

GA 226 Reflections

Live into Hope

I begin with a word cloud as overview: prayerful, careful, thoughtful, preparation, technology, zoom instructions, committees, items of business, Zoom Polity committee meetings, inclusion, listening, hearing, respectful, LGBTQIA+, consent agenda, voting, resources, advisors, unity, belonging, BIPOC, music, worship, sermons, moderators, stated clerks, shared meals, YAAD's, stories, emotions, hope, playfulness, TSAD's, amendments, amendments, amendments, fellowship, fiscal responsibility, Belonging!

- This will give a sense of how GA works, with much preparation, especially with the technology to be used in committee meetings and at GA.
- There was an amazing amount of instruction and work that went into preparing us to do the work of the GA.
- The week before going to Utah, we spent 3 days on zoom with our committee. I was on the Polity Committee. We worked Long days from 9 until late each day. So, all committee work was completed before leaving for Utah. Each committee formulated recommendations to be presented at GA.
- Our first Plenary session was held on Zoom before leaving for Utah.
- There was a welcome reception on Saturday night. Sunday worship and lunch were hosted by various churches in the area.
- Sunday afternoon there was a worship service and the second Plenary session, which was used to get us ready to use the technology for the remainder of GA.
- After dinner we heard from the candidates standing for moderator of GA, and we elected Reverend CeCe Armstrong and Reverend Tony Larson as co-moderators.
- Each day proceeded the same way: worship at 8:30, plenary, lunch, plenary, dinner, plenary, and adjournment at 9 pm.
- The docket was approved each day as changes needed to be made, the consent agenda was accepted, financial updates to the per capital were made at the beginning and end of each day.
- The work was intense but not tense for the most part. Even when there was yet another amendment to the amendment, items of business were handled carefully, prayerfully, and respectfully. There was a respectful listening to each person's reasoning for a new amendment.
- At times, the stories were hard to hear; especially those from the LGBTQ+ community, but the good news was that while this community was rejected by so many others, they were accepted by their church family.
- Overwhelmingly, for me, it was a time of a tremendous feeling of belonging and truly being cared for and about.
- It was as if we'd gone back in time and were in a small community in a small town. You were comfortable talking to total strangers and hearing their stories and they listening to yours. I came away with an overwhelming feeling of Belonging and a feeling of great hope, for the future of the Presbyterian Church, through the moving of the Holy Spirit.
- I believe that the church of Jesus Christ is in capable hands for the future.

Cathy Sanders

OPPC

A Summary of my Experience at the 226th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church

U.S.A. by Ruling Elder Commissioner Daniel Banks

I greatly enjoyed attending the General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Utah! There were very long days and lots of work to accomplish but I was grateful to be there! Of the many topics discussed and voted on that week, five areas piqued my interest the most. They are listed as follows:

Unification

If all the local church's ministries were to unify and support the goals, aspirations and the mission of the local church, what a wonderful thing it would be! In like manner, if all local churches were united in support of the goals of their respective state presbyteries, a great work could take place. As well, if the presbyteries were all in step with the visions of their national synods, feats of greatness could be accomplished! Finally, if all the synods were united in realizing the plans and directives of the General Assembly, the Church would be unstoppable!

The Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency are unifying and merging into one! Commissioners at the General Assembly approved one unified budget for the two entities. *"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity."* – Psalm 133:1

Inclusion

The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., I've learned, is continually adamant about not discriminating against the LGBTQIA+ community and in fighting for justice on behalf of the African-American community and other marginalized groups. The PCUSA believes the Church should be a safe haven for all factions that are discriminated against in the United States and that no one should feel unsafe at church or church functions. Considering all the state and federal initiatives against DEI of late, the Church's stance on this matter is more important than ever.

One scripture we were repeatedly reminded of during General Assembly is, *"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise."* – Galatians 3:26 – 29 KJV

At GA, a person came to the microphone and described themselves as transgender. They stated their pronouns as "they" and "them". The individual was speaking in support of protections for transgendered people. "They" stated that many people see "them" as the "least one" (of God's children), referred to in the Matthew 25 gospel. "They" went on to say, in so many words, that even so, God loved "them", too! I don't think there were very many dry eyes in the house after that. I know mine certainly weren't dry! The item "they" spoke to passed by a huge majority! (See POL-01 at www.pc-biz.org.)

At one of the sponsored luncheons during the week, a lovely black woman from North Carolina asked me how many black Presbyterian churches were in my presbytery. When I responded that there is only one African-American presbyterian church where I'm from, she was greatly shocked

and in disbelief! When I asked how many black presbyterian churches were in her presbytery, she couldn't number them all!

Reducing Our Carbon Footprint

With climate change being an ever-increasing issue, what with Hurricane Beryl [the earliest forming Category 5 in history] coming up through the Caribbean islands to Texas, as we met, the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee presented an overture to the General Assembly. It entailed recommending that all companies financially supported by the development, production or exploration of fossil fuels be placed on a list of prohibited securities and it urged the denomination to seek investment in renewable energy sources. This section of the overture was approved as amended. Another area of the overture recommended adopting the "One Billion for Peace Pledge" which would focus on mitigating the effects of climate change and still another part endorses actions on plastic pollution mitigation (of the seas, beaches, etc.).

Fossil fuel producing companies such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, BP, Coal India, Gazprom, National Iranian Oil Company, PetroChina, Saudi Aramco, TotalEnergies, Royal Dutch Shell, Pemex, Petróleos de Venezuela, Peabody Energy, ConocoPhillips, National Iranian Oil Company, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, Kuwait 63 Moving the Church Forward Petroleum Corporation, Iraq National Oil Company, Total SA, Sonatrach, BHP Billiton and Petrobras are being asked to lessen their carbon emissions to reduce global warming. The aforementioned are some of the largest fossil fuel-producing entities in the world in the development and manufacture of coal, oil, natural gas, cement, fossil fuels and greenhouse gas emissions. (See ENV-01, ENV-02 and ENV-03 in "Committees" at www.pc-biz.org.)

Gun Safety and Storage

An elder on the floor of the convention center, supporting an item on gun safety, shared with the General Assembly that his 12-year-old niece visited a 14-year-old neighbor to play. The older child pointed a gun at the girl and told her to guess if it was loaded or not. With that, the 14-year-old boy shot the 12-year-old in the face, killing her. The story was very shocking to the Assembly, especially to we commissioners who were about to vote on the measure, while being advised by the various delegates. We did vote on DOE-03, an overture calling for action so that children may live free from gun violence. It was overwhelmingly approved as amended. No one voted against it. The overture does not ask parents to give up their guns but to take greater care in storing their firearms so that children cannot access them and kill other children or themselves by accident or by suicide.

Church Polity

Commissioners voted to consider making an amendment to the Book of Order to further protect LGBTQIA+ persons by adding to non-discriminatory language the phrases "gender identity" and "sexual orientation." When it comes to examining and ordaining pastors, the GA approves of adding to constitutional questions to determine if candidates are truly capable of working with all people, regardless of real or perceived sexuality and extending the right hand of fellowship. (See POL-01 in "Committees" at www.pc-biz.org and F-1.0403 and G- 2.0104b of the Book of Order.)

Reflections About the 226th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church
(U.S.A.)

June 25 – July 4, 2024

By

Rev. Craig S. Davies

During my 51+ years as a pastor I have attended 12 General Assembly meetings. I was a commissioner at the 212th General Assembly which met in Long Beach, California in 2000. This year I was a Teaching Elder Commissioner representing the Presbytery of St. Augustine and attended the 226th General Assembly.

This year's assembly was a hybrid assembly. All committee work was by Zoom and all plenary work was held in person at the Salt Palace Convention Center in Salt Lake City, Utah.

I served on the Race, Sexuality, and Gender Justice Committee. The Assembly approved two items of business from the RSG Committee. By a vote of 361-43 the Assembly approved a recommendation from the Advocacy Committee for Women and Gender Justice (ACWGI) and the LGBTQIA+ Equity Advocacy Committee (ACQ+E) directing the Presbyterian Mission Agency to recognize March 31st as Transgender Day of Visibility in all future printings and distributions of the planning calendar.

In addition to this, by a vote of 373-31 the assembly approved a resolution addressing diversity, equity, inclusion, and the realities of Hispanic Latino-a-e-Ministry. The resolution calls for a re-imagining of Hispanic Latino ministry in the PCUSA in these ways:

- 1) Directing the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) and Office of the General Assembly (OGA) to host and fund an in-person gathering in the first half of 2026. This discernment gathering will form the foundation for the development of new programs and initiatives to equip Latino leadership and congregations to respond to unique challenges and opportunities.

- 2) Directing PMA and OGA to allocate up to \$309,000 in the next two years to implement the results of the re-imagining and discernment gathering.

3) The resolution also directs the Committee on Theological Education to convene a consultation with the Hispanic Latino Caucus to explore effective ways of providing theological education and pastoral training for pastoral leaders in Hispanic congregations and communities.

I spoke in favor of this resolution on the floor of the assembly and am pleased that it passed by a large margin as there is a need to strengthen the ministry and witness of our Hispanic Latino pastors and congregations.

Two other items of business received significant debate at the assembly. First, the so-called “Olympia Overture” was presented in two parts by the Polity Committee. The first part of the overture recommended that F-1.0403 in the Book of Order be changed to include “gender identity” and “sexual orientation” in the list of protected classes recognized by the PCUSA as being guaranteed full participation and representation in the life of the church. This item was passed by the Assembly by a vote of 389-24 with little discussion.

The second part of the overture recommended a related change to G-2.0104b. seeking to add “the principles of participation and representation found in F-1.0403” to the list of topics those seeking ordination in the denomination are required to be asked about.

Lengthy discussion took place on this item with passionate arguments both in favor and against. Those speaking in favor highlighted the need to live into the values the church claims regarding the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people and clarified that this change to the Book of Order would not require candidates to give a particular answer or for examining bodies to respond in a prescribed way.

However, many of those arguing against argued that the requirement would nevertheless serve as a way to gatekeep the denomination and keep those who are non-affirming from serving in ordained leadership as teaching elders, ruling elders, and deacons. The fear is that this clause would prevent the denomination from being able to engage people across a broad swath of theological and ideological convictions.

Ultimately, following lengthy debate, the assembly approved this item with 297 in favor and 130 against. Both items will now be sent to the presbyteries for ratification.

The other item of business that was quite controversial and received significant, passionate debate was presented by the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee and had to do with complete divestment from the fossil fuel industry. In a surprise reversal the assembly made an about-face by deciding against complete divestment from the fossil fuel industry after having voted in favor of it earlier. The approved action directs the Presbyterian Mission Agency's Committee on Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to immediately identify the top ten fossil fuel companies that derive most of their profits from the exploration, development, and production of fossil fuels and immediately divest from those companies.

Other important actions taken by the assembly include, but are not limited to, the following:

- . An overture calling for action so that children may live free from gun violence was approved unanimously 424-0. Among other things the overture calls upon every congregation in the PCUSA to actively support and pray for the emotional, spiritual, and mental health needs of children, promote secure gun storage, encourage parents and caregivers to take gun safety action, end gun marketing to children, and promote gun security technology.

- . The Revs. CeCe Armstrong and Tony Larson were elected co-Moderators of the General Assembly and will serve for the next two years.

- . The Rev. Jihyun Oh was elected and installed as Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the PC(USA).

- . The assembly accepted the invitation of the Presbytery of Milwaukee to host the 227th General Assembly in 2026. It too will be a hybrid assembly.

Other observations:

I was particularly impressed with the excellent work and contributions to the assembly's business by the youth advisory delegates (YADDs). And that included our own Kat Bossuot.

As noted above, this assembly was a hybrid assembly with committee meetings held online by Zoom and plenary meetings held in person in Salt Lake City. An effort to hold the next assembly meeting in Milwaukee totally in person was rejected. Why? It would be too costly.

The denomination is facing financial challenges. A total of \$5 million dollars needs to be cut from the operating budget over the next two years.

Membership in the PCUSA continues to decline. In 1983, the year of the formation of the PCUSA, membership in the denomination was 3 million plus. Today it is 1 million and projections are that membership will fall below 1 million by year's end.

In the past, assembly meetings included an exhibit hall. This did not take place this year.

Highlights for me at this year's assembly included Sunday morning worship (June 30th) at First Presbyterian Church, Salt Lake City. A delicious lunch, served by the congregation, followed the service.

I thoroughly enjoyed the worship services that were held each day in Salt Lake City prior to every plenary meeting. The opening worship with Communion included a dialogue sermon preached by the out-going moderators, the Rev. Ruth Faith Santana Grace and the Rev. Shavon-Starling-Louis. The ecumenical service was particularly meaningful. Inspired by the assembly theme, "Live Into Hope," the Rev. Prof. Dr. Jerry Pilay, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, preached the sermon. And the concluding worship service of the assembly included a stirring proclamation of the gospel – "A New Day" - by the Rev. Dr. Victor Aloyo, Jr. newly confirmed President of Columbia Theological Seminary. I loved his final blessing, first in Spanish and then in English: "May the joy of the Lord surround you and keep us all in this new day."

Amen and Amen! To God be the glory!

Dear Friends in Christ:

Greetings! I am writing to thank you for the opportunity to represent you as the Young Adult Advisory Delegate from the Presbytery of St. Augustine at the General Assembly last summer in Salt Lake City. I served on the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee which was perfect for me because my father is an environmental biologist and my mother a pastor. I loved my committee work and the leadership on that team.

It was interesting to be in the plenary time where we had voice but only an advisory vote. That was frustrating for many of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates. That group was enthusiastic and committed and wanted to be heard and have an impact. Many of us were pastors' children and we hope in the future YADS will be a more representative group from the whole denomination.

I am praying for you as you debate and vote on the amendments we sent to you. Please know many hours and prayers were spent on these important issues.

I happy to report I am now an elder at Lakewood Presbyterian Church and hope to return to General Assembly as a commissioner with voice and vote in the future. Again, thank you for the opportunity.

Yours in Christ,

Katherine Bossuot

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