

## Response from the Office of the General Assembly

### J. Herbert Nelson, II – Stated Clerk

#### *F-1.0404: Openness*

*“In Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all creation, **the Church seeks a new openness to God’s mission in the world.***

*In Christ, the triune God tends the least among us, suffers the curse of human sinfulness, raises up a new humanity, and promises a new future for all creation.*

*In Christ, Church members share with all humanity the realities of creatureliness, sinfulness, brokenness, and suffering, as well as **the future toward which God is drawing them.***

*The mission of God pertains not only to the Church but also to people everywhere and to all creation.*

*As it participates in God’s mission, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) seeks:*

*- a new openness to the sovereign activity of God in the Church and in the world, to a more **radical** obedience to Christ, and to a more **joyous** celebration in worship and work;*

- *How does the agency demonstrate that it is open to God’s activity in the church and in the world?*

Listening to the voices of mid council leaders as they articulate their frustrations, joys, and perceived relationships with the OGA. Many of these discussions are both pastoral and filled with history (both old and more recent).

During the past fourteen months, we discerned the Spirit’s calling through engagement with mid councils. This engagement is intended to strengthen and support mid councils while making assessments as to the particular hopes and struggles within their work. The Stated Clerk has traveled nearly 80 percent of his time to engage and listen to leaders (members, ruling elders and teaching elders) to present both a pastoral and ecclesiastical presence. OGA leadership and staff were continually in contact through various gatherings while embracing the need to both hear and address contextual concerns. We remain committed to learning from these visits and contacts as to how the OGA must shift its own strategies to assist and strengthen mid councils. It is clear from our assessments that we will need to make some definitive changes in our own structure and approach with regards to both developing new skill sets through replacing open positions and future hires. It is clear that significant changes in both the context for ministry development and needs of congregational leadership is changing. Thus far our “up-close” conversations and encounters have revealed that a new skill set is needed in this day and age for ministry engagement. Leadership development at every level is key. We are intending these conversations to continue and reaching out to seminaries will be an important next step with regards to congregational and mid council leadership.

- *How does the agency engage in prayerful discernment as it seeks to be obedient*

*to Christ?*

Our leadership retreat focused on prayer, assessment and change in October 2016. All leadership team members are expected to lead their particular areas in prayer as a foundation for our work. We remain prayerful as an agency for the occurrences across the globe and in our local community. Prayer must guide our discernment as world events are consistently landing in our office for responses and collective engagements with both Interfaith and Ecumenical partners. We encourage prayer as a collective and voluntary means of reminding us for whom we are working.

We have mourned the deaths of mid council leaders and staff has traveled to be with those who have joined the Church triumphant. Various domestic and global issues have called us together for collective prayer as an entire group. There remains a growing attention to the power of prayer as some of our staff and leadership attend weekly prayer gatherings with groups within the building.

- *What could the agency do to bring more joy to its staff, to members of the church, and to the world?*

It would be helpful to make our building an exciting place to be for employees and visitors. We are located in an area of significant development and downtown traffic. The Stated Clerk, in a worship service at Presbyterian Center, shared a vision for the Presbyterian Center to become the faith and spiritual center at the gateway between Kentucky and Indiana. The location between Whiskey Row, the KFC Yum Center and the Baseball Stadium gives us the perfect opportunity to capitalize on our purpose as an organization and utilization of building space. We have both space and opportunity to engage in ministry, service and fun for the whole community. Could we even host a new church development within our chapel?

Become a more engaged partner with the City of Louisville.

We could foster a stronger commitment to live beyond the past divisions within the Presbyterian Center while viewing ourselves as one unit with a single mission to serve Jesus Christ.

*- a new openness in its own membership, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, ethnicities, and worldly conditions, made one in Christ by the power of the Spirit, as a visible sign of the new humanity;*

- *How does the agency foster community within the agency? How can the agency build greater trust among the agency staff?*

We are working on more collaborative commitments to our work within OGA. A

new leadership core is emerging through new hires. This presents new possibilities at various levels for broader collaboration both within and outside of OGA.

- *How does the agency promote unity and connectedness in the whole church?*

OGA puts on one of the most visible signs of the unity of the church – the General Assembly. We also host and participate in multiple other events that bring people together from across our church and with other communities of faith.

The engagement with polity, policy, ecumenicity, and ecclesiology continually places our office in connections to congregations and other entities of the denomination and with other partners. Visits to implement General Assembly policies places us in relationship with other agencies of the Church. Our visit to accompany the Presbyterian Church in Colombia in their efforts to advocate for a peace agreement was directly connected to the work of Presbyterian Women and World Mission who started and sustained the Presbyterian mission work in Colombia.

