

# An open letter to the church by Rick Ufford-Chase

July 17, 2020

Dear Commissioners and Advisory Delegates to the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and friends in the Presbyterian Church (USA),

*This is a personal, open letter to the Church that does not represent the position of the Presbyterian Mission Agency or any other entity of the PC(USA).*

Our church is badly broken, and we are missing a God-given opportunity to reform. The combination of the Covid-19 pandemic and the widespread uprisings and national reckoning taking place in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and so many others offers a clarion call to the PC(USA) to change our culture, our worship and fellowship, our decision-making and accountability, and our spiritual practices. We need new ways of being church.

I write as a cradle Presbyterian. I have given all of my vocational energy to the support and nurture of the PC(USA) since I was a junior in high school nearly 40 years ago. I have served for many years as a mission worker, as a ruling elder in four congregations, as a leader in the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, a Moderator of the General Assembly, and as co-director of Stony Point Center. I love this church, but as a white, heterosexual man who is comfortable with the male gender identity I was assigned at birth, I am increasingly aware that I have been privileged in ways that are deeply problematic. Our church is steeped in a culture of whiteness that benefits those who look like me and actively disadvantages those who do not.

As the meetings of the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly came to an end, it was clear that many commissioners, including a significant majority of white advisory delegates and commissioners to this assembly, want to find a new way to be church. They are looking for ways to take responsibility for their conscious and unconscious participation in systems of racism and white supremacy, and they are looking to the church to be a primary vehicle for that effort. The inability of this General Assembly to take significant action in this unprecedented moment is not their fault. In the face of having to make fast decisions about how to hold an assembly in the midst of a public health crisis and recognizing that the Presbyterian Book of Order doesn't contemplate the rules for an online assembly, their task was too narrowly defined by the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly. The rules that governed their conduct were designed to control a potentially chaotic situation, but had the effect of severely limiting the voices of the commissioners and advisory delegates. As a result, the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was unable to take advantage of this unique historical moment to open a path toward the church of the future.

The problems of entrenched racism in our Church are not due to a failure in our elected leadership, nor are they a reflection of our collective refusal to look unflinchingly at our culpability in supporting that racism in the broader culture. Over the last decade the General

Assemblies of the PC(USA) have made a consistent effort to identify, take responsibility for and dismantle that racism, and many Presbyterians are increasingly aware that these have been initial baby steps on what will necessarily be a lifelong journey.

We have voted overwhelmingly to place Presbyterians who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color in places of leadership. We just re-affirmed our faith in J Herbert Nelson as our Stated Clerk, for whose vision and commitment I am deeply grateful. We are enthusiastically following the leadership of Diane Moffett as the President and Executive Director of our Mission Agency as she brings a fresh energy to the whole church. We have been blessed by the Board leadership in the Presbyterian Mission Agency, which for the last two years has been led ably and well by Joe Morrow and Warren Lesane. All four of these African American leaders have been chosen by God to lead us in such a time as this. Further, our nominations committee does an increasingly effective job at recruiting elected members for our national committees and task forces that typically represent far more racial diversity than most of our churches, and the same can be said about the staff members of the Office of the General Assembly, the Presbyterian Mission Agency, and the Administrative Services Group. In my judgement we have consistently chosen co-moderator teams wisely and they have led us into far deeper discernment about the problem of entrenched racism in the institution of our church in each of the last several General Assemblies.

Many Presbyterians have broadly signaled our deep desire to change in all kinds of ways. That was clearly evident at this General Assembly with the few key votes that commissioners and advisory delegates were allowed to take, beginning with the election of Elona Street-Stewart and Gregory Bentley as Co-Moderators with 66% of the vote on the first ballot . a majority election that left little room for doubt about the commissioners and advisory delegates values as they overwhelmingly affirmed the powerful words and witness of this remarkable leadership team. However, though our national staff did an excellent job of managing the technology for an on-line assembly, many who participated found the experience to be deeply dissatisfying because the rules of this assembly allowed them to touch in only the most cursory way on critical life and death matters of our time.

At a time when it has never been more important to affirm the democratic principles that undergird our polity, the structure of our first, historic, electronic assembly dramatically reduced the ability of the commissioners and advisory delegates to the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly to deliberate. The rules created by the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly relegated all substantive matters related to racial, social and environmental justice as well as consideration of critically important and timely reports from a variety of task forces and special committees to the next assembly in two years. Those matters that were recommended for referral go to the heart of what it means to boldly claim and re-create our Presbyterian identity in a moment when that clarification is crucial, and the decision to place those matters in a motion to refer+created an outrageously high standard of a two-thirds majority that commissioners would have had to meet to pull critical matters out for careful deliberation. Further, commissioners and advisory delegates were given no opportunity to express their own interest or willingness to engage with a longer, less-traditional General Assembly in which committees could have been given the task of deliberating over a period of months.

