

Reports to the  
Presbytery of Miami Valley

From 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly,  
Detroit, MI

July 22, 2014

**REPORT OF THE 221<sup>ST</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY**  
**Teaching Elder Ben Beres**

They say that if you enjoy eating it, you shouldn't see how the sausage is made. The reality of the process can turn you off to the savory breakfast meat. Indeed the closest I ever came to becoming a vegetarian was when I boiled and shelled my own crabs on the east coast. Most of us pay for the convenience of not having to know how to butcher and process that which we consume, but I think we all should be willing to get our hands dirty if we want to really claim ownership over it. Common wisdom would say don't work at Burger King if you don't want to tire of Whoppers, but I believe the Scriptures call us to a place of deeper knowing, not of willful ignorance.

That said, you can read about the results of votes in many places. But as a commissioner, and as eyes and ears on the ground, I want to share with you a story that redeemed the sausage-making of GA 221 for me. A story of a third way.

A friend of mine came as an observer this year having been a commissioner years before, and being a professed 'polity wonk,' was very interested in the going's on of the Assembly. Like me, she skews conservative theologically, but has a number of friends on the other side of the aisle. We're also both committed to the health of the church, and were distressed about the marriage vote to happen on Thursday afternoon. Based on the tenth committee's work and conversations, as well as the tenor of the plenary, it seemed to us both that the amendment and AI would likely pass, and, that as worded, they had potential to widen the divide between theological camps and perhaps further fracture our fellowship.

So imagine my delight when she approached me with an idea. Coming to the floor of plenary as they were would have resulted in hours of contentious arguments and bitter division in the body. She and some like-minded friends had gathered for conversation the night before and, seeing the fullness of what was coming, drafted an amendment to include the phrase, "traditionally a man and a woman" into the marriage motion that would remove the gendered language from part of our constitution.

Now suggesting an amendment to advocate for a position isn't a new thing. This is the kicker: because of the relationships she and others had built with folks on the other side, she was in a position to ask for help from the "winning" side, to ask a concession from those who had no reason not to expect that they were going to get exactly what they wanted. The Covenant Network leaders knew and trusted her, even though they knew she didn't agree with them. They persuaded their constituency to vote her way, for a more conservative amendment, because of her relationship with them. In fact, they even introduced the amendment for her!

I give her credit for listening to the Spirit and seeing that going to war in the room there neither advances the truth of the Gospel nor furthers the discipleship of anyone. Many stood to speak their minds, myself included, but rather than force each other to become entrenched, we had dialogue that gave room for dissenting thought without beating the other into submission. That's not how the world usually works, or even our denomination, for that matter. Our meat-grinder too often runs at the same speed as the culture's. But that wasn't my experience of GA. We were able to be a community of people seeking after Jesus and wrestling through difficult

issues of faith with one another and disagree without belittling, begrudging or berating. Just like my experience of life in the Miami Valley presbytery.

That's who the Miami Valley has been and continues to seek to be. That's the kind of Church we want. One that follows Jesus through lines of political allegiance to shape the community and world in a more grace-saturated and faithful way than we can achieve alone.

**REPORT FROM THE 221<sup>ST</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY**  
**Teaching Elder Karen Cassedy**

It's a big gathering, the General Assembly of the PC (USA). It includes commissioners from every Presbytery in the US, advisory delegates, denominational staff and committee members, onlookers, and media. How do you keep from getting overwhelmed, if you're an introvert like me? And how do so many strangers become one body?

Well, we trust that the Holy Spirit shows up. And it seemed that the Spirit did. Not necessarily in our votes, though I'm sure others prayed as I did, "Help me," when I could see the validity of arguments on both sides. Not only in the well-crafted worship, though the sound of 1,000 or more folks *willing* to sing together is miracle enough for me. But primarily in the way we treated one another with respect, regardless of our point of view; in the wonder of church leaders honored for their faithful witness across decades; and in the energy evident in young adult leaders and new worshipping communities.

I was part of the General Assembly Procedures Committee, which dealt with issues related to the functioning of future General Assemblies – such as location, who can be commissioners, financial implications of actions taken, and the need for childcare. I found this committee work to be important in developing trust for the work of the whole GA, as we got to know a smaller, more manageable group of people.

When we came together for plenary sessions, I finally understood why we might need another confession of faith, the Belhar Confession. I see this as a confession for our time. It speaks of the call to unity in Christ, and the reconciliation that is possible even for people who have been enemies. We are not there yet, but God can bring us there. I experienced flashes of unity at GA that made me yearn for more.

