

# General Assembly Reports



## ***General Assembly Commissioners***

***Mary Brown*** (Ruling Elder - Woodlawn)

***Ed Kelly*** (Ruling Elder - First Green Cove Springs)

***David Lee*** (Teaching Elder - Highlands United)

***Paige Porter-Buhl*** (Teaching Elder - Covenant)

## ***Theological Student Advisory Delegate***

Forrest Foxworth (First Fernandina Beach)

## ***Young Adult Advisory Delegate***

Emma Cottrell (Community)

## ***Area Relationship Coordinator for Presbytery of St. Augustine***

Joe Rigsby - Honorably Retired



223<sup>rd</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY COMMISSIONER'S REPORT  
BY MARY L. BROWN

Serving as a Commissioner for the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly was an exciting and gratifying experience for me. I had an opportunity to join other Commissioners, Young Adult Advisors, Theological Student Advisors and Mission Advisors from 170 Presbyterian churches to listen, study, debate, pray, worship and vote on the compelling and challenging issues to see where God is calling me and others.

I attended a wonderful "Get to Know you" reception upon arrival on Friday evening where I met new friends, listened to great music and enjoyed a delicious meal.

The opening worship service was AWESOME. It was a multicultural, multi-sensory service where approximately 200 voices sang "Draw the Circle Wider". There were twenty water bearers representing diversity, ethnicity and various geographical locations of the presbytery who filled the baptismal fonts.

During the opening worship service, Revs. Jan Edmiston and Denise Anderson delivered a co-sermon that set the tone for the Assembly. We were reminded that "God calls on us to be successful by being rich in wisdom and understanding". Rev. J. Herbert Nelson, II, Stated Clerk led us in the Lord's Prayer and informed us that the offering collected would be used to support a partnership with other organizations to pay bail for those individuals who are incarcerated in the St. Louis Jail for misdemeanors and are unable to pay. \$47,200 was collected and delivered as participants marched to the Justice Center chanting "**End No Cash-No Bail.**"

Rev. Nelson reminded us to be mindful of the many issues of justice, peace and compassion that we are facing as citizens of the United States and as members of the Body of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He continued to emphasize the importance of building "**Kindom**"- which will give us an opportunity to create solidarity in all communities." "**Kindom**" is coined to point to our oneness in Christ. Rev. Nelson emphasized the following questions: "**What do you need from me?**" and "**How can we welcome and support as kin persons of different life circumstances, skin color and language locally and globally?**" Those issues took concrete form as we began our work together studying each one to gain a deeper understanding that will give us an opportunity to demonstrate our common commitment to strive for God's righteousness. He called upon commissioners to make this a turn around Assembly, to move our aim from success to significance in addressing and bringing healing to the brokenness of our time.

We were united under the theme "**Renewing the Vision: Kindom Building for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**" This theme comes from the passage in Matthew 6:25:33 that speaks to all of us "to seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, to turn to God first for help, to fill our thoughts with his desires, to take his character for your pattern, and to serve and obey him in everything".

On Saturday evening, after four rounds of ballots, the Commissioners elected Vilmarie Clintron-Olivieri from the Tropical Florida Presbytery and Rev. Cindy Kohlman from the Presbytery of Boston and Northern New England as Co-Moderators for the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly. Also, the following elections were confirmed:

- Rev. Diane Moffett as president of the Presbyterian Mission Agency
- Rev. Tom Taylor as president of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Foundation
- Alton B. Pollard III as president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

Our work was organized into 14 committees which included: Church Polity, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations, Environmental Issues, Peace Making, Immigration and International Issues, and Middle East Issues. Members serving on the committees were randomly selected.

I was assigned to the Mid-Council Committee along with 50 other commissioners including (1) YAAD. Following an opportunity of getting to know everyone, we began our work by hearing from several advocates on the resolutions for boundary changes, the establishment of an Administrative Commission, the need to raise awareness of the declining Black Congregations, and the lack of pastoral leadership in the Black Congregations. We had great leaders who provided the leadership as we approached our work.

I was appointed to a Task Force whose assignment was to prepare a draft resolution for the establishment of an Administrative Council for the Synod of the Covenant due to lack of leadership.

The following resolutions/recommendations were presented and passed by the Assembly:

- Boundary changes due to size and location.
- Establishment of an Administrative Commission of the Synod of the Covenant to assist with some issues of disorder.

