

Session Statement

Friends, brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, thank you all for attending tonight. We greatly appreciate our members and your care and love for the church. The last 18 months have been a tumultuous season for the church and we know that many of you have desired more information, and you have been so patient and faithful in waiting so long. The Session has not communicated as often and fully as we could have, and we are sorry for the pain and frustration that this must have caused many of you. At the prompting of some of our members via formal petition, we are here tonight specifically to update the church on the timeline and proceedings that have occurred related to former pastor Rankin Wilbourne's removal by the Pacific Presbytery. Essentially, the questions we hope to answer are "what happened with Rankin and why was he deposed from the ministry, what has happened since his removal, and where do things stand today?" There is also a list of 14 specific questions that was in the petition, which will be answered after this presentation.

You may recall that this meeting was originally scheduled for March 2020 but it was cancelled due to the pandemic. You may be asking, "what's taken us this long to meet, and if we are doing this virtually now, why couldn't we have done this virtually 16 months ago?" Those are legitimate questions. In summary, the petition we received not only requested a meeting for information, but it also called for a vote on whether to leave the Presbyterian Church in America. According to the book of church order, which provides governing documents for our form of church government, any meeting with a formal vote must be done in person. There is no precedent on how to meet during a global pandemic or whether virtual meetings would be allowed, and so we consulted with the Stated Clerk of the PCA General Assembly in Atlanta, and their office counseled us to wait to meet in person to ensure that no one would be able to question the legitimacy of this important vote. Of course, in March of 2020 we thought that the lockdown may have lasted a month or so at most – we did not anticipate meeting virtually for another 8 months. In hindsight, we should have done this first informational meeting virtually, as we are doing now, even if it meant postponing the vote until later, and again, we are sorry for this delay.

I also want to acknowledge that there are multiple audiences within our overall audience tonight: those who are eager for information and want to understand more, those of you who are ready to move on from this topic, and maybe even some of you have joined us in the last 17 months and are very unfamiliar with these proceedings and our recent history. We hope that we will speak to all of you, regardless of where you are coming from, but if you have questions we don't answer, please speak with those of us on the session, or our pastors or deacons, or email us at elders@pacificcrossroads.org. I also want to acknowledge that there may be people with us tonight who are no longer members of our church – we had a group of people leave the church in 2019 or earlier, many because they disagreed with the session's decision at that time to retain Pastor Wilbourne. And then we had another group leave in the last year because Pastor Wilbourne was no longer our pastor. There are a lot of strong opinions on both sides, and a lot of hurt and pain. I want us to acknowledge that pain – the church is supposed to be a refuge from anxiety and pain, not a source of it. And we confess that PCC, under our oversight, **has** been a source of pain for some, and we confess that and grieve that. We ask your forgiveness. In preparing for tonight, we tried to hold to 2 principles: 1) stick to facts and not speak for others (recognizing that the session's perspectives may differ from others'), and 2) avoid finger-pointing and focus on a healthy path forward for our church. We encourage you to apply these principles in the Q&A session as well. These are complex issues and are multi-faceted. If they were simple and cut and dry, I can assure you we would not be where we are today.

The rest of this presentation will follow this outline: a brief reminder on the original judicial process regarding Pastor Wilbourne, the PCC Session and others' response to that process, subsequent judicial processes, the current state, and finally our conclusions. The Session stands unified behind these words and all members have reviewed them for honesty and clarity.

First, a brief refresher of the events that led up to the removal of Pastor Rankin Wilbourne. For several years the PCC Session attempted to handle concerns raised internally related to Pastor Wilbourne's interactions with staff members. These were primarily related to concerns around power dynamics, control, and how he treated some people in the office. In retrospect, the Session's methods of conflict resolution, reconciliation, and even discipline were disjointed, causing harm to all parties involved, and were not in keeping with the guidelines laid out by our denomination for handling issues with ministers. Some of you may not know this, but in the PCA, the senior pastor is not actually a member of our church. The senior pastor's church is the presbytery – this is the body to which he is accountable and the only body with the authority to discipline a senior pastor. So Rankin was not a member of PCC and the session should not have tried to address these concerns internally and impose discipline on him, which we did, in many ways, over many years. In hindsight, when concerns were first raised, Rankin should have gone to the presbytery himself, to help him address these concerns, and the session should have gone to the presbytery as well.

