

The Parity of Elders is a Great Idea: Overture 1—Not So Much

Bryce F. Sullivan

June 10, 2019

Abstract

The court of the General Assembly (GA) of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) lacks an effective parity of number among ruling elder (RE) and teaching elder (TE) commissioners, but Overture 1 is not a good solution to the problem since it would only increase the number of RE commissioners for those churches that already maximize their RE participation. There were only 58 churches out of the 1,572 churches in the PCA that sent their maximum number of RE commissioners to the 2018 GA, and those churches sent 141 RE commissioners. If a revised *Book of Church Order* (BCO 14-2) were in effect in 2018 as outlined in Overture 1, and if those same 58 churches maximized their RE participation, only 141 additional RE commissioners would have attended the 2018 GA. Overture 1 would have led, at most, to an increase in the RE commissioner participation rate from 22% to 28% of all commissioners at the 46th GA. Unfortunately, the eligibility of RE commissioners to participate does not often result in actual RE participation, and Overture 1 should be answered in the negative. Other strategies should be vigorously pursued so that the historic foundation of grass roots Presbyterianism in the PCA is not lost at the court of GA.

Overture 1

Overture 1 will be considered by the Overtures Committee and the 47th GA of the PCA in the fourth week of June. It is a proposal that its creators hope will increase the numbers of RE commissioners who participate in the annual GA in relation to the historically higher numbers of TE commissioners at the annual assembly. Presented by the Northwest Georgia Presbytery, the Overture seeks to amend Chapter 14, paragraph 2, of the PCA's *BCO* to address the "severe crisis" of RE underrepresentation.¹ The proposed amendment would double the number of RE commissioners eligible to serve as commissioners. Increasing the number of eligible REs, however, will not automatically ensure a significant increase in RE participation at the annual GA as this report demonstrates.

Elder Parity in the PCA

Elder parity is generally thought of in two ways in historic Presbyterianism, and this is reflected in the PCA's *BCO*. The *BCO* adopted at the first PCA GA in 1973 guarantees a "parity of authority" among elders but not a "parity of number." Parity of number in the courts of the church is an aspiration, but it is not guaranteed in all cases. The PCA adopted a two-office view (the offices of Elders and Deacons) with the *BCO* describing TEs and REs as belonging to "one class of office" and REs possessing the "same authority and eligibility to office in the courts of the Church as teaching elder" (*BCO* 8-9). As the GA's 1979 Ad-Interim Committee on Number of Offices stated, "the concept of parity does not refer to equality of numbers but rather equality of condition, rank, and value."²

¹ Overture 1 to the 47th General Assembly of the PCA from the Northwest Georgia Presbytery (<https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Overture-1-NW-GA-REs.pdf>).

² *Report of The Ad-Interim Committee on Number of Offices*, 7th General Assembly (1979), pp. 77-85 (<http://pcahistory.org/pca/2-455.html>).

Concerning parity of number among TEs and REs, there are some ways in which this is guaranteed by the PCA constitution. For example, the committees of the GA “are to be established on the basis of an equal number between teaching and ruling elders” (*BCO* 14-1.10).³ There have been situations in recent history when parity “on the basis of an equal number” was not maintained on GA committees, but this is the constitutional aspiration.⁴ *BCO* 15-1 also provides a guarantee on the parity of number when a Presbytery creates a commission. While attaining parity of number is elusive in some church courts, in all church courts of the PCA there is a constitutionally guaranteed parity of authority among TEs and REs.

Determining RE Representation at GA and Overture 1

BCO 14-2 currently provides that each congregation is entitled to send 2 RE commissioners to the annual GA for a church with communing membership up to and including 350. For each additional 500 communing members or fraction thereof, 1 more RE may serve the church at the GA. So with 350 members, a church is allowed 2 RE representatives and with 351 members, the church is allowed 3 RE representatives. Table 1 shows the number of REs eligible to serve a church at the annual GA under *BCO* 14-2 and under the proposed Overture 1, depending on the number of communing members a church has on its membership roll.

Table 1: Church Size and the Number of REs Eligible to Serve as GA Commissioners Under *BCO* 14-2 and Under Overture 1.

Number of Communing Church Members	Number of REs Eligible to Serve at GA Under <i>BCO</i> 14-2	Number of REs Eligible to Serve at GA Under Overture 1
Up to 350	2	4
351-850	3	6
851-1,350	4	8
1,351-1,850	5	10
1,851-2,350	6	12
2,351-2,850	7	14
2,851-3,350	8	16
3,351-3,850	9	18
3,851-4,350	10	20
4,351-4,850	11	22
4,851-5,350	12	24
5,351-5,850	13	26
5,851-6,350	14	28
6,351-6,850	15	30
6,851-7,350	16	32

³ At the 2nd GA in 1974, the word “parity” was replaced to read “an equal number” in the current *BCO* 14-1.10.