The YAAD Commissioner on the committee spoke very passionately as he raised awareness for support of the resolution for **Mid-Councils to follow the lead of the National Black Caucus in raising awareness of the declining nature of Black Congregations and the lack of pastoral leadership**. He also pointed out “that there is a legacy of social and economic inequality in the nation and that a few in the Assembly would understand or face the challenges of being black in the PC (USA).”. The Assembly passed the resolution.

The Assembly also acted on many other matters and heard from several ecumenical and interfaith partners.

Listed below are some of highlights that the Commissioners heard and had an opportunity to discuss, amend and make decisions:

- Approved a minority report for the PC (USA) to continue its corporate engagement with fossil fuel companies.
- Encouraged the state of Israel to fully comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to stop discriminatory practices and called on the U.S. Government to rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council.
- Reaffirmed previous General Assembly policies designed to reduce gun violence.
- Rejected an overture to elect and ordain ruling elders without requiring them to serve on session.

- Approved an overture from the Presbytery of Newton to establish a team of twelve to fifteen persons to review the current per capita-based system of funding the ministry for sustainability into the next ten years.
- Initiated the process of possibly including Dr. Martin Luther King's Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in the Book of Confessions.
- Acted to fund new initiatives for addressing the genesis root causes of the exodus of refugees from Central America to the USA.
- Authorized a five-member task group to raise awareness of issues adversely affecting black girls and women in society.
- Called upon the federal government to end family separations at the U. S. Mexico border.

Members of the Assembly had an opportunity to worship at various host churches, I chose Third Presbyterian Church. Rev. Cedric Portis, Minister preached on the sermon "Who is my Neighbor? Anyone in Trouble.

The Assembly was very organized, everyone was cheerful, excited and very helpful. There were multiple opportunities to attend bible study, luncheons, and dinner events to hear dynamic speakers on relevant topics. I had the opportunity to attend or participate in the following:

- Attended the "Hands and Feet" Celebration featuring the awesome Saxophonist Kirk Whalum Blues/Jazz musician. We all clapped and sang along with him. This was an enjoyable evening. Hands and Feet is an initiative envisioned by our Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson that was shared two years ago when he stood for election. This initiative will continue at the 2020 General Assembly in Baltimore, MD where all participants will have an opportunity to participate in acts of service in partnership with communities at risk.
- Participated in the one-mile Cash Bail Rally and March with several hundred other participants to deliver the \$47,200.00 to the Justice Department.
- Attended the Voices of Sophia Breakfast. Where I heard a very powerful message delivered by Rev. Tracy Blackmon. Sophia is an organization that invites conversations from men and women on Illuminations of their faith journey and vision.
- Attended the Board of Pensions dinner. We all received a book written by Grady Parsons, "Our Connectional Church: The Hopeful Future of the PC(USA)" where he tells the story of four congregations as examples of innovation and vital ministry. Frank Spencer, President of the Board of Pensions gave an insightful report of research being completed on congregational data and of the new Board of Pensions initiatives to address the challenges.

The 2020 Vision Committee grounded their report in scripture "Write the Vision. Make it plain so a runner can read it" from Habbakuk. They presented the following proposed vision: **Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, Alive.** We were encouraged to include this vision in sermon series, Bible studies, VBS and Camp themes.

As a first-time commissioner, I had an opportunity to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of the work of the presbytery. I also met new friends, discussed issues and shared valuable information. We all worked long days and nights to complete our assigned tasks, however, it was worth it, and I thoroughly enjoyed every moment. **Thanks to the Presbytery for this wonderful opportunity.**

## COMMISSIONER REPORT – 223<sup>rd</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY

By Ruling Elder Commissioner Ed Kelly

The 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly was my first. I am not sure what I expected, but I arrived hopeful that my background as a leader in my own church, this presbytery and more recently at the synod level, would allow me an opportunity to add some value to the process. This report contains a summary of only my personal reflections. It is delivered with full disclosure that it comes from my personal perspective and is colored by a lifetime of my experiences and my prejudices, both known and unknown.

By far, the best thing about the GA for me was spending time and enjoying fellowship with my fellow commissioners and delegates, David, Paige, Mary, Emma and Forrest, with Sandra, our stated clerk, and our friend, advisor and mentor, Joe Rigsby. They were a constant source of joy and support.

