

[05-09] Commissioners' Resolution: On the Challenge of Being Black in the PC (USA)
Source: Commissioners
Committee: [05] Mid Councils
Profile #: [CR-016]
Event: 223rd General Assembly (2018)
Sponsor: Johnson, Jane
Dean, Helen
Type: General Assembly Full Consideration

Action Summary

Recommendation

Action

On this Item, the General Assembly acted as follows:

Approve as Amended (AA)

On this Item, the Mid Councils Committee acted as follows:

Approve as Amended (CA)

Assembly Action

On this Item, the General Assembly acted as follows:

Approve as Amended

Voice Vote

Committee Recommendation

On this Item, the Mid Councils Committee acted as follows:

Approve as Amended

Counted Vote - Committee

Affirmative:49

Negative:0

Abstaining:0

Final text:

That the recommendation section be amended as follows: [Text to be deleted is shown with brackets and with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown with brackets and with an underline.]

“1. ~~[Direct mid councils to recommit to]~~ [Reaffirm the] Committee on Representation requirements for inclusiveness as stated in the constitution (G-3.0103), paying careful attention to issues of inclusiveness and fair practices by the pastor nominating committees and committees on preparation for ministry.

“2. ~~[Direct]~~ [Advise] mid councils to ~~[raise]~~ [follow the lead of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus in raising] awareness of the declining nature of black congregations throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the lack of pastoral leadership, both current and future, for those congregations.

“[3. Direct the Office of the Stated Clerk to respond to the presbyteries that the National Black Presbyterian Caucus has identified as not abiding by Committee on Representation Guidelines.

“[4. The Office of the General Assembly is to report within one year to presbyteries and synods concerning the progress on this resolution and a full report to the 224th General Assembly (2020).

“[5. Advise the Board of Pensions to analyze and report on the viability of African American Presbyterian Churches and the challenges of supporting installed pastoral leadership.]”

Recommendation

That the 223rd General Assembly (2018) do the following:

1. Direct mid councils to recommit to Committee on Representation requirements for inclusiveness as stated in the constitution (G-3.0103), paying careful attention to issues of inclusiveness and fair practices by the pastor nominating committees and committees on preparation for ministry.
2. Direct mid councils to raise awareness of the declining nature of black congregations throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the lack of pastoral leadership, both current and future, for those congregations.

Rationale

This is a call to action for the PC(USA) regarding issues and concerns of the black constituency of this denomination. As the church, we have stated the obvious, repeatedly, in reference to our perspective on racism and injustice. However, the time has come for the denomination to take some action beyond developing resources, writing reports, and passing rules and regulations that are disregarded, or in some cases, outright ignored by a seemingly biased system that tends to favor those in power and control. While many of the same issues are relevant to most ethnic congregations, this paper will address “black” congregations specifically.

As black Presbyterians, we have been on a continuing pilgrimage with this denomination long before the beginning of the First African Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in May of 1807.

Over the years, black Presbyterians have organized and reorganized in order to meet the challenges that emerge out of the awkward movement of history for black Presbyterians. African American Presbyterians helped shape the direction of a reunited church in 1983, with a commitment to racial justice and inclusiveness, as part of our confession of faith and rules of government. Yet, even today, we feel the church continues to struggle to effectively comply with this commitment, embrace the history and rich contributions of black people, and move swiftly toward change.

The time for stating the obvious and setting new goals is no longer an acceptable strategy without a plan of action that can be implemented immediately.

The National Black Presbyterian Caucus (NBPC) has noted the following concerns that could lead to some action and resolution of the majority of the issues raised:

1. Research completed in twelve presbyteries indicate that presbyteries are not abiding by the Committee on Representation guidelines, as stated in the Constitution (*Book of Order*, G-3.0103).

2. Currently of the 400+ black congregations, approximately 80 percent are without a pastor, mainly because they are unable to support one. Many of these congregations are less than fifty members.
3. Many pastors currently providing pastoral leadership are not Presbyterian and, therefore, lack a sufficient knowledge of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition. Therefore, the status of the diminishment of the “black” church appears obvious. Without intervention, they will certainly continue to be closed or merged, one by one. The appearance is that presbyteries do not pay much attention to the decline or the issues causing the decline, until it is too late. A goal would be that the number of vacant congregations become a priority and that we address this issue so that we ~~increase~~ decrease* the number of vacant pulpits by 40 percent before the 224th General Assembly (2020). Further, presbyteries are encouraged to consider ways to address issues in black congregations before a church reaches the point of no return and an administrative commission is formed as an afterthought. Attention to mentoring and training for elders, similar to the pilot program in the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, may be one feasible alternative to providing pastoral leadership to small churches under fifty members.
4. A study of the impact of the ordination exams and the grueling process have caused many to drop out of the process.
5. The failure of seasoned elders on sessions, in some cases, has discouraged youth and young adults from participating. Providing opportunities and mentoring for youth and young adults may help with the desired results.
6. Encourage black persons who choose to serve on committees to speak out and speak up on issues that need to be addressed rather than feeling like their voices will not be heard.
7. Monitor the progress of African American women serving in leadership positions, particularly, senior pastor positions. Notable are the number of PNC’s who are still reluctant to consider and call women despite the representation guidelines and the latest Status of Women Report.
8. Begin conversations around our own prejudices within the black church, particularly, as we look at the whole issue of inclusiveness in our particular context.

