

Commissioner Report on the 225th General Assembly

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.” General Assembly provides time for our church to pray, discern, reflect, and look out.

Lament to Hope was the theme of this year’s General Assembly. The theme was embedded into worship, devotions, language and leadership. The Reverend Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, Stated Clerk of the denomination, reflected on how the very gathering of the Assembly was a movement from Lament to Hope as the church worked diligently to adapt processes, develop new systems, and make a way for the first-ever hybrid Assembly to be held. Committees for this year’s Assembly met in person in Louisville in the newly renovated Presbyterian Center, and plenaries were held online.

The Assembly was guided by the grace-filled and authentic leadership of Co-Moderators The Rev. Ruth Santana-Grace and Rev. Shavon Starling-Louis who frequently shared the words “grace abounds”. They began and concluded their work with a prayer often attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero, speaking to the importance of the immediate work of the Assembly in recognition of the fact that we are but a tiny part of a much larger Kingdom effort (prayer found at the end of this report).

As in other years, the Assembly included information about the structure and state of the P.C. (U.S.A.), a report on major happenings since the last Assembly and the business items of the current Assembly. Business was conducted through the work of many committees and then through plenary sessions. The work was completed using a system called PCBiz which served as the depository for all documents as well as contained the voting mechanism for the hybrid Assembly. Zoom was used to allow folks to see one another and the two programs were synchronized to work together.

Many, many topics and areas were covered in the Assembly: racism, environmental issues, investment and divestment, Christian Education and formation, Mid-Councils, gun violence, ecumenical and interfaith relationships, immigration, the Book of Discipline, and more. I hope that you have been able to access updates and information about some of the areas considered and decisions made through the Presbyterian Outlook or other sources. I served on the Immigration Committee, work conducted in a particularly sobering week with the deaths of 53 immigrants being smuggled into the country in a truck that was abandoned in high heat. Lament.

Some specific items and pieces of information that may be of interest include:

1. The CLC system (which is used by churches and pastors in the search process for new pastoral leadership) is being updated! Thanks be to God!
2. The Book of Discipline was reviewed in its entirety. The Assembly reflected on the gift of Discipline that is a constitutional part of our church, as a comforting and helpful “rod and staff”.
3. Each overture comes to the Assembly has financial implications assessed. For many, there are no financial implications. But for those where there are costs associated with the approval of the overture, the cost to implement the overture is noted. If overtures with financial implications are approved, determinations are then made about where that money will come from: cash reserves, designated funds, elimination of another effort or program and realignment of those dollars, or Per Capita. Each day of the Assembly the Per Capita implications of the previous day’s actions were shared.
4. There is a document titled “Organization for Mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)” that as produced in 2020. This is not the most exciting reading, but it provides a very helpful overview of the structure of the P.C. (U.S.A.) including the corporate entity (A Corporation), the

Office of the General Assembly (OGA), the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA), and other entities like the Board of Pensions (BOP), the Presbyterian Foundation, the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, and the Presbyterian Church Investment and Loan Program (PILP). One of the significant actions taken in plenary session is related to the church structure. The body heard of the need to take significant action to restructure OGA and PMA due to an imbalance of power and resources between them. OGA lacks infrastructure for fundraising and is dependent on Per Capita, which in our current membership-based funding model, is declining. PMA has robust fundraising mechanisms and while PMA may gift OGA with dollars to make up for short falls, an unhealthy dynamic has developed between the two entities. The formation of a Commission to restructure these entities with equity was approved.

5. There is a national nominating process for individuals who wish to serve as part of national committees, teams, etc. You can access these opportunities here [PC\(USA\) OGA \(pcusa.org\)](http://pcusa.org).

And some words that were particularly moving included the following.

1. This year's Assembly also took time to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Formula of Agreement in which the ELCA, the PC (USA), the Reformed Church in America and the UCC entered into full communion on the basis of "a common calling" in 1997. In reflection on this Anniversary, these words were shared, "**may we guard against anything that seeks to be the center of our life other than Jesus**".
2. The Stated Clerk shared many inspiring words at different points in the Assembly. Here is a snippet of some of the words he offered.

What is God trying to do? We can't answer that. We are not in charge. We have to live into it. We serve a God who loves us. We do not walk alone. Maybe we will see a new normal and maybe we won't. We walk not because we know the way but because we know in Whose holy hands we walk. Be blessed this day to take a breath on this side of heaven.

I am thankful to the Presbytery for the opportunity to serve and I am grateful to The Bellbrook Presbyterian Church for the time to do so. I am also thankful for the time spent with Ruling Elder Commissioner Bridgette Hawkins who graciously drove and shared her insights and perceptions with me. It was a blessing to build a new relationship within our Presbytery.

Gratefully,

Rev. Diane Ziegler
Commissioner

Here's the prayer shared by the Co-Moderators:

A Prayer

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete,
which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders;
ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future that is not our own.

Amen.¹

¹¹ [The Archbishop Oscar Romero Prayer - Churches for Middle East Peace \(cmep.org\)](http://cmep.org)