

REPORT ON THE 219TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH-USA

July 1-11, 2010

Thank you very much for the opportunity to be a Commissioner to the 219th General Assembly. Simply noting that this is the 219th (and it was often noted) is to communicate a sense of the importance of this gathering to the members of our denomination. The cost of the Assembly (well over \$2 million) is another indicator that Presbyterians believe that the Holy Spirit acts through a process of discernment that is best expressed in gatherings of the Body of Christ in assemblies at all levels of the denomination.

The length of the Assembly and related meetings (I arrived in Minneapolis on at noon on July 1 and left at noon on July 11.) and the complexity of the issues make attendance physically, intellectually and spiritually very demanding, but every effort is made to make attendance possible for a diverse and representative group. It is also extraordinarily rewarding.

The experience divides roughly into: worship, committee work, plenary work and a plethora of meetings, dinners, receptions, and exhibits related to the work of the Church. I was assigned to the Committee on Middle Governing Bodies and met with representatives of the Association of Presbyterian Colleges and Universities. I attended the Maryville College breakfast, the Presbytery of Great Rivers dinner, the Synod of Lincoln Trails dinner, the lunch sponsored by Collegiate Ministries and the General Assembly breakfast at which Phyllis Tickle spoke about her book, "The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why". I also took advantage of the opportunity to talk to those who had booths in the Exhibit Hall representing the many areas of mission and service in the Church.

WORSHIP

Worship opportunities were diverse and extraordinary. The preachers were excellent and each was a "production". One pastor/head of staff, with whom I served on the committee was so moved by the service featuring an African choir that he promised to convene the leadership team in his congregation to revamp their worship to ensure that their services reflected the joy and excitement that he found in worship at the Assembly. At this Assembly a child was baptized for the first time in worship, we shared Communion, sang, prayed and listened to many voices proclaiming the word and work of God. However, the most meaningful aspect of worship at the Assembly was the use of hymns and prayers throughout the work of the Assembly as a means of focusing the Commissioners on Who and Whose We Are. I found myself thinking about how important it is in times of stress and conflict to be reminded of the core reason that we gathered and the mission to which we are all committed.

COMMITTEE WORK

The Committee on Middle Governing Bodies reviewed eight Overtures and received no Commissioner's Overtures. The issues that demanded most of our time included the decision about whether to create a commission (as opposed to a committee) to determine the future of synods and the follow up to a committee report on the Synod of Boriquen in Puerto Rico.

In Presbyterian polity, a commission is empowered to act FOR the General Assembly in the time between Assembly meetings. The actions of a commission have the weight of GA actions.

Many people were very concerned about giving such power to any group other than GA. There has not been a commission named since the early part of the last century. After a lengthy discussion (and many substitute motions) the committee recommended the creation of a Commission with limited powers and the committee proceeded to refer to that commission several of the overtures which had to do with various aspects of the nature and function of synods. The case was successfully made that there is an urgent need for flexibility in forming and reforming synods and presbyteries to meet the needs of the church in crisis and that the commission could create that flexibility. The recommendation prevailed in the plenary.

The committee also recommended a GA commission continue to work with the conflict in the Synod of Boriquen. Last winter the conflict among presbyteries in the Synod of Boriquen became so serious that the Moderator created a special commission to review the situation and report to the 219th GA. We received their report. This discussion was complicated by the complexity of the conflict among the presbyteries and by the fact that many of those directly involved and testifying were not native speakers of English. Even with the use of translators communication was difficult and the complexities of parliamentary procedure almost impossible for those individuals. The recommendation prevailed in the plenary.

The importance of parliamentary procedure and Book of Order processes to the outcomes of the GA cannot be underestimated.

The committee also considered and recommended the formation of another Korean language synod. The recommendation did not prevail in the plenary due, I believe, in large part to the testimony of female Korean pastors who reported that they are consistently discriminated against in the Korean synods.

PLENARY

The first business of major importance was the election of a Moderator from among six very different candidates. I made it a point to talk with all of the candidates and Cindy Bolbach was not my first choice largely because she advocated a corporate approach to resolving church problems and because education did not appear to be on her radar. It is my opinion that a corporate style has existed in recent years and that has not benefitted mission and spiritual growth in the denomination. However, in my opinion, Moderator Bolbach proved to be an excellent choice. She conducted the business of the Assembly with dignity, grace, intelligence and a remarkable sense of humor. The fact that it took several hours to elect her was not a product of indecision on the part of the commissioners, but was the product of the failure of the voting apparatus. She was the only Elder candidate and her position in support of recognition of gay marriage and civil unions was, I thought, a portent of things to come.

The actions of the plenary that received national attention were, of course, those related to ordination of gays and lesbians, recognition of same-sex marriage and civil unions. The Assembly proved to be ambivalent. Ordination was recommended and will again be voted on by the presbyteries. The margin of approval was slim. The Assembly did not vote in favor of same-sex marriage or for a proposal that the Pension Fund extend benefits to the families of gay and lesbian couples employed by the Church. There is very real pain on both sides of this issue. Pastors working in states that have legalized same-sex marriage are facing particular challenges.

Although the issues coming to the plenary from the committees (2) on Middle East issues apparently did not get national press, they were discussed with great vigor in committee, plenary and at numerous dinners, focus groups and educational sessions. The report of the study committee was accepted including provisions that would denounce Caterpillar for profiting from the sale of equipment that, it was argued, contributes to the continuation of violence against Palestinians. This is obviously a matter of great concern to those who live in the Great Rivers Presbytery and the Synod of Lincoln Trails. Well over 100 CAT facilities exist within our bounds.

The PC(USA) has a long-standing position in support of the right for Israel to exist within the legally defined boundaries. The report contends that Israel has trespassed those boundaries and that as the more powerful antagonist in the conflict has a significant responsibility for resolution of the conflict. One of the most disturbing realities of recent years is the discrimination against Palestinian Christians and the resulting decline in numbers to a mere 1.3% of the population. The recommendations of the report are not popular with the American Jewish community and are, in some cases, at odds with U.S. policy in recent years. As we all know this is a conflict with roots going back decades (and arguably centuries) which has the potential to impact our daily lives in very significant ways. There appears to be little movement toward resolution. I do think it is appropriate for the Church to speak as a prophetic voice, but we must take that responsibility very seriously.

The 19 committees of the GA presented a mind-boggling set of overtures for our consideration. They were mind-boggling in number, in complexity and in the amount of human suffering our discussions revealed. Polity, process and budget were discussed along with the health and safety of women and children; pleas to the United Nations to intervene in wars around the world; environmental issues; and care for those with HIV-AIDS and hepatitis. Acting on the overtures brought before it, the General Assembly considers items directly or indirectly related to every aspect of our lives.

The loss of membership in the PC(USA) and the resulting loss of income have led to the loss of personnel and programs throughout the Church, but particularly at the Synod and GA level. Overtures that passed this Assembly that will require expenditure of funds will be implemented only at the expense of existing personnel and programs in the current year and increases in the per capita can be expected in the future. We heard budget reports at the beginning of every session and the enormity of the fiscal issues were never far from my mind.

I have written well more than can be read in my share of the time allotted and am struck by how inadequately and incompletely I have characterized the work that was done and the impact of the experience.

Respectfully,

Miriam Pride,
GA Commissioner