I soon found that my contribution to GA 223 would be at the committee level. I was assigned to Committee 6, on Church Polity and Ordered Ministry. Most people would have groaned with an assignment which certainly seemed mundane when compared to other work, but I found my legal training and PJC background to be valuable there, especially in crafting compromises in response to the overtures before us and in working with the Book of Order. It was a hard two days (and two nights) of committee work but I enjoyed that experience. You will be presented with a number of amendments to the Book of Order for consideration later this year, mostly processed through our committee.

For me, the plenary sessions were a different matter. It appeared to me that the primary focus was on issues defined as matters of social justice (a theme based on one of the Great Ends of the Church - the “promotion of social righteousness”). I personally felt that, except for the recognition of new mission workers, some consent agenda items and informational reports, the other five Great Ends of the Church received little attention. The message I heard was that we are people with many grievances, both with our church and with government, and that those are best addressed through organized political action. In the voicing of the social justice issues it seemed to me that folks spent a lot of time apologizing for both for our individual omissions and misdeeds and for the corporate misdeeds of our country, past and present, resulting in mistreatment or neglect of others. Truly our sins are many, but perhaps there could have been some recognition of the good we have accomplished and the significant strides on a number of social issues that have been made – that I have personally witnessed - both as a church and as a country in the 50 years that have passed since I was a young person. I was clearly part of a very small minority at GA 223 with respect to these concerns so this is sort of a minority report, offered with an understanding that differences of opinion are not uncommon in ecclesiastical circles and that we need to be mindful that we are at our best when we act together as a community of faith, trusting that God will lead our church in the way it should go.

Of particular concern to me, as an overall observation, was that there was little reflection at GA 223 upon of the condition of the denomination, either in numbers of adherents or in financial health. It seemed to me that we, as a denomination, should be giving attention to these matters. What follows is a summary of what I learned during the week:

Budgets. There were two budgets to be approved by GA 223 for 2019 and 2020: (i) a Per Capita budget for matters covered by the amount assessed against each member, collected from the congregations (presbyteries are supposed to pay the share of the churches which do not do so) and (ii) the PMA (Presbyterian Mission Agency) budget which is funded by a number of sources. The PMA budgets for 2019 and 2020 are in the range of \$70-71 million; the Per Capita budgets are around \$14-15 million. Some additional comments on those budgets:

PMA Budget: GA 223 added programs, staffing requirements and other mandates, primarily for promotion of the above mentioned social justice agenda, increasing overall spending by a collective amount which I calculate (roughly) to be \$2.9 million dollars over the next two years (\$1.8 million combined for the PMA mission funded budgets for 2019 and 2020, and \$1.1 million to the combined Per Capita budgets for 2019 and 2020) in the actions taken during the various plenary sessions. GA staff advised that the PMA budget increases could be absorbed, but only by making cuts to staffing and other programs – in other words, trading off some of what prior GA's have approved for these new mandates.

Per Capita Budget At the final plenary session on Saturday morning, some commissioners objected when the OGA/PMA jointly recommended a Per Capita budget which included an increase in the Per Capita by approximately 16% per year, from **\$7.73** in 2017 to **\$8.95** for 2019 and 2020, to help reduce the projected deficits in the Per Capita budget for 2019 and 2020. The GA staff had already proposed a 10% increase in Per Capita to \$8.50 to be used to pay for existing program and staffing costs, but had to add to that to cover the new mandates. According to GA staff analysis, however, just to break even for the next two years the Per Capita would have had to have been increased by much more, to \$10.71 in 2019 and \$11.45 in 2020, which of course did not happen. The additional cost seemed to come as a surprise to a number of commissioners despite the fact that GA staff advised us each morning what the projected financial implications would be from the cumulative actions taken in the prior plenary sessions. The increases in Per Capita to **\$8.95 for 2019 and 2020**, respectively were approved. Even with the increase, the Per Capita budgets will still run projected deficits of \$1,892,227 for 2019 and \$2,078,303 for 2020, requiring the use of existing reserves. It looked like to me (copied from a chart provided on screen only, with no hard copy found on PC-Biz) that, assuming the same giving and funding levels, the existing Per Capita reserves would be reduced from the current level of about **\$6 million** in 2018 to around **\$2 million** by the end of 2020.

Membership. With respect to membership, according to GA figures our losses of churches averaged 100 congregations per year from 2005 through 2016, and total membership declined from 2,312,662 in 2005 to 1,482,767 at the end of 2016 (36%), accelerating between 2012-2016 due to an increase in the departure of congregations to other denominations. We had a net loss of members in 2016 of 89,893 and a net loss of 67,714 members in 2017 (5% of the 2016 membership). The thinking of our denomination leadership seems to be that most of the dissident churches have now departed (according a published statement from the GA Stated Clerk, those churches were a “temporary roadblock” to advancing the mission of the church) and things will get better. A Board of Pensions analysis contained in the foreword to a new book by Gradye Parsons (a copy was given to each of us by the PMA) expressed a hope that the membership losses are leveling off and membership in the denomination will bottom out at not less than 1.1 million and start growing again somewhere between 2025 and 2030, primarily by reason of projected increased membership in large urban churches, although smaller congregations would continue to decline.

Let me emphasize that numbers with respect to finances and membership in this report were gleaned from my reading of the available published data on the GA website, the PC-Biz site material distributed during the course of the week, and I will stand corrected if there are errors. Nevertheless, with that caveat, it appears to me that the denomination's leadership may be whistling past the graveyard with respect to the long term future of our financial condition and membership.

Ed Kelly

## What A Week in St. Louis at the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA)

By: David Lee, Commissioner

GA is an amazing week that is exhilarating and exhausting, challenging and very rewarding. It's a week of theological and ecclesial stretching for each commissioner and for the Body of Christ that is the PC(USA). There are so many experiences with such depth that one would be hard pressed to remember even a portion of them. Amazing worship experiences, amazing people with remarkable skills who are doing ministry locally and globally in remarkable ways.

GA is about many things. For many it's a rare opportunity to 'catch up' with people from your past. For me it was a delight to see a few people I haven't seen since the day I graduated from Union Seminary. One of them, a pastor now serving in Milwaukee name Jim, was the very first person I met on that campus about 41 years ago. We were both at UTS on a 'discernment weekend' and both spent the next four years, as friends, in the midst of our theological education.

On Tuesday afternoon, as we were waiting for the "Hands and Feet" initiative march to the St. Louis jail to protest an unjust system of 'cash bail,' I was approached by a young man who asked if I was David Lee. I told him 'yes' and he introduced himself as "Daniel." Daniel, all grown up and at the GA as a young pastor serving a church in Illinois was a child in my arms 27 years ago when I was serving the Concord PC in

Statesville, NC. What an amazingly gratifying experience. To meet a living embodiment of the commitment of that church to its baptismal vows was for me a thrilling moment.

At GA you watch transitions take place as Moderators who have served faithfully for two years pass the mantle, not to mention the stoles and the gavel, to newly elected moderators who will do the same for the next two years. Outgoing moderators, the Revs. Denise Anderson and JanEdminston congratulated and installed the new Co-moderators, The Rev. Cindy Kohlmann of the Presbytery of



MODERATORS MAKE THE TRANSITION



Boston and Northern New England and Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri from a church in the Presbytery of Tropical Florida (Miami). The new moderators immediately took up the mantle and presided over an historic week in St. Louis.

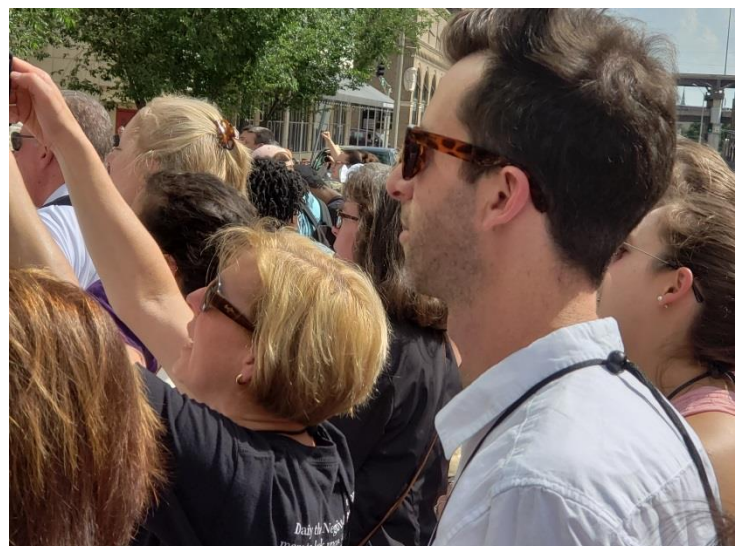


On Sunday morning we went to worship “GA” style with commissioners boarding buses to attend churches with the bounds of Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery which hosted the GA. The Committee on Local Arrangements (COLA) did a fantastic job all week, but none more evident than the coordination of almost 1000 commissioners and guests boarding buses to be taken to churches for worship and then lunch. The hospitality of the people in and around St. Louis and in

these churches was incredible. I attended the Grace Presbyterian Church in Crystal City, Mo., which also happened to be the home church of one of my parishioners at Highlands. A small town church with a big heart hosted 20 of us from the GA and fed us spiritually and physically with apparent great joy.

Beginning Sunday evening the GA is divided amongst a number of committees which consider hundreds of overtures submitted for presbyteries across the country. Rather than discussing what was considered I would offer that this process is grueling and challenges each commissioner and advisory delegate to read, study, debate and debate some more, vote and then send overtures back to the whole body for consideration. It’s a testimony to our dedication to the polity of the church and our desire to do things ‘decently and in order,’ even if it takes all night.

On Tuesday afternoon at the invitation of the Stated Clerk we were invited to participate in a march to the St. Louis City detention center to protest by our presence the inequitable system of ‘cash bail’ that has hundreds incarcerated and awaiting trial who are unable to post ‘cash bail. It was a blistering day and hundreds of Presbyterian delegates and friends took to the streets of St. Louis. We were an amazing variety of sizes, colors, languages, genders, etc.







United by the singular purpose of expressing in the living, breathing, corporate body of the GA what we believe to be an unjust system of detention while awaiting trial that includes for many being sent to what is known as the 'work house' which is a medium security facility housing over 500 'inmates' none of who have been to trial. People, many of whom have been arrested for misdemeanors, even traffic violations, are kept until trial if unable to post bail, sometimes for months. Jobs are lost, families are affected, and these people in spite of our 'presumption of innocence' spend time in jail. In the months preceding GA and at the Assembly offerings were gathered to help post bails for many of these inmates. Our stated clerk, J. Herbert Nelson, delivered \$47,000.00 to help secure bail for people incarcerated and awaiting trial.

Wednesday through the final worship of the GA on Saturday morning is a whirlwind of action which such an array of reports and decisions as to be mind boggling. In one moment we are discussing the plight of Native American churches in need of support and in the next we hear reports concerning the question of divestiture in fossil fuel. We talk about, pray about and debate items as important as family leave and then moments later have serious discussions about the Middle East. What is consistent about all of these reports, overtures, suggestions and request for new policies for the PC(USA)? The passion and fervor of these presenting, supporting and sometimes opposing these programs, changes, and new directions for our denomination. Even still, underlying all of that, is the definite belief in the fact that in the midst of the process the presence and power of the Holy Spirit is moving us ever forward, always reforming, always seeking the will of God in each decision. Not all decisions are popular. Most were met with great enthusiasm and joy. Some left people wondering, sad and disappointed. But if we believe in the Lord of our polity we must believe that God is in control, even of the GA of the PC(USA).

## **223rd General Assembly Paige Porter-Buhl**

GA 223 was a whirlwind of conversation, new friends, earnest faces, and visionary ideas from the moment I stepped into the baggage claim at the St. Louis airport where volunteers were gathering newly arrived participants together and shepherding us into buses to the various hotels. My seatmate on the bus was a volunteer worker from the Gaza border, elsewhere on the bus was a missionary from... somewhere... but our conversation was cut short as we were herded to our seats.

The days were unexpectedly grueling; while substantive ideas, both new and old, both interconnected and independent, seemed to float through every conversation and overtures, enticing one's mind to stay active and nimble, one's body was primarily still; sitting at a table at plenary, sitting at a table in committee, sitting at a table for meals, always sitting from early in the morning until late at night. Posting the blog entries on the PresbyteryMusings page for all the delegates at GA was a delightful activity, and so was knitting, but neither could substitute for a long leisurely walk or jog. About every other day I was able to hit a treadmill for a few minutes, but it didn't seem enough. In a humorous mood I considered suggesting that for the next GA, they install treadmills in the huge plenary hall along with the tables and chairs for those of us who like to keep moving, but that's not exactly the most realistic of suggestions.

The stories told by overture advocates in the Social Justice Committee room seemed to come straight out of biblical times, reminiscence of the people who approached Jesus with their pleas, often one by one – A father pleading for a son, a young boy bravely standing up on principle, Visionary women sharing with us their experiences of hope and change. We stayed at our seats through each story, asked questions that often seemed impersonal, the system seemed to embody the stern grimace of justice more than the gentle touch of mercy, yet there were those who sat at the back of the room who where there to hug, to listen to care. They too were a part of the system, so that justice and compassion were in tandem, neither forgotten.

Worship was both gloriously emotionally moving and utterly intellectually fascinating. Sounds and colors, fabrics of different textures, music and spoken voice all blended together to a whole. I eagerly stayed through the last moments of the closing worship, though many had to stay to catch planes and other transportation home; I wanted to savor every moment, and as exhausted as I was, I was reluctant to leave.

I had homework before the event, and as I flew back on Sunday, I realized how much homework I have before me afterwards to share ideas, liturgical snippets, research odd references to books that I had yet to read. It may take me fully the two years to unpack all the meanings and ramifications, and by then, it will be time for us to send another group of people to GA, and the cycle will begin again.

As I looked down at my watch, I realized we were just a couple minutes short of midnight. And work was still being done. People were still speaking passionately, listening intently, deliberating, and thoughtfully discerning God's voice in our midst. Our Friday night plenary session was exhausting and exhilarating. The effort would have been impressive had it stood alone. Yet, it came on the back of 8 days of intense work. I left feeling both humbled and energized by the amazing work being done by our people, by our denomination. PCUSA, you can be proud of so much.

As you may know, General Assembly requires a variety of roles. Staff and volunteers do so much in the way of planning and set up. Vendors and visitors add to the experience. And then, from each presbytery, we have representatives that populate the official roster: teaching and ruling elders from all over. In addition to those official commissioners, we have a host of *advisory delegates*. The role of advisory delegate is exactly what the name suggests: to advise the commissioners on all business items.

So, each presbytery has a Young Adult Advisory Delegate. Additionally, we invite a host of ecumenical and missionary advisory delegates. Lastly, the PCUSA invites a handful of seminary students to serve in the role of Theological Student Advisory Delegate. This was my role for the 223rd General Assembly. As a representative of both my school and my presbytery, I participated in both committee and plenary sessions.



Cindy Kohlmann (Co-moderator) &  
Joyce Lieberman (our Synod Exec)



Speaking at plenary.

I was assigned to Committee 5: Mid Councils. This meant we dealt with issues pertaining to presbyteries and synods. Our business items included reviewing synod minutes, name changes, and border realignments. We also devoted a significant amount of time deliberating the healthiest way to address tension between a particular synod and presbytery leaders. Finally, we spoke in favor of a resolution aimed at addressing the unique challenges facing our African American congregations.

After several days of committee work concluded, commissioners and delegates gathered for plenary sessions. We slowly tackled all of the items that came from each committee. I was so encouraged by what is often a mercurial balance to maintain: passionate dialogue with a genuine spirit of cooperation. I realize my perspective is purely anecdotal; but I genuinely felt as though even the most divisive issues were more an expression of different strategies, not different goals.

I was so proud. So proud to be part of this denomination. So proud to participate in something so large and Spirit-filled. I was so proud to see our theology at work, even in seemingly innocuous parliamentary procedures. Our commitment to hearing every voice, to appreciating diversity, to thoughtful and intentional deliberation, to listening before speaking, to unity without uniformity, to a shared life together... all

these commitments were so evident. And they were never sacrificed simply for efficiency or expediency.

I was so proud to be a part of the St Augustine Presbytery delegation. These women and men were, to a person, extraordinary. In session, they spoke with such depth and care and humility. They approached each issue with intense consideration. And outside of our official business, they were warm and hospitable. They were kind. They were thoughtful and encouraging. We are so very fortunate to have them in our presbytery.

I was so proud to be a part of the TSADs (Theological Student Advisory Delegates). These students are insightful, passionate, articulate, wise. If they are any indication of our future leadership, we are in good hands.



TSADs

The official business of the GA is readily accessible online. I would encourage anyone to read about all the wonderful things we (our denomination) are doing. The increased *per capita* rate still seems, to me, an incredible deal. As Presbyterians, we have an opportunity to put our joint resources towards doing some meaningful work: supporting missionaries, addressing race and inequality issues, engaging healthy environmental approaches, working towards more sustainable financial models, planting new worshipping communities, supporting victims of sexual abuse, advocating for social justice, and the list goes on. Again, I am so encouraged that we have such a strong commitment and energy towards God's mission at both the macro and micro level... that these things are happening and being supported at local congregations in particular communities while *at the same time* we are working towards systematic changes.

This space does not even include a mention of the wonderful personal experiences worshipping with Third Presbyterian Church (St. Louis) or the march to the city Justice Center or the myriad of wonderful people with whom I got to share meals and conversation.

I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to participate. We have so much to be excited about. To God be the glory.



Rev. Bertram Johnson

Forrest Foxworth  
Theological Student Advisory Delegate  
Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary  
St Augustine Presbytery

**223rd General Assembly Experience**  
**Emma Cottrell - Young Adult Advisory Delegate**

Thank you for letting me speak to you today about my experience at the 223rd PC(USA) General Assembly; and thank you so much for allowing me to represent you as the Young Adult Advisory Delegate for the Presbytery of St. Augustine.

When I applied for the position, I honestly did not know what the General Assembly was. All I knew was that I had a free trip to St. Louis and a lot of reading to do. For those of you who don't know, the General Assembly is where the PC(USA) decides their national stance on issues, decides where to spend their money, elects Moderator(s), and does all the business they need to get done for two years. And of course, in Presbyterian fashion, that means committee after committee after committee! Some days, we would be talking about the amendment to the amendment to the amendment and I would think, hmm, Catholicism doesn't sound too bad right now. However, I love being part of a church where we have the power to decide who and what the PC(USA) is.

When I got to the GA, I was so excited to see such a diverse group; men and women, people of color, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people of all ages, and people from all around the world! I was hesitant at first, I thought that the church should focus on love and service, not on politics. However, I realized more and more throughout the week that those two things go hand in hand. With all the injustices in our country and our world, we need to get involved in politics to help those in need, because if the church won't help others who will? We debated about the conflict in Israel-Palestine, the prejudice in our own country, violence in South America, and so much more. I got the opportunity to speak on the plenary floor, in front of almost 8,000 people in support of the financial implications of helping refugees in South America, the church being transparent about sexual assault and helping survivors, and on violence in Gaza. Through the week, I reflected on our baptismal vows, we vowed to renounce all evil and to spread the love of Jesus Christ. If I'm not getting involved and fighting with those who are oppressed, am I really living up to these promises?



Anyone who has spent at least five minutes with me knows that I LOVE to talk. I could honestly talk to a brick wall for hours! So, something I struggled with was knowing when to speak up and when to shut up. As a straight, white, middle-class woman, my voice has been heard, for a long time. Finding the balance between letting other voices be heard and using my own privilege to help those unheard is something that will be a lifelong struggle for me. I experienced this first hand at a peaceful protest to end cash bail in St.Louis. We did not have a permit for this march, so there was a possibility of getting arrested. A young black man who was also a YAAD explained to us what to do if you get arrested. My white privilege immediately sank in when I realized I had no idea what to do in this situation, and it was common knowledge to him; it broke my heart. However, instead of silencing us the police protected us and directed traffic around us, reminding me of the awesome power of God's love. What I took most from this experience is that the opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice.

I feel so blessed to have had an experience to work towards ending some of the many injustices in our world. Thank you again for your love and support, and choosing me to be your YAAD.

**Report of the 223rd General Assembly 2018 to  
The Presbytery of St. Augustine October 2, 2018**

**by  
J. W. Rigsby**

The 223rd General Assembly met June 16-23, in St. Louis, MO. It was hosted by the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy. There were a total of 538 commissioners, 144 young adult advisory delegates, 16 theological student advisory delegates, 8 missionary advisory delegates, 14 ecumenical advisory delegates, 100 corresponding members, over 100 OGA staff and volunteers and assistants, over 300 other staff, 43 staff from theological institutions, 245 staff and stated clerks of presbyteries and synods, 25 ecumenical representatives, and over 600 registered observers.

There is no way that I can highlight everything that happened during the 223rd meeting of the General Assembly, but I will lift up a few. Of course, there was the opening worship service which is always a moving and inspirational experience. We celebrated communion during every worship service.