⁴ For example, the 44th GA appointed two Ad-Interim Committees that did not maintain an equal number of TEs and REs. The Committee on Women Serving in the Ministry of the Church had five TE members, two non-elder members, and no RE members. The Ad-Interim Committee on Racial and Ethnic Reconciliation had six TE members and one RE member.

Overture 1 would increase the allowable number of RE commissioners at the GA for each individual church from 2 REs for the first 350 communing members to 4 REs. Additionally, instead of the current policy of allowing 1 additional RE at GA for each 500 additional communing members or fraction thereof, under Overture 1, PCA churches would be allowed 2 additional RE commissioners for each added 500 members or fraction thereof. If adopted, each PCA church could send twice as many RE commissioners to the annual GA than are currently eligible.

The PCA Stated Clerk's report to the 2018 GA provided the 2017 statistics on the denomination's churches and minister. Also included in the Minutes of the 46th GA was the Stated Clerk's Attendance Report concerning TEs and REs who were enrolled as commissioners.⁵ There were a reported 1,568 churches in the PCA as of December 31, 2017, and 902 churches were represented at the GA in June of 2018. The *2019 Yearbook of the Presbyterian Church in America* provides church demographic data for the calendar year ending December 31, 2018.⁶ Therefore, the actual church demographic data at the mid-year General Assembly may differ somewhat from the data published in the *Yearbook*.⁷ The *2019 Yearbook* and the 2019 Stated Clerks' Report⁸ showed 1,572 churches in the PCA. In 2018, there were 902 churches represented at the GA. That means that 57.4% of the total number of churches were represented at GA⁹. However, many of these churches were not represented by RE commissioners. There were 1,536 commissioners registered for the 2018 GA including 1,202 TEs and 334 REs. There were almost four times the number of TE commissioners (78.3%) than their RE counterparts (21.7%). The ratio of RE to TE participation at the 2018 GA was in keeping with the trend over many years.¹⁰ Of the 46 PCA GAs, including the inaugural meeting in 1973, only the first GA had a majority of RE commissioners. At the 1973 GA, 53.8% of the commissioners were REs with an enrollment of 208 RE commissioners and 179 TE commissioners. Since 1973, there has been a steep decline in the ratio of RE to TE commissioners at GA. The historical data show that the PCA lacks, by any measure, an effective parity of number among TEs and REs in the court of GA.

Available Slots for RE Commissioners at the 2018 GA and RE Attendance

Overture 1 would only increase the number of participating RE commissioners for those churches that already maximize their RE participation. Increasing the number of eligible RE commissioners will not automatically increase participation. Based on the communing membership counts of particular churches in the *2019 Yearbook of the Presbyterian Church in America*,¹¹ if all churches maximized their

⁵ See pp. 460-497 of the *Minutes of the 46th GA of the PCA* (http://www.pcahistory.org/ga/46th_pcaga_2018.pdf).

⁶ *2019 Yearbook of the Presbyterian Church in America*. Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. Lawrenceville, GA.

⁷ It is important to note that the *2019 Yearbook* represented the historical record of year 2018. Additionally, the actual communing membership numbers of particular churches may be different from the published data since some churches do not update their statistical data annually with the PCA Stated Clerk's Office.

⁸ See the *2019 General Assembly Commissioner Handbook* (p. 260).

⁹ Since the *2019 Yearbook* and the 2019 Stated Clerk's Report are based on church data as of December 31, 2018, and the GA attendance data is from the date of the GA, there may be slight differences in the number of churches and church communing member data between these two points in time.

¹⁰ See an article providing a summary of attendance data on TE and RE commissioners at all GAs in the linked article: (<https://fpramsay.org/2019/05/28/attendance-of-teaching-elder-and-ruling-elder-commissioners-at-the-general-assemblies-of-the-presbyterian-church-in-america-from-1973-to-2018/>).

¹¹ The maximum number of REs who were eligible to attend GA was determined by examining the number of communing members of every particular church in the *2019 Yearbook* and determining the eligible number of RE participants based on the sizes of all churches in the denomination.

RE participation in 2018, they could have sent a total of 3,431 RE commissioners to the GA. Also, the Stated Clerk reported in his report to the 2019 GA that there were 4,951 TEs in the PCA in 2018. If attendance was maximized wherein all eligible REs and all TEs participated, using the 2018 GA as a hypothetical example, there would have been 8,382 commissioners with the REs representing 40.9% of the total.