And so we were left with an assembly in which there was little opportunity to engage the critical issues of our time. This is a symptom of a much larger problem that People of Color have been

naming in our church for a very long time: rules are not neutral. They either help to advance racial equity or they perpetuate the status quo of racial inequity that most Presbyterians agree is the rule in the broader culture and many of us are beginning to understand is a reality in the church as well. White Christians have largely created that status quo in the United States, and the amazing discourse taking place across almost every sector of our society and in every corner of the country this summer suggests that white people, and specifically white Christians like many of us in the PC(USA), may finally be ready to change those rules. That work can and should begin with a careful re-thinking about how we can strengthen the democratic principles we value so highly in our own Church to be fully and genuinely inclusive of all people.

Ironically, having signaled our clear commitment to a fully inclusive church by electing leaders who are Black, Indigenous or People of Color at every level in our denomination, we have now placed them in the impossible situation of having to lead a church in which the structural power remains deeply embedded in a culture of whiteness that has characterized Presbyterianism in the United States from its inception. To actually change the power dynamics that favor whiteness in an organization built around privileging white people over hundreds of years, we are all going to have to fundamentally change the way we relate to one another and the way we make decisions, and it goes against all of our instincts to do so. Presbyterians are, at heart, traditionalists. We value the core practices of our Books of Order, Confessions and Worship that have governed and grounded our life together. We have established parliamentary practices that bring order and predictability to our deliberations, and that we have been loath to abandon. We are experts at planning for every contingency, and we do everything within our power not to allow the unexpected to interrupt our business proceedings.

The challenge before us is to affirm our foundational polity that offers broad opportunities for shared decision-making while simultaneously creating a culture in which it is clear that all voices are honored. If we choose, this is a time when our egalitarian, participative style of deliberation could point the way to new ways of understanding what it means to be Christian without insisting on being dominant.

This is a time when an authentic Christian voice is desperately needed to counter the dishonesty of our President as he cloaks himself in Christian rhetoric and waves the bible as an empty prop for media consumption when the values he espouses are grounded in white supremacy and hatred. This is a time when we are faced with powerful forces of racism that target People of Color for all manner of violence, and we must embrace Jesus' demand that we demonstrate deep and abiding love for all of God's people (and by that I mean . . . all people). This is a time when democracy and self-determination in our nation and around the globe is under unprecedented assault by autocratic leaders, and the democratic institutions of our church could be pointing the way toward a far more just society. This is a time when many white Presbyterians finally appear to be prepared to become learners and to enter into serious soul-searching about the many ways in which we benefit from, uphold, and have the capacity to change systems of white supremacy, and we must not miss the opportunity to take the unprecedented action necessary to nurture that introspection and transformation.

We can choose to use this moment of crisis in our country as an opportunity to be more faithful to the gospel values we hold so dear. In every moment and in our every decision made by local congregations, mid-councils and the General Assembly, we need to ask ourselves these basic questions:

- Does this decision center, as Jesus so often did, the voices of those long-silenced and marginalized in the broader culture?
- Are we clear that being Presbyterian means risking everything to stand with those who have the most to lose in the inequitable and clearly unjust structures of systemic, structural racism and poverty both in our church and in the broader society?
- Are we willing to take the heat from those Presbyterians who threaten to withdraw their participation in an effort to keep from being made uncomfortable as the Holy Spirit blows through our church in new ways?
- Are we nurturing communities of faith that stubbornly refuse to be captive to or proponents of a society that relegates some to enduring hardship while accepting as a God given right a ridiculous level of comfort and privilege for others?

Are we a Gospel people?

Let's not go back to "business as usual" in our worship if and when the pandemic begins to loosen its hold on our congregations. Let's talk with one another in deeper ways and push one another to greater faithfulness. Let's agree that our prime directive is to be Good News in the face of climate disaster and racism and enforced poverty in our communities and around the world. Let's embrace far more culturally diverse worship styles that sustain our faith communities and actually make our churches the center of our lives. Let's abandon the Christian exceptionalism that is so ingrained in us that we ourselves are blind to it, and instead reach out to be family both with those of other religious traditions and with those whose spirituality long ago left behind the confines of narrowly constructed denominational identity. Let's be known not for the politics of hate and condemnation for which Christianity has become infamous in our time, but for the love of Jesus that constantly pushed well-beyond the boundaries of what was acceptable in his own time.