What I call the first main action of the Assembly was to elect a moderator. There were three teams of candidates. One team represented a possible moderator/vice- moderator, and the other two teams represented the possibility of co-moderators. The 222nd General Assembly was the first to have co-moderators. After the fourth ballot, Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri of the Presbytery of Tropical Florida and the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann of the Presbytery of Boston and Northern New England by a 266-242 vote. The moderators of the 223rd General Assembly promised to celebrate diversity and to think outside the box.

The Assembly voted to increase the GA per capita over the next two years. It is now \$7.73. It will increase by 10% in 2019, to \$8.50. In 2020 it will increase to \$9.35.

The 222nd General Assembly called upon the PCUSA to be a “Matthew 25 Church” – including other things, instructing future assemblies to create opportunities to engage in acts of service to and with communities at risk and to confront racism and the systems that destroy the environment and keep people marginalized. Matthew 25:31-46 is about our mandate, as Christians, to help those in need. The Stated Clerk and the Office of the General Assembly, J. Herbert Nelson, Jr., invited us all to respond to the mandate of the 222nd GA by giving money to help bail out people in jail in St. Louis who were there for minor offenses, but had to have cash money for bail. At my last count, there was nearly \$50,000.00 raised for this purpose and many of us marched from the American Center to the St. Louis City Justice Center in partnership with the Bail Project, to present the offering to free individuals who could not pay their cash bail.

All participants were asked by the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy to bring a “go- bag” for the homeless of St. Louis. This included crew socks and other items to be distributed by various community organizations and churches in St. Louis. This was to help the homeless get a head start on the cold winter.

The Assembly voted to continue to be engaged in dialog about Fossil Fuel Divestment.

There were many signs of inspiration and courage during the Assembly. One was seen and felt through Chip Andrus, pastor of South Salem in New York. Rev. Andrus is faced with the challenges that cancer brings but he was there playing music as he has been since 2001. He is lovingly called the “GA musician.”

The past Stated Clerk, Gradye Parsons has written a book, *Our Connectional Church – The Hopeful Future of the PC(USA)*. The Board of Pensions has commissioned him to study large and small congregations for signs of growth and hope. While we may be concerned about evangelism or social justice, Gradye says, “Social justice is part of true evangelism.”

The General Assembly confirmed the election of the Rev. Diane Moffett as the president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA). She is the first African-American to hold this office.

The Assembly confirmed the election of Dr. Alton B. Pollard as president of Louisville Theological Seminary. Dr. Pollard is the first African-American to serve as president of this institution.

The Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) has been changed to Racial Equity Advocacy Committee (REAC). The committee making this recommendation stated that this name better reflects their work today. The work has moved from an advisory role to an organization that advocates for racial equity for people of color.

The GA approved the “Way Forward” plan. This changes the corporate entity, strives for cost equity among the various shared services delivered by the denomination’s six agencies and creates a Moving Forward Commission to make necessary changes between now and the next Assembly. It basically means a restructure of the PC(USA) A Corp and strengthening the role of the General Assembly’s Stated Clerk. We will see how this works more clearly by the 224th General Assembly.

The 223rd General Assembly strongly condemned Racist Nationalism.

The 224th General Assembly will be June 20-27, 2020, in Baltimore. The 2020 Vision Team's Guiding Statement calls the PCUSA to be: Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, and Alive.

Attending from the Presbytery of St. Augustine were: Mary Brown (RE, Woodlawn), Emma Cottrell (YAAD, Community), Forrest Foxworth (TSAD, First Fernandina), Ed Kelly (RE, First Green Cove Springs), Davis Lee (TE, Highlands), Page Porter-Buhl (TE, Covenant), Sandra Hedrick (TE/Stated Clerk, Kirkwood), and Joe Rigsby (TE, group leader).

As the leader of our group, I want to complement our attendees on their diligence and high level of commitment. Our commissioners and delegates were really involved in the debate and the great work of the 223rd General Assembly. Each person has expressed a deeper commitment to the service of the Lord and a greater appreciation for the great work the PCUSA does locally and around the world. I believe that all of us came away from the 223rd General Assembly feeling positive about the direction and hope of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our Stated Clerk, Sandra Hedrick, did an outstanding job assisting in so many ways during the plenary and committee sessions. I was blessed to be a part of this group. We started each day with a scripture, a prayer, a thought or quote for the day, a laugh for the day to bring a smile to our faces and joy to our hearts.

It was an honor and a joy to have been chosen to be the coordinator of this wonderful group representing a great Presbytery. Thanks to all of you for the opportunity.