However, churches do not maximize the RE commissioner positions available under *BCO* 14-2. In 2018, only 219 of the 1,572 PCA churches sent RE commissioners to the GA.¹² That means that 1,353 churches sent no RE commissioners to GA. Even though each of those 1,353 churches could have sent at least 2 RE commissioners, they sent none. The simple ability to send twice the number of commissioners to GA that Overture 1 provides will not motivate churches to send more REs to the GA. Eligibility does not equal participation. Most churches in the denomination do not come close to sending their allotted number of RE commissioners to the annual meeting. Table 2 below shows that only 6.9% of the eligible RE commissioner slots were filled for the 1,400 churches under 351 communing members. While RE participation rates for larger churches were somewhat better, at the 2018 GA only 9.7% of the available RE commissioner slots were filled from the 1,572 churches of the PCA. Please see the methodological endnote for a more complete description of the method used to analyze the data in this report.ⁱ

Table 2: Church Size, Eligible RE Commissioners, Number of RE Commissioners, and Percent of RE Attendance at the 2018 GA of those Eligible based on Church Size.

Church Communing Membership Size Categories based on <i>BCO</i> 14-2	Number of Eligible RE Commissioners based on Church Size	Total Count of All PCA Churches in 2019 <i>Yearbook</i> by Church Size	Total REs Eligible to Attend the 2018 GA by Church Size	Number of RE Commissioners Attending the 2018 GA by Church Size	Percent of RE Attendance of those Eligible by Church Size
Up to 350	2 REs	1,400	2,800	194	6.9%
351-850	3 REs	128	384	87	22.7%
851-1,350	4 REs	19	76	18	23.7%
1,351-1,850	5 REs	13	65	12	18.5%
1,851-2,350	6 REs	4	24	0	0.0%
2,351-2,850	7 REs	2	14	7	50.0%
2,851-3,350	8 REs	1	8	0	0.0%
3,351-3,850	9 REs	1	9	3	33.3%
3,851-4,350	10 REs	1	10	10	100.0%
4,351-4,850	11 REs	0	NA	NA	NA
4,851-5,350	12 REs	1	12	0	0.0%
5,351-5,850	13 REs	1	13	3	23.1%
5,851-6,350	14 REs	0	NA	NA	NA
6,351-6,850	15 REs	0	NA	NA	NA
6,851-7,350	16 REs	1	16	0	0.0%
Totals		1,572	3,431	334	9.7%

¹² Church count taken from the 2019 *Yearbook* for the year ending on December 31, 2018.

Would Overture 1 Increase the Number of REs Attending GA?

Since the adoption of Overture 1 would only lead to an increase in the number of participating REs for those churches that already maximize their RE participation, it is important to look at the level of RE participation on an individual church level for those churches that sent REs to the 2018 GA. As Table 3 shows, even those churches that sent REs to the GA did not maximize the number of REs they sent as commissioners.

Table 3: Churches that sent RE Commissioners to the 2018 GA, the Number of REs Sent, the Number REs Eligible, and the Percent of REs Sent compared to those Eligible.

Number of REs Eligible based on Church Communing Member Size	Churches that Sent RE Commissioners to the 2018 GA based on Church Size	Maximum REs Eligible to Attend GA of those Churches that Sent RE Commissioners	Actual REs Attending the 2018 GA from Participating Churches	Number of REs Eligible but Not Attending GA from Participating Churches	Percent of REs that Attended GA based on those Eligible from Participating Churches
2 REs	151	302	194	108	64.2%
3 REs	46	138	87	51	63.0%
4 REs	10	40	18	22	45.0%
5 REs	6	30	12	18	40.0%
7 REs	2	14	7	7	50.0%
9 REs	1	9	3	6	33.3%
10 REs	1	10	10	0	100.0%
13 REs	2	26	3	23	11.5%
Totals	219	569	334	235	58.7%

Note: Church sizes were determined by examining the *2019 Yearbook*.

However well intended, attempting to increase RE participation at GA by the method proposed in Overture 1 will not have the desired effect. In 2018, there were 58 churches that sent their maximum allotment of RE commissioners to the GA totaling 141 REs (See Table 4). If these churches had doubled the number of REs attending the 2018 GA, there would have been 475 REs enrolled as commissioners at the 2018 GA. The total enrollment of TE and RE commissioners would have been 1,677 with 475 (28.3%) of these being REs. Using this hypothetical method of predicting the RE attendance and the percent enrollment of TEs and REs at the 2018 GA had Overture 1 been in effect, the Overture would have increased the percent of REs participating in the 2018 GA at the very most from 22% to 28% (See Table 5).

Table 4: Churches that Maximized their RE Commissioners at the 2018 GA and the Hypothetical RE Count for those Churches under Overture 1.

