

Report to the Kennewick First Presbyterian Session

on

The Gathering of the Fellowship of Presbyterians from Pastor Hagan and Pastor Bottino

August 25th-27th

The idea for a type of gathering of Presbyterians came a year ago. There were seven pastors who were concerned for the decline of the Presbyterian Church and in some parts of the denomination a drifting away from our core reformed standards of biblical authority and the work and person of Jesus Christ. They wanted to gather Presbyterians to have a conversation about the way forward. They wrote the “White Paper” which listed their concerns and distributed their concerns widely among members of the denomination

Meanwhile the presbyteries (173) were voting on two actions of the General Assembly: first, changing ordination standards that would allow the presbyteries to determine who would be suitable for ordination under the new guidelines and second, a new form of government (nFog). As both of these passed, the nature, scope and purpose of the gathering changed. Not only the issue of a denomination in decline was on the agenda but then how do churches who disagree with the actions taken by the presbyteries move forward.

Close to 2,000 pastors, elders, and denominational leaders were in attendance as well as those who were observers. Jim Singleton, one of the original seven pastors called this a Kairos moment, as did Dr. Jim Edwards. A “kairos” moment is a moment, both gravely dangerous and yet graciously propitious, in which we as a church repent and in its conformity to the world humbly submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. They wanted to gather together like-minded (not same minded) Presbyterians with a theological core in which the essentials of reformed theology are affirmed. They have decided not to fight to overturn 10-A, but to ask God’s guidance for doing something different. The leadership of the gathering shared these as their core values of the fellowship:

1. They are not gathering to be mad or angry nor would they tolerate any blaming or shaming of the denomination or those who voted for the change in ordination standards.
2. They do this in humility
3. Their desire is to hold the local congregation in high esteem and help try and give them options for ways to work within the PCUSA but also differentiate themselves from some of the recent actions by the denomination
4. Connect to the PCUSA wherever possible but differentiate when necessary as well.

Vision of the Fellowship is

1. Theological Clarity
2. Missional Passion- to reach those who don’t know Christ with the gospel of Jesus Christ
3. Covenantal not regulatory
4. Global Perspective - to see and join what God is already doing in the world
5. Leadership development - to see churches planted and entrepreneur leadership in pastoral as well as theological and biblical teaching

The essence of the fellowship is to provide a place pastors and churches can have where there is a mutually agreed upon theological core that shares the essentials of confessional and orthodox faith.

The seven pastors’ and now a steering committee have as the core value is that the local church is the place for effective ministry. The Book of Order has this same position. The leadership of the Fellowship believes two things drive churches in the PCUSA who want to do something different. They are:

- The context of the local congregation is the driving force for any decision that needs to be made. If the congregation finds itself in a presbytery that they enjoy and work in then there is an option to stay and work within the existing structure to become more missional and relate to the PCUSA where there is congruence in mission and theology.
- The other issue is how differentiated the pastor and local congregation wants to be and needs to be in regards to the PCUSA and recent actions taken to change ordination standards and other underlying issues in the denomination. (which is from the Fellowships perspective).

With that in mind the leadership of the Fellowship is seeing that there are four tiers in which churches can participate in the movement:

- 1. The first tier is to stay within the presbytery and PCUSA and work to become more missional and participate in the fellowship where the congregation feels an affinity.**
- 2. The second tier is if one finds itself in a presbytery where the dominant theology is not evangelical there is a possibility of a presbytery within a presbytery. It takes 10 churches to begin a presbytery. Action by the General Assembly is needed**
- 3. The third tier that is an option under Nfog (New Form of Government) is a Presbyterian order where there would be two COMs and CPMs that would operate and examine according to theology and issues of 10-A. They would meet as one presbytery then adjourn when examinations of candidates would take place**
- 4. Two options to become a member of a New Reformed Body:**
 - a. Become an affiliate member of the Fellowship much like a union church between the Cumberland Presbyterian Church and the PCUSA. This would be a very permeable relationship much like holding dual citizenship.**
 - b. Dissociating yourself from the PCUSA completely. It would like going to a different denomination. Issues would be vote of presbytery and property**

At present there is only a legal warehouse for a New Reformed Body. No theological documents or articles of incorporation or constitution exist, just legal documents. Any hint of a denomination is not present. However, there is scheduled a constitution meeting in Orlando January 20-21st to formalize the Presbyterian Fellowship. They want to keep this as a movement rather than a new denomination. However they do see this change (Fellowship and a New Reformed Body) as a needful way of addressing the issue of the effectiveness of denominations in a post-modern and post-Christian America.

Both pastors' believe these intriguing choices (four tiers) and should be considered. The leadership of the Fellowship will be sending out their theological documents and constitution documents sometime this fall before the constitutional meeting in January. Even the seven pastors who organized this event say that they and their churches are in very differently places and more discernment is needed. They do know that it could get very messy at times and don't expect things to change without a rough road ahead.