What does it mean that this GA took actions that some folks wish we hadn't? Presbyterians affirm that Christ alone is Lord of the conscience. Commissioners were fully aware that, either way, votes on marriage equality and divestment would have some negative impact; in the face of this, I sought to vote fearlessly and humbly, aware of my own need for forgiveness.

One final reaction: I don't think that the General Assembly needs to take stands on so many issues. I wish there were some other way to acknowledge the interests of individual Presbyteries than having to vote on all the overtures they send along. I wish we could prioritize, selecting only a few issues to focus on each year.

**ABOUT IN HOPE**  
**REPORT ON 221<sup>st</sup> MEETING OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**  
**JUNE 14 -21, 2014, DETROIT, MI**  
**Ruling Elder Donna Courtney**

Saturday: Opening worship was impressive with a traditional Scottish bagpipe band in full tartan regalia, worship participants following in the grand entry. Uplifting music, message, scripture and communion. These were to be experienced anew each day in the plenary hall. So many highlights, God-sightings and inspiring moments, I'm reluctantly going to present this report in a few highlights and memorable moments.

- Firstly, being randomly assigned to one of the more interesting and potentially controversial committees, I was impressed and pleasantly surprised to find that our 70 member committee would hold decent, even-sided debate and discussion and complete our assigned business without going over time or any outstanding contentiousness. One could tangibly feel the Holy Spirit and the prayer-filled space in that room. Even our gallery of visiting spectators were well-behaved and cooperative. This was in no small part due to the excellent and humble leadership of the moderator, vice moderator, parliamentarian, ACC members, techie and other staff.
- I was most impressed, both in Committee and Plenary by the thoughtful, articulate insightful input of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates and the TSADs. Not the church of the future but very much a vital part of the present church today.
- Hey I finally understand Per Capita a little better than previously. FI's were given for different proposals and those made sense to me in a new way that seemed pretty obvious but I just had not considered.
- I heard others speak of "weight-bearing pillars of their church" and how their departure left gaping voids. We heard from Jim Reeves, now in his 90's (I think that was his name) who said, "...over the years, I been out-voted, ignored, overlooked and even insulted...but I stayed at the table...Once we were on the outside looking in...now we on the inside looking at each other, and talking. I like what was said of Sara Bernice Mosely, the first woman Presbyterian Moderator of the PCUSA in 1978 – "...she will be missed, she should be celebrated, she should be emulated..."
- One day I received the insight, that day by day, however slow the progress, we were approaching the image of what God would like his church to look like...
- The many-sided discussion on middle-east issues. The more I heard the more complex the issues became for me. The gasp that went up from the floor when the result of the vote to divest came up on the screen is one of those memorable moments. The vote was 51% in favor, 49% opposed. Moderator Rada pleaded with media to make it clear that PCUSA had made the decision to divest in 3 American companies involved in non-peaceful pursuits and were not divesting in Israel. The small group discussions helped me through some of this – at least to see just how complex the issues surrounding Mid-east action actually were.
- I thoroughly enjoyed my Sunday a.m. worship in Dearborn, MI at Cherry Hill PCUSA where the message was given by Steve and Cinda Gorman, missionary couple working in Cairo,

Egypt. Later in the week, in the exhibit hall I was at the table where I could stamp my wrist with a stamp of the Coptic cross. I began effusing to the gentleman there of the wonderful message I had heard on Sunday about the Coptic church...before realizing that I was going on and on to Steve Gorman himself! I thought he had looked sort of familiar...

- Then there was the day when a presbytery from Virginia adopted me and paid for my lunch! That was cool and made me want to move to that welcoming body of our church.
- Another time, during a break during a particularly trying long plenary session, the question flitted across my mind: “why are these people taking up all my time?” Right away the Lord answered: ‘this is not your time, dear, it is mine...’ okay, Lord, point taken. Sorry.”
- Let me conclude my impressions with stating that my doubts about our shrinking, struggling, shrinking denomination were eased, I felt the Abounding Hope that we are still relevant, still growing in God’s grace, and always, a vital part of God’s work in the world.

## **Welcome to Detroit! Abound In Hope – 221<sup>st</sup> General Assembly – Ruling Elder Carol Hess**

I now fully understand GA's decision to honor our commitment to hold the meeting there in Detroit! Here was a wonderful opportunity to stand with our brothers and sisters there in solidarity as they continue to struggle with economic woes, depressive surroundings and crime. It reminded me of the trips to Colombia in years past when we stood with our brothers and sisters in their time of need.