Number of REs Eligible based on Church Size	Church Count based on RE Participation Category	Number of RE Commissioners at the 2018 GA	Number of REs Commissioners Eligible under Overture 1
2 REs	41	82	164
3 REs	15	45	90
4 REs	1	4	8
10 REs	1	10	20
Total	58	141	282

Table 5: TE and RE Attendance Totals at the 2018 GA and a Hypothetical Total Commissioner Count Assuming Overture #1 Were in Effect in 2018.

	As Recorded in the Minutes of the 46 th GA	Hypothetical Count at the 46 th GA under Overture #1
Total Number of TEs:	1,202 (78.3%)	1,202 (71.7%)
Total Number of REs:	334 (21.7%)	475 (28.3%)
Total Enrollment:	1,536 (100%)	1,677 (100%)
Churches Represented:	902	902

The data show that at every level of church size, increasing the number of REs eligible to attend GA as proposed in Overture #1 would not increase by a significant amount the number of additional REs who would attend the annual GA. There could be a slight increase in RE participation, but the increase would be limited to those churches that already maximize their RE participation at GA. Increasing RE eligibility will not ensure an increase in participation.

Conclusion

The historical data show clearly that the PCA lacks an effective parity of number among RE and TE commissioners in the court of GA. While almost any proposal to increase REs in the court of GA is a worthy cause to consider, Overture 1 is not a good solution to the problem, and it should be answered in the negative (i.e., it should be defeated). There were only 58 churches out of the 1,572 churches in the PCA that sent the maximum number of REs to the 2018 GA. Those churches sent 141 RE commissioners. If Overture 1 were passed, and if those 58 churches maximized their RE participation under the revised *BCO* 14-2 created by Overture 1, it would have meant, hypothetically, that only 141 additional REs would have attended the 2018 GA. The RE commissioners in 2018 were 21.7% of the total number of RE and TE commissioners. Overture 1 would have led, at the most, to an RE participation count at the 2018 GA of 475 or 28.3% of the total commissioners.

An increase from 22% RE participation at GA to 28% RE participation is not the level of RE participation to which the court of GA should aspire. It is worth noting that at the 2018 GA only 9.7% of the available RE commissioner slots were filled from the 1,572 churches of the PCA. There already exists a great deal of capacity for additional RE participation at GA.

While parity of number among elders is an elusive goal, it should be vigorously pursued so that the historic foundation of grass roots Presbyterianism in the PCA is not lost at the court of GA. Instead of changing our *BCO* with the insufficient fix proposed in Overture 1, the elders of the church should work toward finding solutions that will increase RE participation as commissioners at the PCA General Assembly.

ⁱ **Methodological Endnote:**

Several data sources were used in this report, and these were referenced in the footnotes contained in the body of the report. In addition to the methods noted in the body of this report, the following methodological caveats are important.

One issue concerns the PCA *Yearbook* selection. Since the GA occurs mid-year and the annual *Yearbook* and Stated Clerk's Report show church demographic data as of December 31 of each year, data analyses were compared using both the *2018 Yearbook* and the *2019 Yearbook*. The results of the analyses were only slightly different. For example, the hypothetical count of REs at the 46th GA under Overture 1 shown in Table 5 was 477 (28.4%) using the *2018 Yearbook* and was 475 (28.3%) using the *2019 Yearbook*. Therefore, the *2019 Yearbook* was selected for related analyses since it was the most current. Individual differences between the *Yearbooks* were examined separately to determine if these differences would affect the results. In all cases the differences were nonsignificant.

The *Yearbook* data are also incomplete. When a church had a blank for the number of communing members, it was assumed the church had 350 or fewer members, and the communing membership count was recorded as 100. Another matter of note is the fact that some reporting errors are also evident when comparing the GA minutes and the *Yearbook* data. For example, 6 churches were listed as mission churches in the *2019 Yearbook* yet these churches sent RE commissioners to the 46th GA. However, mission churches are not eligible to send RE commissioners, so it appears these churches did not update their particular church status with the Stated Clerk's Office before December 31, 2018. Additionally, based on the both the *2018 Yearbook* and the *2019 Yearbook*, one church sent more REs than their communing membership numbers would allow them. It was assumed that these apparent inconsistencies were simply due to recording errors of some type.

There were also formatting and other errors in the 46th GA minutes in the Attendance Report found in Appendix S (pp. 460-497). These included, for example, formatting errors that made it difficult to determine whether the attending commissioner was a TE or RE (pp. 469, 470, 472, 473, 480, 481, 482, 489, and 494). Also, in one instance, an RE listed in the minutes as a commissioner reported that he attended GA and served as a floor clerk, but he was not a commissioner.