



223rd General Assembly (2018) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) June 16 - 23, St. Louis, Missouri A Brief Summary

The 223rd General Assembly was an interesting week with a few plot twists. The theme was from Matthew 6:33 and striving for the Kingdom of God was viewed as Kin-dom Building. Some significant actions:

Election of the Co-Moderators: Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri and Teaching Elder Cindy Kohlmann were elected Co-Moderators on the fourth ballot on Saturday evening. Ms Cintrón-Olivieri is an educator from Tropical Florida Presbytery and Ms Kohlmann is a member of Boston Presbytery and on the staff as a resource person for the Presbyteries of Boston and Northern New England. In their moderatorial term they hope to model cultural diversity and parity of ruling and teaching elders. The plot twist here was that for the first time in many assemblies the advisory vote of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates (YAADs) did not predict the successful team.

Book of Confessions: Going into the Assembly there were no proposed changes to the first part of the Constitution, but in what was probably the biggest plot twist, the Committee working on Theological Issues decided on a change to an overture requesting "Adopting the 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail,' written by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as a Contemporary Statement of Faith (But not with Constitutional Standing)." Instead, the committee recommended, and the Assembly approved, commending it to the church for study and starting the process to include it in the Book of Confessions. In addition, the Assembly approved a task force to work with ecumenical partners to create a statement that places the Confession of Belhar in a context that considers the PC(USA) participation "in racism in our historical context, building on prior statements of repentance and apology."

The Way Forward: Maybe the most closely watched topic, and the one with the potentially longest-term impact, were the reports from groups created by the last GA giving careful consideration to the future of the PC(USA). These groups were the Way Forward Commission and the All Agency Review Committee - which presented a joint report - and the 2020 Vision Team which was presenting an interim report. The first report and recommendations included points related to general support services in the denomination, particularly the need for more comprehensive translation of materials. But their most controversial proposal was a restructuring of the board of the corporate entity behind the PC(USA), known in PC(USA) jargon as "A Corp." In the midst of the committee work polity and corporate questions were raised regarding their proposal and, having its own plot twist, at the last minute a new structure was agreed upon that satisfied all the parties, was approved by the committee and passed by the Assembly as a whole.

The Vision 2020 Team presented their draft vision statement with the bullet points that the PC(USA) is Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving and Alive. Lots of questions and input, including whether the five points felt too forced in the attempt to be an acrostic for PCUSA. The feedback and the comments approved by the Assembly are sent back to the Team for consideration in their final report for the next GA.

Fossil Fuel Divestment: Probably the biggest debate in plenary was over the proposal to have PC(USA) entities divest from fossil fuel companies. There were various overtures from presbyteries concerning these investments and the committee recommended one that requested divestment from these companies. A minority report recommended continuing active engagement with the companies through the current investments, a position supported by the PC(USA) Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI). The minority report prevailed.

Per Capita: No report on this Assembly would be complete without a mention of the action on per capita. Before the meeting the Office of the General Assembly requested a major increase from the 2018 rate of \$7.73 per member to \$10.71 in 2019 and \$11.45 in 2020. Feedback ahead of the meeting had the request cut back to \$8.50 in 2019 and \$9.35 in 2020. As the last action of the meeting, the Assembly approved a rate of \$8.95 for both 2019 and 2020. In part, this reflects a number of initiatives the Assembly approved that needed to be paid for. With the overall concern with per capita, the Assembly also approved a team to "review the current per capita based system of funding."

Hands and Feet: One of the important aspects of this Assembly was not an action item on the floor, but action out in the community. In advance of the Assembly as well as during the meeting service projects and community outreach events happened in the St. Louis area. The offering from opening worship - over \$54,000 - was donated to help provide cash bail for individuals being held for minor crimes because they could not afford the bail money. The money was presented at the end of a march from the convention center to the city justice center.