Helen B. Dean, Presbytery of the Peaks

Jane B. Johnson, Presbytery of the Peaks

* The text of this rationale has been updated as of 06/22/21 to correct an error and better reflect the intent of the writers. As it is part of the rationale, this content was not voted on by the assembly and does not need a GA vote in order to amend. While this edit is reflected on PC-Biz, it is not changed in the published copies of the *Minutes of the General Assembly* as they were printed prior to correcting this error.

Comment

Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy Comment

Advice and Council on Item 05-09—From the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP).

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) advises that the 223rd General Assembly (2018) approve Item 05-09 with the following amendment: [Text to be deleted is shown with brackets and with a strike-through; text to be added or inserted is shown with brackets and with an underline.]

“1. ~~Direct mid-councils to recommit to~~ Reaffirm the Committee on Representation requirements for inclusiveness as stated in the constitution (G-3.0103), paying careful attention to issues of inclusiveness and fair practices by the pastor nominating committees and committees on preparation for ministry.

“2. ~~[Direct]~~ [Advise] mid councils to [follow the lead of the National Black Presbyterian Caucus in raising] [raise] awareness of the declining nature of black congregations throughout the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the lack of pastoral leadership, both current and future, for those congregations.

“3. Direct the Office of the Stated Clerk to respond to the presbyteries that the National Black Presbyterian Caucus has identified as not abiding by Committee of Representation Guidelines.]”

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) appreciates the resolution’s call for the PC(USA) to follow through with its stated commitments to representation and creating just church structure. In doing so, it is critical to listen to the voices of those impacted by unjust structures and marginalization, and to use that learning in the creation of effective mission strategy.

Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns Comment

Advice and Council on Item 05-09—From the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC).

The Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns advises that the 223rd General Assembly (2018) approve Item 05-09.

This resolution supports the work of ACREC as it advocates and addresses issues of racial justice and equity of people of color in the church and society.

ACREC supports this resolution as it brings awareness again of the need to take action to address the continuing problem of the lack of representation of people of color, specifically black members of the PC(USA) in decisions affecting pastoral leadership and representation in the emerging life of the PC(USA).

ACREC believes a lack of action by the PC(USA) will directly and negatively impact the participation and membership of its black members and thereby the entire church.

Advocacy Committee on Women's Concerns Comment

Advice and Council on Item 05-09—From the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns (ACWC).

The Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns advises that the 223rd General Assembly (2018) approve Item 05-09.

The Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns identifies the need for more intentionality in unmasking the idolatries of racism and gender bias. The intersectionality of each is intrinsically embedded in church and in culture. “Racism is the opposite of what God intends for humanity. It is the rejection of the other, which is entirely contrary to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Racism is a lie about our fellow human beings, for it says that some are less than others. Because of our biblical understanding of who God is and what God intends for humanity, the PC(USA) must stand against, speak against, and work against racism.”¹

At this critical moment in history, when racism, sexism, and misogyny explicitly abound throughout the current culture, causing significant spiritual and emotional violence against women, it imperative for the church to hear the voices of those long silenced. The commitment of the PC(USA)’s decade of “Hearing and Singing New Songs to God”² supports the attempts to address gender concerns for women clergy.

There is currently no integrated plan to address declining black congregations, with enough bandwidth to adapt to the changing needs of black congregations in the 21st century. And while the General Assembly cannot direct mid councils, we feel a sense of urgency to study the listed implications via a task force to direct all agencies to engage in the sacred practice of strengthening our black congregations.

Endnotes

: <https://facing-racism.pcusa.org/>.

Hearing and Singing New Songs to God, approved by the 218th General Assembly (2008), 10.

<<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/wocctaskforcereport02-22-081.pdf>,>; *A Resolution to Recommit to Celebrating the Decade of Hearing and Singing New Songs to God*, Item 10-20 from the 220th General Assembly (2012) <<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3933>>.

General Assembly Committee on Representation

Comment on Item 05-09—From the General Assembly Committee on Representation (GACOR).

The General Assembly Committee on Representation commends the authors of this commissioners' resolution. We are in full support of the premise and substance of the document. GACOR stands ready to assist and advise the committees on representation of mid councils in their work regarding African American pastors and the 400+ African American PC(USA) congregations.

Committees on representation (CORs) of the mid councils of the church have the potential to be impactful agents of change in the PC(USA). Empowered and resourced CORs can lift up the voices and challenges of those that have been long silenced or ignored. GACOR works to increase diversity and equity at all levels of the church. We will assist and support efforts to make the PC(USA) more just, diverse, and equitable.