

A Summary of Actions Taken by the 46th General Assembly of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church

This week my denomination, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, held its 46th stated General Assembly in Denver, Colorado. This is the annual meeting and council (synod) of my church, and every pastor has a right to attend and every congregation may send elder representatives. Due to the subject of same-sex attraction and ordination, this was the most intense and contentious assembly in recent EPC history, if not its most divided assembly ever. More on that towards the bottom. But there was quite a lot of other things going on at the assembly, and below is a summary of the official actions taken.

To amend the EPC's constitution requires a majority vote of one assembly, a majority vote of three-fourths of the presbyteries over the next year, and then a majority vote of the subsequent assembly. The GA completed that amendment process in four areas that essentially cleaned up and standardized language related to the ordination process.

The EPC's formal ecumenical relationships are called "fraternal partnerships" and are aimed at increasing cooperation on mission, church planting, theology, and education. The EPC entered into a fraternal partnership with the The Evangelical Church of Egypt (Synod of the Nile), which is a wonderful development. We also voted to expand the boundaries of the Presbytery of Florida and the Caribbean — previously covering Florida, the Bahamas, and Puerto Rico — to cover the entirety of Spain! There are some congregations in Spain that have requested assistance and partnership with the EPC; my guess is that in the coming years the Spanish churches will become their own denomination, something the EPC has done in the past.

Unfortunately, bad news in this arena carried a shadow over the assembly. The week before the EPC's assembly, the Associated Reformed Presbyterian Church (the EPC's oldest fraternal partner) voted to terminate their relationship with the EPC. This came as a shock to the EPC, since there had been no public communication or warning about this possibility, and the stated reasons (e.g. the EPC's ordination of women) are things true of the EPC since its founding. The GA voted to instruct the EPC's Fraternal Relations Committee to investigate what went wrong and to see what could be done to restore the breach.

Last year the GA amended its Rules of Assembly, the policies for how the GA conducts its work, and provided a pathway under narrow circumstances for overtures (requests for the GA to take action) defeated at a presbytery-level to still get to the GA. We had our first example of this: a failed overture asked the GA to reassess our Position Paper on the Ordination of Women, first adopted in 1984. This Position Paper does not include any scriptural citations and the overture asked the GA to have our Theology Committee recommend new scriptural citations. The main argument for including scriptural citations is that the EPC's Position Papers should be based on scripture. The main argument against was that this particular Position Paper is about how there are different ways of reading scripture on the subject and the EPC believes that there can be liberty on the topic, and therefore scriptural citations are unnecessary and potentially undercut the paper's very purpose. Since the overture originally failed, it needed a two-thirds majority to

be considered by the GA. Surprisingly, it seemed to me that a majority of the commissioners voted to consider the overture, but it still failed to meet the two-thirds threshold.

The EPC sometimes establishes Ad-Interim Committees, which are committees formed for a specific, temporary purpose. The Ad-Interim Committee on Ordination Standards was formed three years ago to provide recommendations on clarifying and assessing the EPC's standards and processes for ordaining ministers. They brought a series of recommendations related the education and examination of pastoral candidates to this GA. Some of these are proposed amendments to the EPC's constitution and are now on their way to the presbyteries for ratification, and some were revisions to GA policy and standards. These recommendations clarified the process for written, committee, and presbytery examinations of candidates, replaced the requirement for a Master of Divinity with a requirement for 72-graduate hours in a variety of specified theological and ministerial subjects, eliminated the Candidate Education Equivalency Program for those without a Master of Divinity, added the requirement for something akin to a pastoral internship, and added a requirement for a pastoral assessment (a tool being developed now that the GA has approved this approach). The 72-graduate hours is shorter than an average Master of Divinity, but the specific educational subjects needing to be covered (certain hours in Hebrew, Greek, biblical theology, systematic theology, and church history) became much more robust.

Two years ago the GA formed an Ad-Interim Committee on Disability and the Sacraments. The EPC has Position Papers, which set forth the EPC's mind on a subject to itself, the Christian community, and the world. The EPC also has Pastoral Letters, which guide churches within the EPC rather than identify our positions to the world. This AIC brought to the GA a first draft of a Pastoral Letter on disability and the sacraments. They asked for an additional year in order to finish the Pastoral Letter and to draft a Position Paper on the subject, which the GA granted.

The EPC's *Book of Order* is divided into three sections, one of which is the *Book of Discipline*. A task-force was established three years ago to rewrite the entire *Book of Discipline*, and they brought their recommendation to this GA. The rewrite maintained the basic structure of the *Book of Discipline*, but improved its general outline, clarified and improved judicial processes and terminology, and expanded guidance on how to respond to abuse within the church. The GA approved the changes, which are now being sent to the presbyteries for ratification.

This GA also established a new Ad-Interim Committee on Digital Discipleship, which is tasked with drafting a Position Paper on the subject in light of biblical anthropology and the way digital technology, particularly AI, disciples people. This AIC was also charged with bringing a recommendation to a future GA on whether to form a Permanent Committee on Digital Discipleship.

The EPC's total membership grew to 126,282 in the past year, a growth of .3%. That may be tiny, but it is the first time since before COVID that the EPC's membership has gone up, which is doubly encouraging considering the shrinking state of American Christianity. More importantly, baptisms of children (13.6%), adult professions of faith (7.4%), and adult baptisms (29%!) were all up compared to the previous year.

