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## A Vision for the Next 50 Years

BY JIM WERT

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Jim Wert, chairman of the PCA's 50th Celebration Committee and a former General Assembly moderator, recently spoke with Randy Pope, founding pastor of Perimeter Church, outside Atlanta. Wert, who's known Randy since 1980 when he and his wife, Emily, joined Perimeter in its early days, was especially interested in Pope's thoughts about the PCA's future.

Here's a slightly edited version of their conversation:

**You've been in the PCA a long time, been to nearly every General Assembly, and have been an influential voice. What are your thoughts on our 50th anniversary?**

I have been very fortunate to be mentored by many of the founding leaders in our denomination, men like Frank Barker and Jim Baird. These founding fathers established such a significant vision for the PCA, rooted in both faithfulness to Scripture and zeal for the Great Commission.

My hope is always to get us back to focusing on our founding fathers' original intentions and dreams.

**Do you have some specifics in mind?**

I am referring to putting the same kind of emphasis on equipping our people to reach the lost as we do on protecting the purity of the church by maintaining our historic, biblical theology.

Most of us would agree that it is not an "either/or" choice. It is a "both/and." Without both, we do not have a healthy denomination.

I recently read a transcript of an interview with Jim Baird, that his son Mark sent to me. While Jim's remarks were 30 years old, their relevance to our denomination's current hopes, dreams, and intentions are clear: sound theology and effective witness *must* operate in connection with one another. These parallel tracks were how the PCA was originally designed, and are essential to our future health as a denomination.

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**"Regardless of the size of the church, I love to see the Bride of Christ become more beautiful by becoming gospel-centered and effective at both making disciples and training disciples."**

Today our fight for purity in doctrine is found in nearly all churches in our denomination. And this is important. But even a casual study of our denomination's annual statistical records tells an equally compelling story. Our people are not being adequately equipped to share their faith in a way that is relevant within the current culture.

In 1977, when I was just weeks from moving to Atlanta to plant a church, Frank Barker gave me a life- and ministry-changing challenge, one that continues to have a rippling impact in my life and in the lives of generations of people who have been connected to Perimeter Church. He simply said — and I can still hear him as only Frank could say it — "Randy, don't let one year go by in the life of your church that you are not offering your people an opportunity to be adequately equipped to share their faith with the people with whom they live, work, and play. Randy, model it to them in your own life and equip them to follow your example."

*That* is the parallel track that our denomination's founders had in mind when we established the PCA 50 years ago. It is every bit as vital for our next 50, and beyond.

**So if these parallel tracks of sound biblical theology and zeal for evangelism were at the heart of our founding fathers' priorities, where do you see us today, 50 years later?**

The health of our denomination has, in my opinion, diminished over the past decades. I'd like to see our churches and committees and agencies renew their passion and training for mission and bring it back to the PCA.

It is like the analogy of food and exercise. A believer's food is the truth of God found in His Word. His or her exercise is found in missional living. Watch what happens to our denomination as a whole and our individual churches when

we focus on both our diet and exercise. It takes both to be healthy, and candidly, our body needs more exercise.

**Based on your experience, what will it take to get there?**

I've spent my whole life as a pastor at one church, Perimeter Church, with 42 of my 46 years as her senior pastor. During those years, I have always tried to be intentional, even strategic, in how we set priorities, hired staff, deployed our resources, and always with that charge from Frank Barker in mind about equipping our people to be on mission. We've always had written ministry plans, and I even added a supplemental white paper titled "The Big Win — Making the Bride of Christ As Beautiful as She Can be Before the Return of Christ."

I've also learned more important things about healthy churches, which is why I am not impressed with a church because of its size. At Perimeter, we never had growth goals. Instead, we had health goals. The reality is that many, and perhaps most, large churches are unhealthy. And many of our denomination's small churches are thriving as providers of gospel salt and light to their neighbors.

Regardless of the size of the church, I love to see the Bride of Christ become more beautiful by becoming gospel-centered and effective at both making disciples and training disciples.

**It sounds like you're still hopeful about the PCA, even considering your remarks about declining health over the past few decades.**

I am. At an early General Assembly, James Boice preached and said that though a young denomination, the PCA was, in his view, the only denomination with the potential of radically changing the spiritual landscape of our country. I agreed with him then and, even today, I still hold on to that hope.

I long to see us take great strides this year and in those to come, to become as beautiful as we can be before the Lord returns. And in so doing, I long to see the PCA influence countless numbers of churches across our country and around the globe to become the same.

**That's a big vision. Do you believe it's achievable?**

I embraced a challenge many years ago given to me by a godly, older saint. He used a statement designed to encourage me to make life and ministry a faith walk. This charge served as Perimeter's founding motto, and continues to guide me. "Attempt something so great for God that it is doomed to failure unless God be in it."

Perhaps the thought of our little PCA having great impact in the world seems doomed to fail. And it is, "unless God be in it." But who says He's not in it? I think we begin by helping our churches to be better equipped to make disciples. And then, by engaging in fervent prayer, and by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, we can begin to see God use the PCA as a model for the global church.

**Your focus on disciple-making is compelling. Do you see other components that will be critical for our future?**

Certainly. There are many factors essential for health in a church or a denomination. If I were to add one additional critical factor, I would suggest it would be the need for unity.

Unity should never be viewed as unanimity on all important issues. In fact, biblical unity is best demonstrated in spite of disagreements. And we've certainly experienced our fair share of those disagreements. Some years seem to be worse than others, and as someone who's been around our denomination from the beginning, I've seen that this dynamic of strife and disunity is not new. We seem to do better when we speak directly with one another, and especially when we pray together, rather than when we allow seeds of contention to grow, for example in social media.

## Any final thoughts?

Let me try to connect these two thoughts about mission and unity. My experience over the years has proven that when two believers begin sharing a common bond with regard to a greater mission, unity is the by product. That means that when God's people, and His churches, begin engaging in the higher call of winning the lost, and realize they are at war together with a common enemy — the devil himself — unity will automatically occur.

Once that happens, we are back on the two tracks that take us to being a healthy denomination. This is when we find ourselves attempting something for God's glory that would otherwise be doomed to failure, except for the fact that God is in it. Our prayer then is simply, "God, grant us to see this very thing take place in the future of the PCA." Under those conditions, I will expect God to do just that.

Randy Pope is the founding pastor of Perimeter Church in Johns Creek, Georgia. After 42 years of leading Perimeter, in September 2019 he moved into the role of full-time assistant pastor and president of Life on Life Ministries. His personal passion is to make and train disciples of Christ. He recently finished his 53rd consecutive year of discipling a few men.

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