

Background/Aim/Plan of the Foothills Overtures Working Group:

Background:

After many conversations by the Stated Clerk of Foothills Presbytery with other presbytery executives regarding potential reforms in the operations of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and after yet another traumatic post-GA experience by many of our pastors and congregations, a group of teaching and ruling elders from Foothills Presbytery convened to discuss a strategy for the healing and strengthening of our denomination.

Representing a diversity of views on a variety of issues facing the church — we are by no means all of the same perspective on the many social, political, and theological issues that challenge our denomination — we found ourselves remarkably agreed on one thing: **the way we are conducting our common life, particularly around the matters of constitutional change and social witness, is deeply flawed.** From the progressives to the conservatives among us, we agree that the PC(USA) must find a new way of ordering our denominational life if we are to salvage the integrity and vitality of our witness to Jesus Christ in the 21st century. What the world sees now, if it pays any attention at all to the internal life of our Presbyterian community, is a denomination muddled in confusion and conflict. Currently, across the spectrum of our views, we are ashamed of the way we Presbyterians are behaving ourselves — and we believe we ought to be. It is time to repent from shrill divisiveness and learn once again to speak and listen to one another in love.

However, grieved as we are about the common life of our denomination, we “do not grieve as those who have no hope!” Rather, we envision a day in our future when Presbyterians across the spectrum of theological, social, and political perspectives will point to the workings of our connectional system and say, with confidence, this is what it means to be a faithful Presbyterian church.

Inspired by this vision, a working group from Foothills Presbytery has written a series of overtures addressing a number of areas of our polity: (1) The purpose of GA and a proposed cycle for GA meetings; (2) The process by which the PC(USA) discerns its social witness and bears this witness to the world; (3) The scope and function of the constitution of the PC(USA)

Aim:

In an effort to live by our convictions about process and consensus building, we are now circulating our ideas, expressed in these overtures, among the presbyteries of the PC(USA).

We intend to

- Invite conversation about our ideas for reform
- Solicit feedback from our brothers and sisters across the denomination
- Determine which presbyteries, if any, might offer concurrence on any of these overtures, should they be approved by Foothills Presbytery for submission to the 222nd GA
- Be open to modification of our perspectives and plans based on this broader conversation
- Adopt and submit overtures for the reform of General Assembly that will lead to greater health in our common life and efficacy in our public witness

Plan:

1. Draft potential overtures for broad publication and consideration within the denomination.
2. Circulate our overtures, with attendant rationales, within the denomination by offering them for the consideration of the bills & overtures committees of every presbytery.
3. Receive feedback from other presbyteries. We expect some concurrence, some objection, and some suggestions for modification of the overtures.
4. After considering feedback from our conversation partners, prepare a final set of overtures to be submitted to the bills & overtures committee of Foothills Presbytery.
5. Seek adoption by Foothills Presbytery of a set of overtures for the reform of GA, and invite concurrence by other presbyteries.

Foothills Overtures for Reforming the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

The Church's Social Witness in the 21st Century

The 2014 Montreat Leadership Conference was entitled "More Than None," referring to the growing number of younger Americans who respond to surveys about religious preference by checking the option "None of the Above." One of the keynoters was Gabe Lyons, co-author of *UnChristian* and *The Next Christians*, and cofounder of Catalyst, the nation's largest gathering of young Christian leaders. Lyons writes,

...the next Christians realize that short-term political maneuvering cannot shape the long-term morals, beliefs, and attitudes of the greater culture... Solving the challenges of our day requires a different approach than we've seen modeled in recent years. Alongside the other characteristics I've described, civility grounds our approach and complements the way we live. It shapes our tone and seasons our rhetoric. This mentality moves conversations and engagement beyond the immediacy of winning the momentary battle to laying the groundwork for a better future." (p. 179)

On a similar note, James Calvin Davis, Presbyterian teaching elder and Professor of Religion at Middlebury College in Vermont, speaks of the "habits of civil discourse that religious communities encourage" as "the real gifts they give to American public life."