Same-Sex Attraction and Ordination Standards

In 2024 the GA formed an Ad-Interim Committee on Same-Sex Attraction and Ordination Standards. I was the co-chair of that committee. In short, the committee was formed to address how the EPC should consider the expectations for penitence and sanctification of someone who experiences ongoing same-sex attraction but remains committed to the historic and orthodox biblical sexual ethic, and then to address in what circumstances such a person would be eligible for consideration for ordained office in the EPC.

Our committee recommended that the GA amend the EPC's 2017 Position Paper on Human Sexuality, the section "Same-Sex Attraction" in the 2018 Pastoral Letter on Human Sexuality, and two sections of the EPC's constitution within the *Book of Government*.

This subject monopolized the attention of the EPC for the past two years. Our committee's recommendations were identical to the more conservative Presbyterian Church in America, in both our approach and conclusions (Position Paper, Pastoral Letter) and in our constitutional wording (*Book of Government*). [The executive report of our committee can be read here.](#)

All of the AIC's recommendations were adopted by the assembly. The Pastoral Letter revisions were approved 57-43% (one of the closest votes I can recall in EPC history) and the Position Paper revisions 65-35%. The first set of *Book of Government* amendments defeated an alternative, substitute motion 62-38% and then was adopted outright 67-33%. The final set of *Book of Government* recommendations was approved overwhelmingly by voice vote. These two sets of *Book of Government* amendments are now sent to the presbyteries for ratification.

Everyone agreed that:

- Marriage is between one man and one woman and that sex is reserved for marriage;
- Homoerotic behavior and desires are sinful and must be repented of and mortified;
- Homosexual practice and unrepentant homosexual lust disqualify from ordination;
- The desires of the fallen heart from which homosexual lust arises are not only a result of the fall, but are themselves sin which must be repented of and mortified;
- Regardless of someone's sense of orientation or inclination, to identify with fallen desires — whether by celebration, solidarity, or resignation to them as inevitable — is sinful;
- To call yourself a "gay Christian" is inappropriate;
- To refuse to repent of and mortify the desires of your fallen heart disqualifies from ordination;
- Christ by his Spirit can remove sinful and fallen desires from the hearts of his people;
- It is possible for those who were once same-sex attracted to develop healthy and godly heterosexual desires;
- Christ has blessed the single life;
- Officers of the church are to be above reproach and cannot be characterized by sin.

In general, the dissenting, minority position held one or more of three following points:

- That if someone has truly repented of and mortified a sinful desire, then it is no longer a present experience in their life.
- There is no difference between someone who is a practicing homosexual, someone who actively indulges homosexual lust, someone who struggles against homosexual desires (regardless of whether those desires are indulged or denied), someone facing ongoing *temptations* to homosexuality, or someone who is *prone* to homosexual temptation (i.e., “If I *were* to be tempted, it would be in a homosexual way”). All of these are just “homosexuality”.
- It’s just not a wise idea to ordain someone who is struggling with same-sex attraction and so it should be prohibited across the board.

The position of the AIC, adopted by the General Assembly, asserted that:

- While God can remove sinful desires, truly repenting of and mortifying sinful desires does not mean that they will automatically go away. While the sinful desires of the fallen heart remain in this life, true mortification of sin and Spirit-empowered victory looks like *subduing* sin so that you are controlled by the grace of Christ rather than the impulses of sin.
- There is a difference — between a remaining sin nature that includes same-sex attraction which is denied in the power of Christ, the experience of temptation towards same-sex attraction/homosexuality, and bodily weakness that leaves someone prone to that temptation — and homosexual behavior and lusts.
 - The EPC does not believe that we opened the door to celibate homosexual pastors precisely because we believe there is a difference between someone sinning (homosexuality) and someone not sinning (confronting indwelling sin and temptation — same-sex attraction). We said you could be considered for ordination if you *weren’t* sinning and *were* conforming to Christ’s character.
- We recommended that local churches and presbyteries be given a tool set to evaluate candidates on the above points and to then make the determination in their specific cases for whether it would be wise to ordain their particular candidates.
 - Those who experience same-sex attraction can be godly leaders by serving as godly examples of denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Jesus.

From the conclusion of our executive report (drawn from the Pastoral Letter):

We affirm that only those “who conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity in their descriptions of themselves, their convictions, character, and conduct should be considered for leadership.” Additionally, we affirm that “Courts may consider for ordination candidates whose ongoing experience of SSA is a corrupted sin nature unindulged, repented of, and mortified; a temptation not entered into, but rather fled; a weakness not embraced, but rather mourned as they rest upon the grace and strength of the Lord.”

This is what we recommended be placed into the *Book of Government*, which will become constitutionally binding upon its ratification:

“Whether single or married, officers must conform to the biblical requirement of chastity and sexual purity (see Westminster Larger Catechism Q&A 138-139) in their descriptions of themselves, their convictions, character, and conduct.”

“Officers in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church must be above reproach in their walk and Christlike in their character. While office bearers will see spiritual perfection only in glory, they will continue in this life to confess and to mortify remaining sins in light of God’s work of progressive sanctification. Therefore, to be qualified for office, they must affirm the sinfulness of fallen desires, the reality and hope of progressive sanctification, and be committed to the pursuit of Spirit-empowered victory over their sinful temptations, inclinations, and actions.”

The EPC’s General Assembly approved raising the standard for ordained officers; it did not open up the door to sin and scandal. We established in our public facing documents, internal guidance, and constitutional standards that holiness requires real, ongoing repentance and mortification of sin. We established that ordained officers are to be characterized by this holiness as described in our confessional standards. The assembly’s action reaffirmed the EPC’s historic position on human sexuality and ordination and added language that would help ensure those standards.