We want to pause here and acknowledge again and repent from the shortcomings and sins of the session collectively and individually. We failed in our obligations to uphold the governance that we swore to uphold in our roles as elders. We did not model the biblical process for reconciliation and handling conflict. And we elders sinned in our pride, leaning on our own competence and belief in our ability to handle these issues, for far too long, rather than seeking outside help from our own overseers. This harmed those who were affected by Pastor Wilbourne's sins, it caused chaos, confusion and anxiety in our church office, it harmed our church body as a whole, and it harmed Rankin and his wife, Morgen. It also created internal divisions in our session that severely hampered our ability to serve as shepherds. The Senior Pastor is supposed to be the moderator of our session, and we removed Rankin from this role, so we did not have a true leader, and as a result we often got bogged down in long meetings and endless debates, which often left our staff disheartened, confused and feeling unloved and undervalued. And we used up a lot of oxygen that could have been devoted to prayer and ministry. As a session, we were divided in what we knew and in how we believed the problems should be solved. We ask for forgiveness in all of these things, from those of you who are a part of our body, and from those who have left. We are committed to improving, and we have enlisted the help of Paul and other senior leaders in our denomination to train the session, and to help us learn and grow from these sins and failures, in order to serve you better in the future.

I. The initial Investigation and Judicial Process

In 2019 the Pacific Presbytery, the regional governing body of which PCC is a member, received a formal accusation against Pastor Wilbourne. This was a letter that was reportedly signed by 36 former PCC members, including former staff members. To answer one common question: the PCC Session has never seen, nor will likely ever see, the full accusations or any investigation records from this phase. We have not seen the letter nor who signed it, as their names were kept confidential through the process. After receiving the letter, our local presbytery created a Judicial Commission to investigate the allegations and determine if there were sufficient grounds to bring formal charges, at which point they would proceed to a trial. The PCC Session was made aware of the investigation but was minimally involved in this process.

The investigation took about three months, and while Rankin was aware of the investigation, he did not meet with the commission nor was he informed of the nature of the charges against him until the end of the investigation period, in January of 2020. When he met with the Judicial Commission then, Rankin acknowledged that he was guilty of many of the sins raised by the judicial commission, and so he decided to pursue what the BCO calls a “Case without Process”, which you can read about in chapter 38 of the BCO. What this means is that instead of the court filing charges, and having to go through a trial, Rankin came forward as his own accuser – confessing a number of very specific sins and putting himself at the mercy of the court as to his judgment. Under this process, Rankin was required to draft a “statement of facts” which would be used by the court to determine his judgement, and that statement had to be approved by the court before he could submit it. So the judicial commission made sure that his confession statement adequately addressed the concerns they identified during their investigation, and the specific charges they were planning to bring against him.

One point I want to make here – we have heard some concerns that this was a plea bargain or some backroom confession designed to manipulate the process, and I can assure you that this is not accurate. You can obviously tell this from the judgment that was imposed that this was not the case, but just to clarify, when someone accuses themselves under BCO 38-1, they confess their sins without any knowledge or agreement of what discipline they might receive. They simply put their confession out there and let the court render judgment. A trial can get messy, with cross examination, a lot of contention, a lot of time and resources, and division, and as Rankin told me at the time, “I don’t need to put our church through more pain and hurt – I am guilty of these things. I am. I can and should confess these.” He had confessed many of these things to our church in the past, but now it was time for him to confess them to his church – the presbytery.

The Session was appropriately not a part of this decision, as it was Rankin’s alone to make. There have been questions about how much the Session was aware of the sins confessed to in his statement and the time periods for these confessed sins. I want to be clear: the Session as a group aware of all of the sins and issues outlined in his confession. While we may not have been aware of every example he cited, we were collectively aware of most of them and were not surprised by any of the sins he confessed to nor examples he provided, nearly all of which were from several years ago. Many of these had been discussed at session meetings and other forums. In addition, we have since been able to review the draft charges that the presbytery was planning to file against him, and we can confirm that it largely lines up with his final statement of confession, and that there was nothing in there that was new to the session. As to the nature of his confessed sins - These were all related to his treatment of and personal interactions with people. Nothing was sexual, or related to substance abuse, or related to any sort of criminal activity, as some have asked. But we also acknowledge that because of the manner in which these and other complaints were investigated and handled by the session, two unfortunate things are indeed true: not all session members were aware of certain of these issues, and we do not believe all concerns were handled in a manner that was just, seeking the purity and peace of the church, and conclusive.

So back to the process - Rankin’s confession obviated the need for a trial, and after hearing his confession along with a supplemental plan of repentance, the local presbytery moved immediately to decide the appropriate level of censure, if any. At this closed meeting in February of 2020, attended by a full quorum of PCC elders, the Presbytery voted to apply the censure of deposition, which is one of the most severe ministerial punishments available; it disqualifies a minister from serving in the denomination, and removes him from his church. While we had no expectations for the severity of the

censure ahead of time, we were all quite shocked by this decision. This ruling was announced at the February 16th Congregational Meeting, ending Pastor Wilbourne's time at PCC. This is effectively where we left you last with regards to this process, right before Covid hit.