- *How can the agency build greater trust within the PC(USA)?*

Be Faithful to our Calling by God through Jesus Christ

Be accountable to PCUSA Members and Entities

Be Transparent in Our Work and Service

Be Present with the hope of our faith as Inspiration

Be loving in our engagement

- *What are your thoughts about white privilege in the PCUSA? How can the agency contribute to building a church that truly honors God, celebrates the diversity of God's creation by lifting up all people, and demonstrates that we are all one in Christ Jesus?*

The Lord God is placing the PCUSA in a position where it must grapple with its own racism. As new immigrant congregations emerge, we must ask questions about developing new congregations that are held to standards that are unjust with regards to their history. We refuse to see how we treat people as second-class citizens within our own ranks regarding unequal standards for implementing new church developments; the implementation of Fellowships for People of Color in the PCUSA versus the standards for White NCD's. These barriers exist while knowing that the future growth of our denomination is

dependent upon people of color to join the ranks of the PCUSA. A serious question looms among White Presbyterians as to whether the fear of sharing power within our own ranks will be the impediment to a revival in our denomination.

OGA is complicit regarding some issues as well. Despite meeting the hiring goals related to diversity set by the denomination, there are only two African American males in the OGA. One is the Stated Clerk and the other is the Custodian. African American diversity goals within the denomination for both Church growth and hiring have virtually been ignored within our structure. We did not come near the 2010 goal of increasing African American congregations by 10%. One way that we are attempting to address hiring goals is to ensure we have adequate representation with our candidate pools before we proceed with interviews. It must be noted that we have hired one Korean male and three White Women in the last year – in an office that is predominantly White male. (These observations include the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, which is connected to OGA with twenty-seven employees – the rest of OGA has 33 employees).

We must continually speak truth in love to power regarding issues that impact the world, but it is equally important that we reflect the same truth that is at the core of our ethos and advocacy.

*- a new openness to see both the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God's activity in the world;*

- *What are some possibilities in the agency, which would allow the agency to be more faithful and useful for what God is doing in the world?*

OGA must address frontally the issues plaguing our communities when we enter a contract to hold our General Assembly in a city. I believe that St. Louis will be a test run as to how we can be accountable to the church, and how the church can hold a community, in which we are making a significant investment, accountable for the mistreatment of their residents. Our next General Assemblies after St. Louis are Baltimore and Columbus, Ohio. The contexts of these three cities are similar – racial injustice.

- *What are some perils in the agency's institutional form, which could inhibit faithful obedience to God?*

Inertia – the force that often causes an institution to keep moving in the same direction despite much energy and desire – is certainly a possible peril.

Another possible peril is related to vision and budget – might we be hearing God's call incorrectly? Or if we are hearing it correctly, might we not be able to convey that call in such a way that the church does not support it?

- *What are the things you hold on to as essential and carry forward, even as you are open to the new?*

Honesty, Integrity, Industry, Commitment, Humility and Prayer.

- *If you could change one thing within the agency which would create new opportunities to do the agency's job better, what would that be?*

Different configuration of A-Corp and Shared Services.

*- a new openness to God's continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be more effective in its mission."*

- *What new ecumenical partnerships and collaboration have been most effective in accomplishing the agency's mission?*

Thought not new, the partnership with World Communion of Reformed Churches has been very effective recently. Their leadership was very instrumental in assisting us with mediation related to ECO taking PCUSA congregations out of the denomination.

The PCUSA is engaged in numerous partnerships both ecumenically and interreligious.

- *What new ecumenical partnerships would help the agency be more effective in mission?*

We remain in dialogue with many Interfaith and Ecumenical groups. It is at the core of our commitment as Presbyterians. Now, we are not engaged in a dialogue with any particular groups regarding membership – although given the current political climate we are more actively engaged now with current partners than in previous years.

OGA is planning to assume the leadership role with interfaith partners in terms of relationship building. That function currently resides with PMA – but current circumstances do not allow a more full engagement.

- *What is your agency saying "no" to right now in order to focus energy on what you need to say "yes" to? What would the agency love to do but cannot?*

In 2013, OGA went through a significant reorganization including the elimination of several staff positions. It was done after recognizing that under the continued paradigm of minimal to no increases in per capita apportionment that the current level of staffing and work were not sustainable.

For the 2019 and 2010 budget OGA will be submitting an ambitious budget that

responds to God's call to support mid councils more fully. The budget will likely ask the assembly to increase the per capita apportionment significantly to allow OGA to provide national and regional support to mid councils as they respond to their ever-changing environment for mission.