In many ways, those habits of civil conversation are more important than any consensus we might hope to achieve on heretofore divisive issues. [James] Gustafson was sure that promoting conversation, not necessarily agreement, was religious communities' most important moral achievement. He argued that "participation in a serious moral dialogue moving toward consensus is more important than the consensus itself," because "participation in moral discourse deepens, broadens, and extends [people's] capacity to make responsible moral judgments" themselves. Striving for healthier, more respectful conversation will yield fruit, not just because it will move us toward mutual understanding and possibly substantial agreement, but because it will teach us how to think ethically, as individuals and as a society.

James Calvin Davis, *In Defense of Civility*, p. 168-69

Again, in concert with these other voices, The Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church, commissioned by the PC(USA) General Assembly, concluded its report to the 217th General Assembly (2006), saying,

The task force is convinced that the world is watching the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and other denominations as we engage in highly publicized debates. To be one is not to say that we will be the same, that we will all agree, that there will be no conflict, but as the church listens to Jesus pray, all its members are reminded that the quality of our life together—our ability to make visible the unique relationship that is ours in Jesus Christ—is compelling testimony to the truth and power of the gospel we proclaim.

The Peace, Unity, and Purity Task Force recommended, among other things, that the 217th General Assembly

urge governing bodies, congregations, and other groups of Presbyterians to follow the example of the task force and other groups that, in the face of difficult issues, have engaged in *processes of intensive discernment through worship, community building, study, and collaborative work*;

and

direct the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, and urge those who plan and moderate meetings of other governing bodies, *to explore the use of alternative forms of discernment preliminary to decision-making, especially in dealing with potentially divisive issues.*

It Is Not the 1960's Anymore!

In conversations with members and officers of the Presbyterian Church (USA), when I suggest that our social witness should begin at the local level and be carried up to the General Assembly, I sometimes meet resistance from those who harken back to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. What if the national church had not spoken a decisive word, or failed to bear witness in a bold way, on issues such as race relations and women's ordination? Acknowledging the great importance of the church's witness in that era, my question to these friends is this: Do we really think we are operating in the same cultural context as our forbearers in the church? Even given the "question authority" mentality for which the 1960s is famous, a culture of allegiance persisted among members of mainline denominations in those days that does not exist today. Members, on the whole, identified with their denominations, still had a significant level of trust in institutions (at least, those who were still active in mainline denominations), and respected the authority of those institutions—at least, to a greater degree than is the case today. Current American culture is one of deep and pervasive distrust of institutions and their authority, of polarizing rhetoric that tends to dismiss or even demonize opponents (a tone that, sadly, is adopted by some elements in the church), and a highly consumerist approach to religious affiliation that undermines the old allegiances. We simply cannot continue to expect the institutional methods of the 1960s to be effective in building up the body of Christ today.

The Substance of GA Statements

We all want the statements of the Presbyterian General Assembly to mean something significant, but many of us are not convinced that our current process truly reflects the discernment of the broader church. We are particularly concerned with the process by which the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) brings action items to the GA agenda. While the process calls for the ACSWP to communicate "to the whole church...the manner in which the whole church can participate (advise, offer input, etc.) in its deliberations," there is no mechanism in place to guarantee that due diligence is being exercised in ensuring broad deliberation. We believe a significant measure of deliberation and consensus-building should be required among the presbyteries before a social witness issue is dealt with at the GA level.

Bearing Witness and Doing Business

As members of Foothills Presbytery, we are fully aware that we are addressing the denomination from the state of South Carolina. We trust that historical caricatures of our region will not lead our brothers and sisters in Christ to jump to premature conclusions about our call

for reform. Our vision should not be mistaken as a warmed-over “doctrine of the spirituality of the church” such as that presented by James Henley Thornwell and others, a doctrine which we reject! We believe strongly that social, political, and economic issues are intrinsic to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are, therefore, calling for a more faithful process of bearing witness and doing business in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

We believe that a large part of our witness as a Christian body depends upon the manner in which we relate to one another. If we try to speak a prophetic word when we do not have our own house in order, our witness will be ineffective, at best, and may even undermine the Gospel we proclaim. In our culture of national politics and pervasive media coverage, we have become enamored with speaking loud words at the national level. We believe we are better able to discern our witness in conversations that grow organically at the local level. Would we not be better served by an ACSWP that utilizes our energies and resources generating intentional acts of discernment among the presbyteries of our denomination? Rather than appointing task forces that meet several times, removed from their communities, to discuss papers and write statements, we believe God is calling us to do the hard work of dialogue in real communities.