II. The Complaints

So, then what? How did the Session respond? You are aware of our efforts to ensure the preaching of the Word and shepherding of the flock, and we are so thankful for Bill Ingram, Shawn Gendall, a number of guest preachers, and our incredible staff for continuing to ensure that continuity of the church during a global pandemic and with a severe drop in our budget. But regarding Rankin's case, the Session chose to utilize the prescribed process in the book of church order to formally complain against the censure imposed on Rankin. As you heard earlier, the presbyterian form of government provides layers of oversight and checks and balances at each level to ensure good governance. The BCO provides a formal process of complaint for any person who believes a process or decision made by a ruling body is incorrect. To simplify, this is a form of an appeal. The PCC Session submitted a written complaint to our presbytery that outlined our concerns with the process and what we believed was an unfair outcome of the case. Rankin also filed a complaint, and a group of teaching elders filed a separate complaint. The complaints, while varied in their technicalities, were all consistent in the following themes:

1. The initial investigation was not handled in a way consistent with the BCO and that ensured justice for all parties involved.
2. The presbytery meeting where the censure was determined was improperly ordered, leading to a biased decision-making process that was not consistent with the Book of Church Order.
3. The level of censure was not consistent with the sins confessed to and was lacking in grace for a repentant sinner.

Just to avoid any confusion, our complaint did not suggest Rankin was innocent. He willingly confessed his sins, and he is guilty of them. Our complaint was against the process and the severity of the judgement rendered in that process.

Why did we complain? We had a few motivations that the Session prayerfully worked through before deciding to proceed. First, we wanted to ensure a fair and just process for Pastor Wilbourne and his family; we believed deposition was not appropriate for the sins he confessed. Second, we want to protect future PCC ministers, church planters, and other pastors in our presbytery from experiencing similar issues in future judicial processes. We hoped that our complaints could lead to improved processes in the future. And finally, we would like to see our presbytery (including ourselves) adopt an increasing posture of grace and humility, something we felt was lacking in the process. Like our church, our presbytery is inexperienced in matters like this, which is probably a good thing, but we want to see our presbytery function more smoothly and in accordance with our polity.

Complaints first go to the ruling court, so these went to our local presbytery last summer, where they were heard but were rejected. All of the complainants then chose to complain to the next higher court, in this case our denomination's Standing Judicial Commission (SJC), the highest court in the PCA. The Session chose not to discuss the complaint process openly with the congregation while it was ongoing. We felt this was dictated by the process, to keep all proceedings confidential until final rulings were

made. And so from this standpoint, we did not have any information we could really share until now. The SJC is a slow body, similar to the US Supreme Court, that proceeds with caution through its docket. This past April, the Session and Presbytery received a preliminary ruling from the SJC panel assigned to the case; in short, the Panel sustained the complaints, meaning generally that it agreed with the crux of our concerns and recommended that Rankin's deposition be annulled, and it instead provided a reduced censure of Definite Suspension for the time already served. This ruling was then forwarded to the full SJC for final decision. The SJC had the option to re-hear the case but chose not to, and on July 14th (last week) the full Standing Judicial Commission met to review the case, and the SJC confirmed the Panel ruling by a unanimous vote of 19-0. This final ruling changed the censure to definite suspension for time already served (so a 17 month suspension), and fully restored Rankin as a pastor and member in good standing in the PCA. The SJC Panel's ruling, kind of like a legal opinion from a court, highlights several areas where the presbytery's process was not in keeping with good judicial wisdom nor with the requirements in the BCO, and also confirms that the censure was inappropriately severe for the sins Rankin confessed.

Let me pause here and address some concerns that have been raised. Some people have said that Rankin got off on a technicality through this complaint process. But we urge you all to consider that he was publicly defrocked and removed from the ministry he had led in building over 13 years, he had to move his family out of Los Angeles where he met his wife and raised their family, and he served 17 months of definite suspension. This discipline was severe and painful. The SJC ruling did not say that he was innocent – it said that the process was improperly conducted, yes, but separately, it still imposed a 17 month suspension based on his confession. This was real discipline. Others have raised concerns that Rankin preached many times as a guest preacher at another church in Indiana, outside the PCA and so he was either not really disciplined, or not repentant, or both. First, that decision to preach was not up to us, nor our presbytery. Our session did not take any action to authorize or grant permission for him to preach at another church, as some have asked us, because this was not our decision to make – we did not have any authority over him. He had been deposed from the PCA and moved out of the area, and joined a new community in Indiana outside our denomination, and so the decision on whether to preach or not was up to his new Pastor and elders in his new church, which is outside the PCA. I did speak to him about this and encouraged him to share his full confession with the session of his new church, for them to consider, and he had already done this. We were in touch with his new pastor as well.

