered in Jackson, MS at a conference with Ligon Duncan, I've attached to this email. Bell was a racial moderate, but the *Journal* promoted segregation, had an article that railed against Montreat allowing black kids during the same time as white children, etc. They even wrote articles that supported the KKK and dismissed the work of the NAACP in its aims for gaining access to voting and basic civil rights for African Americans (SPJ 7/31/1957). Bell even said about racial issues, "Satan is using the present agitation as one of the greatest red herrings of all times..." (SPJ 7/31/1957) You can learn more of Bell's views in David Chappell's *A Stone of Hope*. You can read a summary of the *Journal's* treatment of racial issues in this article on the Third Millennium Ministries' website:
http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/ken_taylor/ken_taylor.church.spirituality.html

⁴ Barring African Americans was a practice of Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, First Presbyterian in Jackson, and First Presbyterian in Hattiesburg as representative examples. Sources: *The Last Segregated Hour*, *Open Friendship in a Closed Society*, *Mississippi Praying* and Rayner, Robert Patrick. *On Theological Grounds: Hattiesburg Presbyterians and the Civil Rights Movement*, (MA Thesis; University of Southern Mississippi, 2009).

⁵ See Dr. George Robertson's comments as pastor of First Presbyterian Church Augusta and its negative role in the Civil Rights Era. - <http://firstpresaugusta.org/we-and-our-fathers-have-sinned-daniel-98/>

⁶ These links are to research from Dr. Sean Lucas of First Presbyterian Church in Hattiesburg and relate to his book *For a Continuing Church*, which is a history of the PCA.
<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/race-and-the-roots-of-the-pres.php>
<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/race-and-the-roots-of-the-pres-1.php>
<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/race-and-the-roots-of-the-pres-2.php>
<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/race-and-the-roots-of-the-pres-3.php>
<http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/race-and-the-roots-of-the-pres-4.php>

Books covering Civil Rights issues that include prominent PCA Churches and leaders who steered PCUSA churches into the PCA

Open Friendship in a Closed Society, Peter Slade

The Last Segregated Hour, Stephen Haynes

Mississippi Praying, Carolyn Dupont

A Stone of Hope, David Chappell

Southern Presbyterians and Race, Joel Alvis