My first time as a commissioner, I stood in awe of the grandeur of all meeting together under one roof. Those from Presbytery of the Miami Valley, had choice seats since we were only 3 tables from the stage on the right side facing the stage. Huge screens made it much easier to see what was happening on the stage. Cobo Hall full of tables, people, chairs and electronic devices was a site to behold! Electronic devices, ah, yes! We elected our moderator by paper ballot. Come Wednesday, they decided on using the phone clickers to register votes.

Before each plenary session, a group of musicians played songs from the New Hymnal, Glory to God. The new Hymnal! I'm still trying to get used to the previous new blue one. For the most part, they really did try hard to get everyone to participate as we were setting up for the meeting.

During these sessions there was time for discussions in small groups to give the opportunity for all to listen to each other. I found these very helpful, coming together with no agenda but to listen to each other as we exchanged ideas, thoughts or concerns. Worshipping together and having communion as well, I felt added much to the fellowship of our time together. We had various people speak to us about what was on their hearts. One that stands out very vivid for me was one person stating, (I don't have the exact words but the idea is as follows.) "In many areas of conflict that the church has had, I NEVER once left the table!" My, that left an impression on me!

The committee that I was assigned to was Peacemaking and International Issues, not the Middle East. I think the Holy Spirit was working on my behalf in this committee assignment. If I had been placed on the Polity committee, I would have drowned. The Peacemaking Committee's meetings always started with some quiet music and then worship, which did help us to focus. We also developed a covenant for the group, and we were helpfully reminded of our covenant on the one or two occasions when things were starting to get off track.

For the most part, business was discussed both pros and cons without any out bursts by any one. It was here that I became informed as to the role of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates. I was very impressed as to how they conducted themselves, how knowledgeable they were and how well they were able to bring to the floor information or ideas that had not been discussed. I'm encouraged for the future of the church.

Yes, the days were packed and the schedule was full, but I have a better understanding of what our other brothers and sisters are about. It was encouraging to hear positive stories, how God is working in their lives. The churches in the Detroit presbytery are struggling, but they are determined to literally dig in and work with their people to find solutions. They are one example of many, of how Christians around the world are working together being witnesses as to what can happen when we all are at the table.

**REPORT OF YOUNG ADULT ADVISORY DELEGATE TO 221<sup>ST</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY**  
**Shelby Oda**

Going into the General Assembly, I was very unsure of what to expect. I had been to the opening meeting held for our Presbytery, however, they spoke of a bunch words that did not really make sense to me, like plenary. I felt like I was prepared, I read all of the overtures, and met with Ben several times to clarify things. However, General Assembly is an experience that one can never really prepare for. Once you are in the committee rooms and sitting in plenary, different debates can go certain ways where some are shocking and throw you for a loop, while others are predictable. You never know what other commissioners or YAADs are going to bring to the table. General Assembly is a unique experience. However, I underestimated how much it would change my perspective of the church.

From listening to my friends that attended CRU at Miami University, they spoke of such wonderful things their churches were doing like mission trips, etc., however, I was just linked to the “frozen chosen.” I did not have that sense of wonderment and pride that others had for their church. However, after a week of grueling debates, long hours, and meeting people from all over the country, I got to see passion and unity spark within our church as we moved forward in equality.

As a psychology major, I love observing people’s reactions and through this, sitting back and quietly watching, I got to see the passion that can only be seen as the love of Jesus and for his people. It was magical seeing people’s eyes light up as they fought and debated over certain topics or the chills I got up my arms during the first opening worship with all of us standing together, passionate for my Lord and Savior. Nonetheless, what really struck me as beautiful and uniting was hearing personal testimonies, whether they were YAADs in our late night meetings, the women sitting behind me from a different Presbytery, or a personal statement on the floor of plenary. Those stories, the courage each one had, and the hope they contained put into perspective for me that I was in a church where others cared, truly cared, what was going to happen to the future and wanted the absolute best.

Therefore, when leaving General Assembly, although what overtures passed and did not pass were important, what truly stood out to me and has forever changed my heart is the way people interacted around me with love and prayer, with the Holy Spirit moving throughout. I can now say that I love being a Presbyterian or a “frozen chosen” because I know we offer so much more than cool mission trips, groovy music, etc. We instead offer a home that belongs to all individuals whether they are gay, straight, immigrant, or a native. That in this home, God loves each and every one of us, we are accepting, and we are prepared to fight for our future.