

221st General Assembly 2014

report by Jan Burger

Theme verse for the 221st General Assembly:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.
(Rom 15:13)

General Impressions and Thoughts

We are a connectional church--together in all our differences. This came through to me quite clearly at General Assembly (GA). In spite of our differences, which are sometimes great, we are held together by the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As an elected commissioner to GA from the Presbytery of Yukon, I was reminded that those elected to be commissioners are to seek the will of God in the circumstances through the use of Scripture, prayer and discernment. We were not necessarily called to represent the will of the people back home.

I was very impressed with the way everyone was polite and courteous and 'played by the rules.' We were told not to applaud when the results of a vote were posted because, while some were rejoicing about the results, others were not. This act of courtesy and love was followed, even in the most emotional instances.

I was also very impressed with the Young Adult and Theological Student Advisory Delegates. Those who spoke were well informed and articulate. Their thoughts were well formed and they spoke with passion, but without excess emotion. I was impressed that each time someone called for a moment of prayer when the debate was getting too emotional, that someone was either a youth advisory delegate or a theological student advisory delegate.

Did I agree with all the decisions made by the GA? No. But I am still a Presbyterian and I am appreciative of the fact that Presbyterian congregations are given a lot of latitude in how they interpret God's will for them.

The Meeting

The 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) met in Detroit, MI from June 14 through June 21, 2014. The General Assembly (GA) meets every 2 years in a different region of the country each time. The work of the GA is to review the work of synods, resolve controversies in the church, and is responsible for matters of common concern for the whole church, serving as a symbol of unity for the church.

At this GA, there were in excess of 1000 people:

- 656 commissioners from 172 presbyteries
- 172 young adult advisory delegates
- 25 theological student advisory delegates
- 8 missionary advisory delegates

15 ecumenical advisory delegates
(220 advisory delegates)
plus Presbytery and Synod executives, Presbytery and Synod stated clerks,
committee advisors, and interested observers

Each commissioner and advisory delegate was assigned to one of 15 committees, which were charged with reviewing and coming to a yes or no decision on all the overtures that were brought to the GA from the presbyteries. There were about 160 overtures that the committees had to consider. I was on the Social Justice Issues Committee, a committee of 67 members.

On Saturday evening, the new moderator, Ruling Elder Heath Rada, and the Vice Moderator, Teaching Elder Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia, were elected on the first ballot. Because of glitches in the electronic voting system, paper ballots were used, the first time paper ballots had been used since 1987.

Committee meetings began Sunday evening, and continued all day Monday-9 am to 9:30 pm, and 9-5 on Tuesday. The GA plenary sessions began again on Wednesday afternoon. (The plenary sessions were when everyone-all the commissioners, advisory delegates and others-met together. There were 12 plenary sessions.) Each day began around at 8:30 am and ended between 9:30 and midnight, with breaks for lunch and dinner.

I found the process to be interesting. In both the work of the committees and the plenary sessions, a motion was made and seconded to approve the overture that was before us. Then discussion was allowed to happen--with one 'for' comment, followed by one 'against' comment--until no one had anything new to add. During the plenary sessions, these comments were limited to one minute each. The commissioners were then asked to vote, using the now repaired electronic voting system. The voting devices had no identifying mark, so there was no way to know how anyone voted.

A few items that were approved involve changes to the Book of Order. Those changes will go to the Presbyteries to be voted on before June 21, 2015. If approved by a majority of the 172 presbyteries, the changes will be incorporated into the next edition of the Book of Order.

One change that the Presbyteries will vote on is in regards to the definition of marriage as being "between two people, traditionally a man and a woman."

An Authoritative Interpretation was passed that gives pastors discretion in performing same sex marriages. An Authoritative Interpretation does not need the approval of the Presbyteries, but takes effect immediately.

Another emotion-filled overture had to do with the divestment of where PCUSA money is invested in companies that do business with Israel. The motion which was adopted, reads in part:

1. Reaffirm Israel's right to exist as a sovereign nation within secure and internationally recognized borders in accordance with the United Nations resolutions.

2. Declare its commitment to a two-state solution in which a secure and universally recognized State of Israel lives alongside a free, viable, and secure state for the Palestinian people.

3. Instruct the Presbyterian Foundation and the Board of Pensions of the PC(U.S.A.), to divest from Caterpillar, Inc., Hewlett-Packard, and Motorola Solutions, in accord with our church's decades-long socially responsible investment (SRI) history, and not to reinvest in these companies until the Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee of the PC(USA) is fully satisfied that product sales and services by these companies are no longer in conflict with our church investment policy. This action on divestment is not to be construed or represented by any organization of the PC(USA) as divestment from the State of Israel, or an alignment with or endorsement of the global BDS (Boycott, Divest and Sanctions) movement.

If you are interested in more of the details about General Assembly, go to [http://www.pc-biz.org/PC-Biz.WebApp_deploy/\(S\(uhgb0irxy2n1o4xvcdv1uaf4\)\)/Committee2.aspx](http://www.pc-biz.org/PC-Biz.WebApp_deploy/(S(uhgb0irxy2n1o4xvcdv1uaf4))/Committee2.aspx)

The minutes of each plenary session are available in the [02]Bills and Overtures Committee .

You can also click on any individual committee and further click on any of the overtures to see what was presented, how the committee voted and how the whole GA voted.