It is this dialogue at the local level that appears to be largely missing from our discernment process. We need leadership that is committed to getting Presbyterians of diverse perspectives to sit down together *in real communities* to discern God’s work of social justice *in those particular places*. It is our conviction that these conversations have the potential to generate a whole host of social policy statements that, while less publicized in national media, might make a more substantive impact in the long run on both the church and society?

The call of one of the Foothills Overtures is to eliminate the taking of “yes-no” votes on social justice issues at the General Assembly level. By this call for a moratorium, we do not mean to suggest that the church should keep silent at all levels about matters of social justice, economics, and politics. Rather, we need to reform a process that is currently failing to engage our congregations and presbyteries in the hard work of faithful conversations that seek to discern the mind and will of Christ in and for our particular contexts.

About the Constitution

Historically, constitutions have been stable, foundational documents. However, in current practice, despite the recent revision of our Form of Government, the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) still functions more as a manual of operations. As a result, our debates over constitutional amendments every other year leads to a loss of unity and stability as a denomination. We believe the constitution could be a clear, concise document that establishes our central identity as the Body of Christ, in biblical and confessional terms, while allowing each presbytery the freedom to discern and interpret the constitution for that presbytery’s context. In the same spirit as our convictions about discerning our public witness, we believe our constitutional process should be a more deliberative, consensus building process, that involves local conversations across the church, that come together periodically in a national convention. We would like to see this work of discernment and consensus so valued by our denomination that a 2/3 majority would be required to amend both parts of the constitution (as is now required to amend Part I: The Book of Confessions). To the end of unity and stability in the essentials, we envision a decennial constitutional convention.

In this spirit, and based on these convictions, we offer the attached Overtures to Foothills Presbytery, to be approved and sent on to the 218th General Assembly.

Foothills Overture #1

Overture Regarding Meetings of the General Assembly

Whereas the General Assembly exists to serve the individual churches which make up the PCUSA, and not the churches to serve the General Assembly;

Whereas the General Assembly “*constitutes the bond of union, community, and mission among all its congregations and councils, to the end that the whole church becomes a community of faith, hope, love, and witness*” (G-3.30501);

Whereas the Six Great Ends of the Church are “*the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world*” (F-1.0304);

Whereas, in actual result, more recent General Assemblies have produced the opposite of a “*bond of union, community, and mission*” among its member congregations – but instead have produced strife, division, and dysfunction; and thereby greatly distracted PCUSA congregations from their central work of pursuing the Six Great Ends in their mission and ministry;

Whereas the central focus of recent General Assemblies has not been on “*providing that the Word of God may be truly preached and heard . . . that the Sacraments may be rightly administered and received . . . [and the nurture of] the covenant community of disciples*” (G-3.0501a-c), but rather has been centered upon the consideration of constitutional amendments – effectively turning the meetings of the General Assembly into biennial Constitutional Conventions;

And whereas a Constitution is not a manual of operations, but is a deeper document expressing shared and unifying principles and values which establish the general framework for governance, and therefore should not be easily amended without thoughtful consideration and widespread consensus regarding these fundamental principles and values;

Therefore, be it resolved that the General Assembly meetings of the PCUSA return to their rightful purpose of supporting and building up the congregations of our denomination as defined by the Book of Order – enabling them, individually and together in church councils, to more faithfully and effectively fulfill the Six Great Ends of the Church. Specifically, be it resolved that G-3.0503 of the Book of Order be amended as follows:

The General Assembly shall hold a stated meeting at least biennially. *Each General Assembly shall be organized around one of the Six Great Ends of the Church (F-1.0304), taken up in succession in the order listed in F-1.0304. The main business of each General Assembly shall be to discuss and to explore ways to enable PCUSA congregations and councils to fulfill more faithfully and effectively that Great End which is the theme for each General Assembly. Every fifth General Assembly (i.e. every ten years) shall*

depart from the rotation of the Six Great Ends and instead be called together as a Constitutional Convention to consider all amendments to the Constitution that have been properly submitted since the last decennial Constitutional Convention. All overtures to amend the Constitution, in order to be considered by the General Assembly, must have the endorsement of no fewer than one-third of the Presbyteries in the PCUSA. No overtures to amend the Constitution shall be considered at any General Assembly not designated as a Constitutional Convention, unless the overture has received the endorsement of two-thirds of the Presbyteries of the PCUSA. The moderator, or in the event ... [the rest of G-3.0503 continues unaltered from this point].

OVERTURE OF THE SESSION OF FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
OF GREENVILLE, SOUTH CAROLINA ABOUT THE PROCESS OF ADDRESSING
ISSUES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, ECONOMICS AND POLITICS

Whereas, Jesus was born into and lived in the real world of politics, economics and social injustice;

Whereas, the ministry and life of Jesus demands that Christians engage not just in matters of the church and theology, but also in the real world by attempting to right wrongs and combat injustice;

Whereas, at times the church has not engaged in matters of social justice, economics and politics, and, in those situations, has perpetuated injustice in the world;

Whereas, Presbyterians are a diverse Christian denomination with a wide range of views on matters of social issues, economics and politics;

Whereas, Presbyterians favor open and respectful debate about matters of social justice, economics and politics and how the Christian faith impacts such issues;

Whereas, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA has taken positions as a denomination on a wide range of partisan issues on matters of social justice, economics and politics about which there is diversity of viewpoints among the denomination;

Whereas, taking yes or no positions on partisan issues has caused and continues to cause division within the denomination, loss of members, and distraction from the Gospel. Taking such yes/no votes also has and continues to cause many members to believe the denomination is sympathetic to the most liberal parts of the denomination and at odds with many Presbyterians with deeply held views to the contrary of such denomination positions;

Whereas, Fourth Presbyterian Church of Greenville, South Carolina, believes there is a better way to fulfill the church's obligation to engage in matters of social justice, economics and politics, but avoid at the national level taking unnecessary positions on controversial issues that have the adverse effects described above.

Now, therefore, the Session of Fourth Presbyterian Church of Greenville, South Carolina, adopts and moves that Foothills Presbytery adopt the following overture:

The Presbyterian Church, USA hereby reaffirms the importance of and supports engagement of Presbyterians in issues of social justice, economics and politics. Following the example of Jesus Christ, Christians should engage in matters of social justice, economics and politics, in addition to matters of the church and theology.

In carrying out this responsibility as a denomination, the Presbyterian Church, USA shall cease taking up or down, yes or no positions on partisan issues of social justice, economics and politics at the national level. Instead, the Presbyterian Church, USA, when such matters are properly before the General Assembly, shall call to the denomination's attention the importance of such issues, explain both sides of such issues and implore its members to learn about and pray about such issues and to become engaged in such issues according to one's conscience and views at the local church and presbytery level. The Presbyterian Church, USA shall also develop the schedule and agenda for the General Assembly so that the time allocated for education on such issues in committees, on the floor, and with all other aspects of the General Assembly is not disproportionate with the fact that social justice, economics and politics relate primarily to just one of the six great ends of the church.

Overture

Foothills Presbytery overtures the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to temporarily set aside its Guideline and Policy for “Forming Social Policy” found in the appendix to the Standing Rules of the General Assembly. This section pertains to the role of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy. Foothills Presbytery recommends the following to temporarily take its place:

For the next three General Assemblies (223, 224, and 225) the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) shall focus its attention on generating discussion in the presbyteries about any social witness policy concerns that arise. The aim of these discussions will be to work toward forming consensus in the broader Church regarding social witness.

For this time period, the ACSWP shall not on its own propose any Social Witness Policy to the General Assembly, synods or presbyteries, but shall allow any social witness policy proposals to arise from the presbyteries in the form of overtures.

