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PROPOSED CONCURRENCE TO AN OVERTURE TO THE 224TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2020)

The Presbytery of Middle Tennessee concurs with the Presbytery of Chicago to overture the 224th General Assembly (2020) to:

Encourage our churches to counter polarization in our society by:

- Praying for God’s guidance and healing touch as we seek to reduce pain and conflict from broken relationships.
- Studying the call of Scripture and our confessions to join Christ’s mission of reconciliation to the world.
- Seeking to become wiser and more generous in spirit as we go out into the world as ambassadors of Christ.
- Becoming more sensitive to our own choice of words and actions and aware of how they might be interpreted (or misinterpreted) by others.
- Repenting for words and actions that demonstrate little respect for others with whom we disagree, both inside and outside of the church.
- Learning, practicing, and teaching skills that build trust and respect between people.
- Respectfully and honestly exploring our disagreements while maintaining our love for God and our neighbors as our dearest priority.

Rationale:

This overture is a challenge to live out a better way together. We are at our least happy and most empty when we fail to seek relationship with God and with each other. Polarization is a symptom of a larger need: we are losing our yearning for leading more Christ-centered lives.

The American culture is becoming increasingly polarized, according to studies by the Pew Research Center and the Public Religion Research Institute. We often entrench ourselves in our own side of polarizing issues, widening partisan divides in our communities, congregations, and in our homes. Rather than seeking relationship, we’re not talking—or listening—to each other. Even worse, we hear in our neighbor’s words a different narrative imposed by the lens of our own opinions. Rather than seeking constructive dialogue, we recoil with contempt for those with whom we disagree.

Through our scriptures and confessions, God calls us to a different way of life. Passages such as Matthew 5:23-24, John 17:20-26, Romans 12:9-18, 2 Corinthians 5:11-21, Ephesians 2:14-16, and

Colossians 3:13-14 remind us that we are at our most faithful when we are working toward reconciliation with God and with others. The Confessions of Belhar (especially 10.3) and of 1967 (especially 9.10 and 9.31) urge us to remember that the love of God is inextricably tied with the love of neighbor. (See addendum for the texts of these scriptures and confessions.)

As a denomination, we in the PC(USA) have not always treated each other with respect in our many disagreements. We have battled over difficult concepts and too often have split apart rather than become reconciled. We need to learn again to listen with genuine interest in and respect for those with whom we disagree, to counter any attempt to bully, shut down, or belittle our conversation partners, and to model Christian love to the world in the name of Christ who gives us the ministry of reconciliation.

This overture calls us to be part of the solution in halting the deliberate, selfish rending of relationships which ultimately drives us away from relationship with God. We propose that leadership in our churches conduct training to strengthen our abilities: to seek to understand the other sides of each story, to find in our hearts empathy where we once felt contempt, to pivot and befriend our neighbors with different viewpoints, to cooperate in civil discussion, and to learn how to best intercede in unconstructive conflict.

Among many other such resources, the following list of websites, organizations, and books can be helpful for building skills in these areas:

- Golden Rule 2020: A Call for Dignity and Respect in Politics (www.goldenrule2020.org)
- Better Angels (www.better-angels.org),
- Weave: The Social Fabric Project (<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/weave-the-social-fabric-initiative/>)
- House United: Coming Together for the Common Good (www.houseunitedmovement.org)
- *Holy Disunity* by Layton Williams
- *A House United* by Allen Hilton
- *Love Your Enemies* by Arthur Brooks

This is not an effort to persuade those who differ in allegiance or opinion. Rather, it is an attempt to fully realize and to celebrate the rich gifts that diversity can provide in an environment of love and human relationships where dialog can lead us where the Spirit guides us.

As we gain experience with tools, we can live more fully and more faithfully into our calling to be ambassadors of reconciliation, both demonstrating lives of peace and teaching the skills we have learned into our social networks, neighborhoods, communities, and world.

Addendum

References to Scripture and the PC(USA) Book of Confessions
Cited Above

Matthew 5:23-24

So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

John 17:20-26 (Jesus speaking)

“I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have

given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

Romans 12:9-18

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Ephesians 2:14-16

For Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.

Colossians 3:13-14

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The Confession of Belhar

(10.3) We believe

- *That Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another;*
- *That unity is, therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ; that through the working of God's Spirit it is a binding force, yet simultaneously a reality which must be earnestly pursued and sought: one which the people of God must continually be built up to attain;*
- *That this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;*
- *That this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways;*
 - *In that we love one another;*
 - *That we experience, practice, and pursue community with one another;*
 - *That we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another;*
 - *That we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and mind;*
 - *Have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope;*
 - *Together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ;*
 - *Together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity;*
 - *Together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ;*
 - *That we need one another and upbuild one another, admonishing and comforting one another;*
 - *That we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity;*
- *That this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God;*
- *That true faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership in the church.*

The Confession of 1967

(9.10) The risen Christ is the Savior for all [humanity]. Those joined to him by faith are set right with God and commissioned to serve as his reconciling community. Christ is the head of this community, the church, which began with the apostles and continues through all generations.

(9.31) To be reconciled to God is to be sent into the world as [God's] reconciling community. This community, the church universal, is entrusted with God's message of reconciliation and shares [God's] labor of healing the enmities which separate [us] from God and from each other. Christ has called the church to this mission and given it the gift of the Holy Spirit. The church maintains continuity with the apostles and with Israel by faithful obedience to his call.