Let's follow the lead and the creative energy exhibited in so many of our mid-councils over the last few years as they have let go of the "business as usual" practices that constrain us and focused instead on building deeper relationships of confidence with one another that offer the necessary trust, durability and resilience to respond to the challenges of our time.

Let's urge the advisory delegates and commissioners of the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, under the competent and visionary leadership of the Stated Clerk and our Co-Moderators, to spend the next two years actively working together to develop real proposals for changes in how we govern ourselves that address the systemic challenges we face as an organization steeped in a culture of white supremacy that is not our fault but is absolutely our responsibility. Those proposals could be presented for consideration by the 225<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. If they are daring enough, those proposals could lead us into the church of the twenty-first century that we can only dimly imagine but that God clearly has in mind for us.

The time for tinkering is long gone. Church politics cannot solve our problems, and appeasement of one another's most fearful tendencies in the name of a fake unity holds no promise for us. This is our moment to fundamentally rethink the ways in which we do business and to construct new ways of being church that leave behind our need to harness and control the movement of the spirit.

White Christianity . and the culture of whiteness baked into the PC(USA) . will never again be the dominant religious experience in the United States. That is a gift from God, because it was a deeply problematic space to inhabit. The future of the Presbyterian Church (USA) . if we are to have any future at all . is clear. We must embrace our identity as a church committed at all costs to the cause of justice and care for all of God's creation. We will almost certainly have far fewer members, and a lot less money to throw around. Our churches will be known not for the number of well-dressed people meeting decently and in order on Sunday morning in mostly mono-cultural experiences of worship, but instead for our daring actions as a small band of followers of Jesus Christ who believe his witness offers genuine transformation and healing in an unbearably broken world. Most importantly in our current historical moment, all people and the gifts and culture they bring to the table will be valued, and norms of whiteness that we have come to assume define Presbyterianism will be a thing of the past.

I have been holding on to my Presbyterian identity by my fingertips for nearly a decade. The more I learn about the level of harm that we have perpetrated as Christians throughout a history that is rife with anti-Jewishness, Islamophobia, genocide of indigenous peoples, theft of land, the institution of slavery, the creation and perpetuation of Jim Crow across generations, marginalization and abuse of women, and hatred and condemnation directed to those who are LGBTQ and/or gender non-conforming, the less sure I am that the liberating message of Jesus has the possibility of over-coming that legacy of so much evil and destruction. As a white, straight, cis-gendered man, I know that I have to actually make decisions to participate in movements that counter that kind of evil, not protect it or build it up. If I have to leave the church to be faithful, so be it.

But . and this is a very tenuous ~~but~~+. I want to believe the mantra I was raised on: Presbyterians are ~~re~~formed and always being reformed.+ I'm still here, hanging on, trying to empower others rather than seek power for myself, attempting to follow the lead of Presbyterians who have not shared my experience of privilege, and lying awake at night trying to imagine a better way to be faithful. When I despair and want to give up on the church, I remember the faithfulness of my friends and colleagues who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color who have continually experienced both micro and macro aggression in this broken church and who continue working faithfully to call us into the kin-dom . the authentic family . of God. I am convinced by their vision of what could happen if we were to just let go of our blind faith in the culture of whiteness that has become the idol of our age and instead embrace the entirely liberating, no-holds-barred, boundary breaking witness of Jesus.

Advisory Delegates and Commissioners to the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, please don't give up. God has called you for such a time as this, and you have work to do if we are to have any hope for relevance in this unparalleled, consequential moment here in the United States. You are called to lead the church in this moment of incredible challenge and opportunity, and your assembly could be known for creating an historical tipping point in our denomination. This opportunity may not come around again for a very long time, and it must not be missed. There are many, many of us across the church who are prepared to support you in this task.

You can ask your Presbytery Stated Clerks and the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly to help you devise ways to reconvene as an Assembly to accomplish two things:

- Determine which items of business that were before this General Assembly should have been considered critical and time sensitive given the remarkable historical moment in which the church finds itself, and develop a way for those items to be referred to GA committees that fully incorporate the voices of both our commissioners and advisory delegates for full consideration and recommendation for action.
- Initiate comprehensive changes needed to model a new way of being church that is unflinching in its commitment to identify and transform the Church's structural, habitual and reflexive racism, and become known for our commitment to be a place of full inclusion, dignity and respect for all who profess their love for Jesus of Nazareth and confidence in Jesus of the Cross.

And leaders in the Church, please make it easier . not harder . for our commissioners and advisory delegates to take on this God-given task and meet this challenge in a way that honors their vow to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination and love.



**Rick Ufford-Chase**

With fear and trembling,

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