For this time period, the ACSWP shall not serve its usual role as a clearing house or editor for all social witness policy proposals written by any other entity.

Rationale

The Social Witness Policy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has been decided at General Assembly by up or down votes, sometimes by narrow margins, without first generating a sense of the will of Christ from the broader Church. This form of decision making has often led to deep divisions in the Church. By spending time and effort at generating conversation and moving toward consensus, Social Witness Policy can be formed that better reflects the wisdom and discernment of the whole Church.

As much as possible, these conversations with presbyteries should be held through electronic means or regional meetings to minimize the expense. Any funds that would have been spent to bring ACSWP to its own committee meetings should be redirected toward the presbytery conversations.

In doing this, the ACSWP will be fulfilling the task force policy in section 3.c. of “Forming Social Policy” to develop a plan in which the whole church can participate in the formation of social witness policy.

Overture

Foothills Presbytery overtures the 222nd General Assembly (2016) to amend the Standing Rules of the General Assembly by ~~striking~~ certain words and *adding* others as follows:

Under the section B “Commissioners, Delegates and other Participants at the Meeting,” Subsection 2. “Advisory Delegates,” Paragraph b, “Categories”:

Categories b. There shall be ~~four~~ *five* categories of advisory delegates: youth, theological student; missionary, ecumenical and *executive presbyter*. The expenses of each *of the first four* advisory delegates shall be paid by the General Assembly (see Standing Rule I.3.) on the same basis as the expenses of commissioners (see Standing Rule B.2.f.(2) below for exception). *The expenses for the executive presbyter advisory delegate shall be paid by the presbytery on the same basis as expenses for commissioners.*

Add a Paragraph “h” under subsection 2 “Advisory Delegates” as follows

Presbyter Advisory Delegates: Each presbytery may elect an Executive Presbyter Advisory Delegate (EPAD) who shall ordinarily be the presbytery executive (or person operating as the chief executive of the presbytery by any other title) to be an advisory delegate to the General Assembly.

Rationale

Presbytery executives have a unique perspective, seeing intimately into the lives of congregations and closely into the life of the General Assembly at the same time.

This perspective gives them a view of the whole church in a way that few others have.

They care deeply about the life of the congregations and pastors they serve, and they care about the mission of the General Assembly as the whole Church ministers to the world.

The voice of presbytery executives has been systematically diminished for over thirty years because they have no say at General Assembly meetings unless they are elected a commissioner. This might happen only once in an executive’s career because of the method commissioners are chosen. This important voice is effectively minimized at the Assembly.

The voice of presbytery executives is very much needed at the Assembly to keep the whole church in perspective and to prevent the Assembly from seeming like an “other.”

Paragraph c would not be changed, so Executive Presbyter Advisory Delegates would have the same privileges as other advisory delegates. That is, they would serve on a committee with voice and vote and would have voice on the floor of the Assembly.

Presbyteries would cover the expenses of Executive Presbyter Advisory Delegates, so financial implications to the Assembly would not be a concern.

Foothills Overture #5

Overture to Require a 2/3s Majority of Presbyteries to Amend the *Book of Order* (Revising G-6.04e)

Whereas, a constitution is a social document that asserts and affirms the core beliefs, values, principles and appropriate rules to express the identity of a given people;

Whereas, a constitution should therefore be a core social identity document and thus stable across long periods of the life of a social body;

Whereas, the the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, USA recognizes and affirms this understanding regarding the creeds, catechisms and confessions in the **Book of Confessions**, and provides that any change in the creeds, catechisms and confessions require a process whereby the denomination only amends the **Book of Confessions** when there is approval by affirmative votes of two General Assemblies and two-thirds of the presbyteries (see G-6.03e);

Whereas the current rules for amending the **Book of Order** by a simple majority vote of one General Assembly and a simple majority of the presbyteries has led to loss of this understanding of a constitution;