III. Current State

Where does that leave us now? Let us answer an obvious question first: Pastor Wilbourne is not coming back to PCC. Both he and Morgen and our session agree that this would not be wise nor healthy, not for him and not for our church. Both sides want to move forward. In fact, after this final ruling was made, Rankin notified our presbytery that he was withdrawing as a member in good standing. As a result, his name has been removed from pacific presbytery's scrolls. We have stayed in touch with the Wilbournes through the last 18 months and we pray for continued healing for them, and that the Lord will continue to use them for his purposes. This effectively ends the judicial process for this presbytery. The case is closed, so to speak.

So what is next for us? Well, we would ask that you all pray for healing within our presbytery. This process has not been easy and has taken a toll on our relationships with some of our brothers in the presbytery. But we are encouraged - with Paul and others' help, the presbytery recently chose to seek out professional mediation for all parties involved in the complaints, in order to mend the relationships

within our presbytery among the pastors and ruling elders involved. We want to create healthy relationships going forward and are committed to doing so. We hope this is the first step.

Then there are questions about the impact this has had on our church body. It is obvious this has brought disharmony and angst into our community, and members and other attendees have left the church because of the decision. However, due to the ongoing pandemic it has been really difficult to parse the numerical attendance impact, nor do we think it is important to do so. We mourn the brothers and sisters that have left our body for these or other reasons during the last several years. We would love to see them all come back to the active fellowship of this body. We would welcome that. However, we know that most are committed to seeking, or have found, new church homes, and we rejoice for them as well. We pray for Christ's blessing on all these saints. In all these cases, we stand ready to pursue reconciliation and renewal with any and all, wherever and whenever possible. We know that this is possible in Christ and we want to seek this.

And so we look forward to a bright future for this congregation. We are excited about the shepherding and discipleship our pastors are leading us in, we are thirsty for more face-to-face community and worship as COVID restrictions hopefully ease, and we want to see Christ's kingdom expand in Los Angeles. We are excited about our mission and living out our vision statement, with all of you as partners.

We pray that this recounting of events from the session's perspective has been helpful to explain the processes that have occurred over the last year. Our goal in communicating our complaints is not to point fingers or to redirect blame, and I apologize if anyone feels I have done this. Rather, our goal is to provide you with the full history and to show how we are trying to engage in our denomination's governance, which we believe is a good thing, to ensure a just judicial process. We are thankful for our brothers within our local presbytery and at the national level who poured so much time into this case. We are thankful that some of you are here tonight and are leaning into paths of reconciliation. While painful for so many, we trust and believe in God's sovereignty – he is Lord of all of it, and despite our flaws and sins, he loves us completely. We can rest in that.

In closing, we want you to take away four key points:

1. Pastor Rankin did sin and hurt some people who worked with him. But we believe he is repentant, coming as his own accuser to the courts of the church to confess his sins and to publicly repent of them, and still following an ongoing plan of repentance with accountability to several experienced pastors who are walking with him on this path who we are in touch with. The Session believes his repentance is sincere and that deposition by the Pacific Presbytery was not warranted. This does not negate the impact that his sins had on those who were hurt by them.
2. As the Session, we believe that in our efforts to address concerns along the way with Pastor Rankin, we erred greatly by trying to solve our problems in-house. the correct process of involving the presbytery early is a healthier and required approach to address significant issues or concerns with a Senior Pastor, and to ensure we are following proper church governance. We will not make this mistake in the future.
3. We also confess to poorly executing our roles as overseers, apart from Rankin, creating a dysfunctional work environment in which we micromanaged too many things and did not

have transparency with nor properly empower our leaders. The elders' poor leadership caused pain and anxiety for many staff members, some of whom were unaware of the Session's hands-on approach behind the scenes. We seek forgiveness from our current and former staff members, from Rankin and his family, from the congregation, and from the presbytery, for these failings. And we would like to meet with anyone who felt mistreated and hurt by our church, to ask their forgiveness and hear specifically how we may have hurt them. Please contact us if you would like to meet.

4. Finally, we also believe that the local presbytery's process for handling this matter, both with its Shepherding Committee and Judicial Commission, was not conducted properly, lacking in wisdom and grace at key points in the process. We believe the General Assembly's Standing Judicial Committee's ruling confirms our beliefs and reaffirms our trust in the presbyterian form of government within the Presbyterian Church in America.

Your Session has been humbled through this process. We have had to face our pride and those of us remaining repent of our reliance on ourselves, for falsely believing that we are in control. We have learned and are learning to trust Jesus more fully. While he works through people to accomplish his good purposes, we are reminded constantly that he is in control. Christ is the head of this church. So for our part, we are committed to prayer, and to more closely following the BCO for oversight, conflict and disciplinary concerns, especially as it relates to ministers. We also commit to continued improvements in communication.

Thank you, brothers and sisters in Christ, for your time.