

A Thin Place - The 219th General Assembly

“Thin Places” the title of Westminster Presbyterian Church’s newsletter for spiritual growth, takes its name from the Celtic Christian metaphor for those times or places where the boundary between the sacred and the everyday feels “thin” when our hearts are opened, and God’s presence is more strongly felt. Certainly attending a General Assembly for me is a “thin place” where I



encounter glimpses of the Kingdom of God – the worldwide gathering of Christians and people of faith from across the globe – to worship and work and enjoy each other’s fellowship. In addition to our Triune



God watching over us, we noticed when the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly Gradye Parsons was speaking, and the camera focused on his desk, that a “bobble-head” statue of John Calvin was monitoring our business and behavior!

Peg Chamberlin, president of the National Council of Churches, preaching at the Ecumenical Worship Service on Wednesday, mentioned a meeting several years ago when religious leaders were invited to the White House to talk about the possibilities of life on Mars. “Most of those there were biologists, physicists, and astronomers. In the conversation, the word ‘ecumenical’ came up a number of times, and it wasn’t from the religious leaders. It was the scientists who talked about the ecumenical nature of the foundations of life...who said that in order for life to exist, diversity is required. It was the scientists who claimed that the richness of all created things comes from their diversity rather than from their sameness. The basic assumption of the ecumenical movement – just as fundamental an assumption as that of these scientists – is that the earth is one earth, the inhabited earth is all part of one inter-related whole. “ Thursday’s *USA Today* newspaper had an article that caught my attention regarding the Human Genome Project. One of the research findings was that human beings have a genetic code that is 99.95% identical. So we are both the same and different. Yet that .05% makes for lots of differences! As Louisville Seminary’s motto puts it “Many Lamps, One Light.” We are One in Christ, despite our differences. Sorting through that .05% often falls to the work of the General Assembly.

One image you may have of large legislative bodies doing their work is image seen frequently on C-SPAN: speakers droning on in congress with almost no legislators in the seats. That is NOT how Presbyterians work. I can assure you that almost all of the 712 members of the General Assembly are “in their seats” listening attentively to the matters of business. They take their vows to “participate” in the life of the larger church with great passion. Please know that they all work very hard for long hours at a General Assembly. They are often led in prayer by the Moderator before difficult votes are taken. I assure you there is a genuine sense of seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit in all that they do when seated as an Assembly.

What follows are my “dispatches” regarding the work of our General Assembly. As I compose my comments beside the Mississippi River, and you read my efforts, please remember

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the caution of Presbyterian-raised and Mississippi River Pilot Mark Twain in the introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.”

Day One- Saturday – July 3



Preassembly meetings and dialogs took place prior to the first gathering of the General Assembly for business on Saturday. The main agenda for Saturday was the election of Moderator Cynthia Bolbach from a field of six candidates, which took four rounds of balloting on the new “wireless” voting keypads, amidst electronic gremlins! That was the easy part! What follows next for the 200 advisory delegates and 712 Commissioners, according to Jerry Van Marter of the Presbyterian News Service, is the sorting through 1400 printed pages covering the 300 items of business: equivalent to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Hopefully the Assembly can transcend that metaphor as well!

Day-Two – Sunday July 4

Beginning with a powerful opening worship service (which included an infant baptism) for all the Commissioners and guests, the afternoon saw the first meeting of the nineteen committees for their work, each with about 40-45 Commissioners, and an assortment of Advisory Delegates and Observers, listening to overture advocates, and persons who wished to challenge/amend the business of the committee. Their major work began Monday and did not conclude until Tuesday. The day ended with your faithful and loyal commissioners attending the Minneapolis Host Committee’s picnic on an Island in the Mississippi River, along with the community’s celebration of the Fourth of July with fireworks.

Day-Three – Monday July 5

The morning began with a breakfast and talk by Phyllis Tickle, religious writer and author of *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*; then the committees began again their ambitious work. Phyllis also spoke that afternoon to an audience of General and Executive Presbyters, standing room only, for two and a half hours about the Emergent Church – a fascinating talk that will generate thoughts and ideas for me for the next decade! I will share those with you when we have time for dialog about the transitions and transformations our churches are experiencing. Interspersed throughout each day’s schedule are special lunches, breakfasts, and worship services for small groups. To give you an idea of what resources are needed, the Westminster Presbyterian Church, just two blocks from the Convention Center, will host over 100 events related to the General Assembly in our week together. That evening I attended the Association for Presbytery Executive Dinner, honoring those who were new to the



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organization, and those who were retiring, and a sharing of our challenges in helping congregations.