Whereas the result of this aforementioned loss of understanding has led to a fundamental instability of the document, confusion regarding the difference between operational rules which by necessity are open to more frequent change and constitutional principles and rules which are enduring to an organizations identity, and has led to ongoing rounds of partisan attempts to claim the constitution as the document for one side over and against another;

Whereas in this era of sweeping social changes and a culture of partisan bickering, the aforementioned loss has furthered divisions in the Presbyterian Church, USA which has furthered mistrust, led to loss of support for our shared work and led to loss of membership;

Nevertheless, whereas the current **Book of Order** was only established by a majority vote;

Foothills Presbytery respectfully sends the following Overture to the 222nd General Assembly:

1. To amend G-6.04e by striking the following language:

e. The Stated Clerk receives written advice that a proposed amendment to the *Book of Order* has received the affirmative votes of a majority of the presbyteries. ~~The proposed amendment so approved shall become effective one year following the adjournment of the assembly transmitting the proposed amendment.~~

And by replacing the stricken language with the words: *two-thirds majority*, and language from G-6.03e: *The proposed amendment is approved and enacted by the next General Assembly following the amendment's receipt of the necessary two-thirds approval of the presbyteries.*

2. The thusly amended **Book of Order**, along with whatever other **Book of Order** amendments approved by the 222nd General Assembly will be sent out to the presbyteries for a two-thirds approval, and upon achieving that majority, the 223rd General Assembly shall vote to ratify this change.

Overture to
Provide an Alternative Voting Category for Governing Bodies

Whereas, the Church of Jesus Christ is called to work for peace, unity, and purity;

Whereas, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its member congregations are committed to reducing any factors that obscure Christian unity;

Whereas, our unity depends solely on Jesus Christ and not an unlikely if not impossible unanimity on the range of particular and partisan issues we encounter in society and culture:

Whereas, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to press votes on divisive issues which have disrupted the peace, unity, and purity of the Church and diminished membership and mission momentum;

Now, therefore, Foothills Presbytery adopts and moves the following overture:

The Book of Order, Chapter 3, "Councils of the Church," be amended by adding to G-3.0105, **point c: A presbytery may register as "Abstaining" when voting on General Assembly proposals recommending constitutional changes.**

When abstaining on constitutional matters, a presbytery decision to abstain will not be recorded as a "no" vote. However, a majority of presbyteries will be required to vote "yes" for a constitutional amendment to pass.

A presbytery decision to register as abstaining may be accompanied by that presbytery's rationale for abstaining. The abstaining presbytery, for instance, may abstain from conviction that a vote to change the constitution at that time is inadvisable, divisive, and that further prayer, discussion, and discernment will benefit the Church.

Foothills Presbytery Potential Overtures — Feedback Form

For each overture, please place an "X" on the scale representing the likelihood that your Presbytery would vote to concur with the overture. Also include any qualifying comments, or suggestions to improve the overture.

Return to: Rev. Gordon Raynal, Stated Clerk, Foothills Presbytery, 2242 Woodruff Road, Simpsonville, S.C. 29681

**Foothills Overture #1 - GA cycle; limiting constitutional change
Likelihood of Concurrence**

Highly Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Highly Likely
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Comments/Suggestions:

**Foothills Overture #2 - Eliminating Yes/No Votes on Controversial Political Issues
Likelihood of Concurrence**

Highly Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Highly Likely
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Comments/Suggestions:

**Foothills Overture #3 - Altering the role of ACSWP
Likelihood of Concurrence**

**Highly
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Likely**

**Highly
Likely**

Comments/Suggestions:

**Foothills Overture #4 - Executive Presbyter Advisory Delegates
Likelihood of Concurrence**

**Highly
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Likely**

**Highly
Likely**

Comments/Suggestions:

**Foothills Overture #5 - Requiring a 2/3 majority to amend the constitution
Likelihood of Concurrence**

**Highly
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Likely**

**Highly
Likely**

Comments/Suggestions:

**Foothills Overture #6 - Abstention as a category for Presbytery voting
Likelihood of Concurrence**

**Highly
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Unlikely**

**Somewhat
Likely**

**Highly
Likely**

Comments/Suggestions: