

An Overview and Assessment of the OPC General Assembly in The Appeal of John Carrick

Confronting and overcoming a culture of skepticism about disability in the church

Written by Valerie Hobbs | Wednesday, June 24, 2015

I maintain that at the heart of this case is Linda Carrick and her disability and chronic illness and that we cannot, we must not forget that. When an event like this takes place, we bear a responsibility to seize the opportunity to stop, to reflect on and to reform our attitudes towards fellow believers and towards those whose souls we aim to claim for Jesus.

On 4-6 June, 2015, Dr. John Carrick and Dr. Bill Dennison presented an appeal before the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) against the outcome of roughly two years of judicial process involving John Carrick, a minister of the OPC and a former professor of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (GPTS). He had been found guilty by the Presbytery of the Southeast (PSE) in a trial ending in late January, 2015 of two charges:

Charge 1. The PSE of the OPC charges Dr. John Carrick with violating the 9th commandment by impugning the motives of fellow presbyters (He was found guilty of three of five original specifications).

Specification #2: Dr. Carrick impugned the motives of fellow presbyters when he wrote: ‘I want to emphasize that I do not feel that I have had a fair, just, and impartial hearing from the Visitation Committee with regard to the crucial issue of my wife’s health. Indeed, from the very beginning, I believe, the Visitation Committee has approached the matter of my wife’s health with significant prejudice.’

Specification #3: Dr. Carrick impugned the motives of fellow presbyters when he wrote: ‘From the very outset the Visitation Committee began to adopt, I believe, a negative, indeed, dismissive attitude to my wife’s health problems... It is, I believe, a rather lamentable piece of...pastoral prejudice.’

Specification #5: Dr. Carrick impugned the motives of fellow presbyters when he wrote: ‘The Visitation Committee is, in my judgment, characterized by a bullying spirit and tendency.’

Charge 2. The PSE charges Dr. John Carrick with violating the 5th commandment with respect to his inferiors by failing to manage his own household well.

Specification 1: He has shown delinquency in the management of his household by the regular absence of his wife and daughter from the public means of grace in the corporate worship of the visible church.

Specification 2: He has hindered members of his household from receiving pastoral oversight and spiritual oversight from the session having ecclesiastical jurisdiction over him.

On 4 June, the appellant and the PSE presented their cases separately and without time limit before Advisory Committee 10 (AC10), which reviewed the evidence on both sides and voted unanimously to support the appeal before the General Assembly (GA). A representative of AC10 gave the following grounds on the floor:

1. *Impugning motives is ambiguous. While potentially sinful, a proper charge would have to be one of falsely doing so. Further, it is not clear that the appellant in fact ever addressed the motives of his fellow presbyters.*
2. *Charge 2 assumes that the absence of Mrs. Carrick and the Carricks' daughter was sinful and that the appellant was complicit and/or cavalier about such absence. Not only were these two individuals outside the jurisdiction of the presbytery [having transferred their membership to another church], but no factual evidence was provided to substantiate claims about their absence or about hindering pastoral/spiritual oversight.*

On 5 June, close to 2 pm, Advisory Committee 10 presented their report, recommending that the appeal with respect to charges 1 and 2 be sustained and proposed the following procedure, which was approved unanimously by GA.

1. *Presentation by the appellant (John Carrick and Bill Dennison): up to 30 minutes*
2. *Presentation by representatives of the PSE (Rodney King and Scott Willett): up to 30 minutes*
3. *Questions and clarification regarding preceding presentations: up to 15 minutes*
4. *Final remarks by representatives of the PSE: up to 15 minutes*
5. *Final remarks by appellant: up to 15 minutes*

Following the appellant's final remarks, AC10 presented its recommendations, the moderator put forward a motion to sustain the appeal, and thirty-eight speeches [eighteen in favor (two by one member of PSE), seventeen against (eight by five members of PSE), three abstentions] from commissioners followed, spanning around four hours from the evening of 5 June until after lunch on 6 June.

Debate focused primarily on issues related to the amount and type of evidence offered by the PSE, whether or not the charges assume that Mrs. Carrick's absence from church was sinful, the good name of the PSE which some alleged was tarnished in 'the public realm, even through the internet', and what it means to impugn motives. One rather surprising set of speeches expressed discomfort with questioning any presbytery decision on the grounds that this would send 'the rather chilling message to [presbyteries] that they need to think twice or more before using judicial process because the General Assembly may well overturn their work.'

Several commissioners shared moving personal stories of caring for relatives with chronic illness. Four commissioners argued that they lacked enough information to vote in good conscience, others, including a member of the advisory committee, pointing out the impossibility of comprehensive knowledge of even 'any one single fact' by anyone involved and the importance of acting on the basis of 'enough information.'

A few expressed concern with the involvement of GPTS in these matters, particularly the handing over of an audio recording of a meeting between the Carricks' OPC session and Dr. Carrick to a member of authority at GPTS, without informing Dr. Carrick, a tape which then played 'a role in the decision of the seminary not to renew the appellant's contract.'

After some four hours of speeches, the moderator once again put forward the motion to sustain the appeal, which was voted on by voice vote and upheld by a significant majority (by several accounts, around 80% in Dr. Carrick's favor).

All of the aforementioned issues raised on the floor warrant careful and thorough discussion insofar as they reveal the minds of some of the commissioners in the difficult position of having to vote on these matters. But in this article and against the backdrop of this particular case involving Dr. John Carrick, his wife Linda Carrick, and their young daughter, I examine what I see as a culture of skepticism regarding disability within some parts of the Reformed Church community and argue three main points:

1. *that this case centers on Mrs. Carrick, particularly on the question of whether or not chronic illness and disability is sufficient basis for excused absence from worship;*
2. *that PSE's recommendations to Dr. Carrick regarding church attendance reveal a prioritization of Mrs. Carrick's soul at the expense of her body; and*
3. *that this rather startling case must prompt us to examine the ways in which we think and speak about and act towards those on the periphery.*

My discussion is based on what was said on the floor of GA, captured in around sixty pages of presentations, questions, comments, and speeches I transcribed during my observation of the appeal at OPC GA.

[In my first piece about this case](#), relating my experience at the final stage of Dr. Carrick's trial in late January, 2015, I argued that, fundamentally, the charges were about Linda Carrick, formally classified as disabled and suffering from multiple chronic illnesses, and is reflective of the wider Reformed Christian community's attitudes towards women, towards illness, towards disability, towards those, as [Chris Jones put it in a follow-up piece](#), whose 'experience is at variance with established norms regarding how Christian men and women ought to think and behave.'

In the public, online discussion that followed, one member of the PSE wrote that, 'The article is ironic – no women were on trial.' And yet, discussion on the floor of GA repeatedly visited the question of whether Linda Carrick was central to the case (even if she wasn't formally charged) and whether the PSE had considered her absence from church, which both she and Dr. Carrick argued was due to health issues, to be sinful. On the one hand, some members of the PSE argued that 'The presbytery never questioned Mrs. Carrick's integrity' and that 'The presbytery never asked...Mrs. Carrick, whether or not she could be there.' One member of the PSE, responding to a question about whether or not Mrs. Carrick's absence was sinful, answered,

We did not adjudicate her. We did not vindicate her. We did not convict her. We did not accuse her. We did not excuse her.

Another, referring to moral judgments about her absence, noted, 'We didn't go there at all.' However, these claims were undermined by statements from these same and other PSE members. For example, when the question was raised 'Why did the PSE not charge Mrs. Carrick instead of Dr. Carrick?' and the PSE pointed out that she had transferred her membership to a nearby PCA church and was therefore not under the jurisdiction of the PSE, a PSE member clarified for the body that while Mrs. Carrick could not be charged, that did not mean that the PSE had stopped short of a determination that 'such absence was sinful and that the appellant was complicit with or cavalier about such absence.' Illustrating this, another PSE member said,

There was concern on the part of the session with respect to her illness that it always seemed to flare up on the Lord's Day. Not that we deny that she was sick. But it always seemed to be a little suspicious to us.

Another PSE member cited testimony of a session member of Mrs. Carrick's former OP church, that

While he does not deny that Mrs. Carrick has a legitimate illness, he has witnessed times when Mrs. Carrick claimed to be too ill to attend worship but then seemed to have no problems attending other events.

When asked to specify a specific instance when Mrs. Carrick's absence was sinful, one of the spokesmen for PSE who had previously argued that no judgments were made regarding her moral character, answered,

The testimony that was given to the presbytery was testimony regarding a lengthy period of time. And so there was not the evidence of a particular Sunday being a particular sin.

In short, despite statements to the contrary, moral judgments regarding Mrs. Carrick's absence from church were repeatedly made, her behavior and person made central to the case by the PSE, worryingly, on the basis of *general impression* rather than factual evidence. As a dissenting member of PSE argued,

You cannot claim that there is a pattern if you cannot give specific instances to back this pattern. There was no factual evidence presented at the trial to back this idea of a pattern.