Day –Four – Tuesday July 6

A day spent in hearings of various committees – primarily Ecumenical Relations, which was the committee which acted on [one of our Commissioner Resolutions from Salem Presbytery, celebrating the partnerships with the Tzeltal Synod and medical missions in Chiapas. It was unanimously approved by the committee.](#) Our Commissioners were in the various committees most of the day, the Church Growth committee being moderated by Mindy Douglas-Adams. Some members, whose committees were ahead on their workload, were able to attend one of

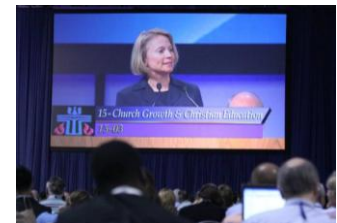


the many mission tours that were offered that day. Lunchtime was spent with the Interim Ministry Luncheon, where Dr. Ken McFayden, professor at Union Seminary, spoke on the challenges we face in transformational ministry in our “changing” times. That evening our [Salem Commissioners were entertained with a wonderful dinner hosted by the Hispanic Caucus, complete with a Bolivian music ensemble.](#) We celebrated David Parker’s birthday to cap the evening!

Day-Five – Wednesday July 7

Mornings were begun with workshops on various topics; lunch was with the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary new President, Michael Jinkins, formerly Dean at Austin Seminary. The challenges of preparing pastors for our modern, fast-changing world, and creating a seminary of diversity were highlighted. Over twenty percent of the student body is racial ethnic and is taught by a faculty with a similar balance. In addition to approving the new president for Louisville Seminary, new seminary presidents were approved for Johnson C. Smith Seminary, The Rev. Paul Roberts, and the Rev. Stephen Hayner as president of Columbia Seminary. Our seminaries are centers of excellence in education – please support them!

Committee reports began to filter out of the respective committees onto the Assembly docket. [Our own Rev. Mindy Douglas-Adams led off splendidly with the committee reports from Church Growth, Christian Education and the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program. Mindy set a high bar for all chairpersons who followed!](#) As a denomination we have recommitted ourselves to the Evangelism program of “Growing Christ’s Church Deep and Wide.” We celebrate that!



Many of these committee reports you may be already alert to if you are “tracking” the General Assembly online. Salem Presbytery’s Overture to urge Congress to cap interest rights and predatory lending practices was approved for recommendation to the General Assembly

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with amendments. The Mid-East report was reported out of committee with a unanimous recommendation, after much amendment and last minute dialog with Jewish, Islamic, and Palestinian-Christian leaders.

New language was offered for ordination standards in G-6.0106b. This has yet to be acted upon by the General Assembly, and will likely result in some lively debate. The Presbyterian News service notes that the overture amends G-6.0106b, which states that church officers must be faithful in marriage between a man and a woman, or chaste in singleness. The recommended wording would replace that existing text with language that gives ordaining or installing governing bodies the responsibility of determining if candidates meet more broad standards of office. Candidates would be examined based on calling, gifts, preparation and suitability. Governing bodies, guided by Scripture and the confessions, would also determine candidates' ability and commitment to fulfilling requirements stated in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation. There is no mention of sexual ethics in the proposed language, the opinion of some being that specific section had led to a great deal of divisive debate, and lifted that standard above the many other standards of officers. This amendment will come to the Presbyteries for their action in 2012.

Another interesting committee report came from the Committee on Civil Union and Marriage. It will also generate some intense debate when it comes to the floor. That committee voted Tuesday to recommend 34-18-2 to recommend to the full assembly changing the definition of marriage in the Directory for Worship from "a woman and a man" to "two people." The issue surfaced because some states now permit same-sex marriage, and some pastors were asking what they should do when faced with a request to perform a marriage that the state legislature has declared legal. This will require Presbyteries to approve or disapprove if it is adopted by the General Assembly.

The New Form of Government was presented, and adopted by the Assembly for referral to the Presbyteries for their action. It gives wide latitude to Presbyteries and Synods to alter and shape their mission, governance and relationships. (An additional overture was adopted as well on Thursday empowering an Administrative Commission to act on behalf of any reorganization of Presbytery/Synod boundaries.) Lots of study and reflection will be essential to study the new proposed Form of Government. It does not change ordination standards or Book of Order matters relating to church property. The Church Polity Committee supported a recommendation expanding the roles of Commissioned Lay Pastors. This will come up later in the week.

The Mission Coordination Committee, due to budget stress and drop in giving to the General Assembly Mission causes was forced to cut 1.9 million dollars out of a new 2 million dollar request for mission funds. The economy is still affecting the church in significant ways. Please

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do what you and your church can to infuse our Mission Giving with your offerings to enable more direct mission programs.

The Theological Issues Committee saw the approval of a revision of the translation of the Heidelberg Catechism and a recommendation that the Belhar Confession ([our own Dr. Dianna Wright served on the Belhar Advisory Committee](#)) be approved. The Belhar Confession will come to the Presbyteries for approval – requiring a 2/3's vote since it is a confessional statement, and subsequent approval again by the 220th General Assembly in 2012.

Day 6 – Thursday July 8, 2010

This day begins with more Assembly Committee Reports beginning with Middle Governing Body recommendations. Overtures to delete Synods, and the creation of Theologically-based Synods and Presbyteries were defeated, or “answered” by another overture which did pass, namely the creation of an Administrative Commission to assist Presbyteries and Synods with regard to issues surrounding mergers, boundaries, etc. An overture to create a new non-geographic Korean Presbytery in the Synod of South Atlantic was defeated. As the economy affects the budgets and staffing of some Presbyteries and Synods more than others, the Administrative Commission will offer consultation and support, along with the ability to act on behalf of the Assembly to combine or alter boundaries, depending upon the requests of Presbyteries and Synods. An Administrative Commission for the Synod of Puerto Rico and its Presbyteries was continued to help the Synod resolve differences and tensions that have arisen.

Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations moved through its docket. They had the significant task of responding to proposed study papers on “Christian and Jews” and “Christians and Muslims”. The “Christians and Jews” paper was referred back to seek more input from Christians living in the Mid-East, who had not been consulted on the paper. This will allow the study paper to be more comprehensive in its recommendations. The “Christians and Muslims” paper was adopted. A report on the relationship between the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and its alleged encouragement of PCUSA churches to disaffiliate and join the EPC presented a mixed result. Instances of individuals of the EPC engaging in such conduct was described, but no “denominational strategy” of such behavior was reported.

Church Orders and Ministry reported this afternoon. First up was an overture clarifying the voice and vote status of Christian Educators. Also considered was the recommendation to change one of the sections of the Book of Order that relates to ordination standards (G-6.0106b) that I have previously mentioned. A minority report opposing the committee report was proposed, resulting in a contest between the main motion and the substitute motion which was to send a “pastoral letter” encouraging dialog with and compassion for members of the homosexual community, yet declaring a restoration of the previously deleted “definitive guidance” forbidding the ordination of unrepentant, practicing homosexual persons to any

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church office.” After significant debate, the minority report was defeated, and the majority report became the subject of significant debate. The debates were respectful and earnest in advocating for their respective positions. Undertones of grief, hopes, sadness, joy, frustration, and anger were evident in the vocal tones, yet a great commitment to our unity of Christ also shown through. The vote was 373 to approve, 323 to disapprove. The Moderator asked us to stand and sing “Blessed Be The Tie That Binds”.

The Social Justice Committees (A and B) reported – [Salem’s overture on asking Congress to cap interest rates on credit cards was approved](#). Other items were approved on social justice, violence against women and children, gun violence, immigration abuse, and preventing environmental damage, restoring creation, compassion, the death penalty, and educating people on environmental damage in the Gulf from the BP oil spill, holding BP accountable. Other matters involved cultural literacy programs for immigrants. A great deal of time was spent Thursday evening discussing immigration issues, primarily relating to the issue of racial ethnic profiling and the need for immigration reform.

A great deal of energy and time was spent on the report of the Committee on Civil Unions and Christian Marriage. There was a minority report that was proposed as a substitute, but an amendment recommended that both be submitted to sessions and congregations (majority and minority reports) so that the spectrum of viewpoints could be used as a resource without changing the definition of Christian marriage. That eventually was the decision, hoping that both conservative and liberal perspectives will be respectfully shared, and the definition of Christian marriage was not changed. The approval of that motion then became the basis for another motion that all pending actions related to marriage be “answered” by the passage of the two joined reports asking for a season of study. A lot of Commissioner effort was displayed to respect Scripture, one another, and seek God’s will together in this season of continuing change. I’m signing off for now. Thank you for your prayers and support of the work of all our Commissioners.

Gracefully, Sam Marshall



(Left to Right) Ron Bowie: GA Commissioner & Presbytery Council Moderator, Cynthia Bolbach: New GA Moderator, Sam Marshall: Presbytery Executive-General Presbyter