So what effect does not charging Mrs. Carrick and yet assuming her guilt have? By implication, Dr. Carrick cannot defend her or indeed himself, his factual evidence of her illness and disability repeatedly ruled irrelevant since the trial was 'not about her.' Given that the seriousness of her condition and absence from church had been implicitly ruled 'suspicious,' focus was then placed on determining just how often she had missed church so that some could determine the measure of Dr. Carrick's delinquency. This can be seen in the words of one commissioner, who had early on asked a question about frequency of Mrs. Carrick's attendance and later made this comment during the debate, reflecting his view that Dr. Carrick's insistence on foregrounding the fact of his wife's illness was a kind of avoiding tactic (even though Dr. Carrick had actually gone on to address the question of frequency):

I do not believe throwing out the medical condition as a sort of wall...I asked about frequency. Immediately there was a tendency to remind me of the condition of his wife.

Essentially, Mrs. Carrick was found guilty and yet she was allowed no voice, even through her husband, no platform from which to defend herself since she was never formally charged.

Having determined her absence from church to be 'suspicious,' the PSE (via a Visitation Committee), prior to bringing charges, had recommended that Dr. Carrick, together with his wife and daughter, attend church every Lord's Day morning for six months, with the

expectation that this would increase to both services, morning and evening, each week thereafter. Dr. Carrick's refusal to comply, based on his rejection of the PSE's assessment of his wife's ability to fulfill this requirement as unrealistic and unrealizable, was then judged unacceptable. A session member of the Carricks' former OPC church explained at GA, 'We as a session met the recommendations given by the VC, the other side didn't.'

Another member of the session echoed this, noting that surely an hour and a half a week wasn't too much to ask, this despite medical evidence presented by Dr. Carrick of the variable and unpredictable nature of his wife's chronic illnesses. In fact, the charge of impugning motives arose from a letter Dr. Carrick wrote to the Visitation Committee about what he judged to be their unreasonable requirements of his wife, confronting them with their 'prejudicial spirit' towards his wife, their 'bullying spirit and tendency.'

During conversation Friday evening at GA, one commissioner astutely observed that such requirements place undue emphasis on public worship and fail to account for other means of caring for one's spiritual state, such as family worship and pastoral visits. Another commissioner noted on the floor, 'The issue may have been less that the man would not listen but that the session and the presbytery would not listen.'

Members of the PSE expressed concern for both Mrs. Carrick's physical and spiritual state at various points, but their recommendations prioritized one over the other, the soul at the expense of the body. As Bill Dennison noted in his closing speech for the appellant:

According to the medical expertise of the analysis of her health issues, no recommendation could be more absurd...And [in] our judgment, that proves and demonstrates that the presbytery did not act in understanding of the depths of Mrs. Carrick's health issues...Micah 6:8. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

While commissioners at GA may have voted to sustain the appeal for a variety of reasons, including the lack of factual evidence provided by PSE, I maintain that at the heart of this case is Mrs. Carrick and her disability and chronic illness and that we cannot, we *must not* forget that. When an event like this takes place, we bear a responsibility to seize the opportunity to stop, to reflect on and to reform our attitudes towards fellow believers and towards those whose souls we aim to claim for Jesus.

My interactions with members of the OPC at GA left me greatly encouraged at the many godly men who care deeply for the body of Christ and who have dedicated their lives to her expansion. I am also deeply thankful that the courts of Christ's church overwhelmingly supported justice on this occasion. I was moved to tears by many of the speeches which reflected a desire to minister to all who have been bought with the blood of Christ. In particular one commissioner urged the body to consider the perspectives of others, the room silent and listening as he cried out, 'Every one of you have people in your churches who are living in crisis. Look around. Do you see them?'

And so, finally, I ask you to consider what it means to be both soul and body. One friendly, well-meaning commissioner at GA said in conversation about my first article that, arguably, I had made 'too much' of some rather 'small matters' like the sign on the women's bathroom.

He is not the only one to take this position, and certainly, the unwelcoming signals that we as a community send to some members of our body are often subtle, unintentional.

But they are also, on occasion, loud and startling, as in the case of John and Linda Carrick, as in an incident related at GA when a member of the Visitation Committee of the PSE told Dr. Carrick that ‘if his wife was feeling nauseous, she should take a bucket to church and place it by the door.’

Deliberate or not, subtle or unmistakable, the words and actions that we use around those with less privilege who worship around us combine, accumulate, and can foster a context that tells them that their bodily needs, their frailties, are of little importance. As I did in my first article, I will end with the words of Bill Dennison, defender of John and Linda Carrick, who exhorted the body, saying:

Jesus, as the Messiah, has arrived. In Christ, the gospel of the kingdom has arrived in terms of what is prophesied by Isaiah. He has arrived for the poor, for the brokenhearted, to set liberty for the captives, sight for the blind, may we not say for the disabled and the chronically ill?

Look around. Do you see them?