

Difference Makers

A Reflection on the 222nd General Assembly

Luke 10:25-37 Leviticus 19:1-2, 13-18
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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It's the 4th of July weekend, time to preach about the celebration of our freedom and liberty, along with the responsibilities that go with these blessings. Well, sorry, not this year. While it's all still fresh on my mind (which gets less fresh every day), I want to reflect upon the 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which concluded it's bi-annual gathering just over a week ago in Portland, Oregon. To summarize the entire experience in a nutshell, **I truly think our denomination navigated and experienced an important turning point, steering us into a new way forward.** In fact, one of the Assembly's committees was called The Way Forward Committee.

There was, of course, the usual impassioned disagreements over certain issues. But **gone was the accusatory rancor and outright disunity** experienced in each and every General Assembly in recent history. One reason, perhaps, is that with the issue of inclusion of LGBTQ persons finally off the front burner, we addressed other issues of mission and policy.

On the closing day, I had the rare opportunity to have a brief one-on-one conversation with the retiring Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Gradye Parsons. He reflected that this was the most civil and friendly GA in his memory. I mentioned to him that even when the committee I served voted *not* to approve an item of business before us, we would add an official comment of affirmation, so as not to give the appearance of being cold-hearted. Known for his incredibly humor, Gradye responded, "People still disagreed and said no, yet it's like they added, 'but I like your mother, and you look great.'"

For the first time in forever, it wasn't the case that certain issues were so divisive and polarizing in and of themselves, but rather the emphasis was on what's the best way forward to deal with and accomplish any particular purpose. Folks on all sides of the theological, social, and racial spectrum came away with a greater sense of hope of where we're heading as a denomination. And there are several reasons why that is the case.

The first occurred on the opening day of official business – electing a moderator of the General Assembly. At the last Assembly two years ago they approved the option of electing **co-moderators**, instead of the usual moderator and vice-moderator. This year there were four people who took advantage of this, in 2 sets of co-moderators. One set female, the other male. Interestingly, and very telling, all were on the moderate to progressive side of the spectrum. I can't remember a time when there wasn't a conservative and/or evangelical person running for the position of moderator. I'm wondering if that's a coincidence or a statement of some kind.

We elected the Rev. Jan Edmiston and the Rev. Denise Anderson on the first ballot. They helped set the tone, partly because of how they exhibited their dedication to inclusion, dignity and respect. As you may have seen in the pictures posted in our church newsletter that was sent out a few days ago, one is white, one is African American, who at 36 years-old is the youngest person ever elected to that position. It was a joy to watch them work, and to briefly get to know them personally.

Another reason this Assembly is historic was the election of J. Herbert Nelson to replace the retiring Gradye Parsons as the new Stated Clerk. The full-time Stated Clerk runs the Office of the General Assembly throughout the year. Nelson has been serving as the director of the PC(USA)'s Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C. Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery was fortunate and blessed to have him as a guest speaker and preacher just last year. In the more than 300-year history of Presbyterianism in the United States, Nelson becomes the first African American elected as the top ecclesial officer of the church. Our denomination, by the way, is about 92% white.

The other top spot in our denomination's structure is the Executive Director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency – the program arm of the church. Currently serving as the interim Executive Director is Tony De La Rosa, who happens to be a married gay Latino man. I've known Tony for almost 20 years through the work of More Light Presbyterians, and I hear he is a primary reason why I was recommended to serve as a committee moderator.

So if you're keeping track, that means **for the first time in our denomination's history there are no white men in the top leadership positions. Our commitment to diversity and inclusion is indeed bearing fruit as we respond to a changing culture and society.**

All of these leaders have been and will most certainly continue to be **difference makers**. One of the scripture passages underlying the work of the Assembly this year was the **parable of the Good Samaritan**, which I read a few moments ago. We focused on how important the actions of one person can make in the life of another. Yes, it takes courage and often movement outside our comfort zones, but the results are filled with grace. **We were challenged, as I challenge you now, to be a difference maker.**

Another highlight of the Assembly was the final approval to add the **Confession of Belhar** to our *Book of Confessions*, part of our denomination's Constitution. This action now enshrines its themes of unity, justice and reconciliation in our denomination's central doctrinal affirmations – much as the *Confession of 1967* did almost 50 years ago, which, by the way, was the last time the General Assembly met in Portland.

Emerging from the apartheid-era South African church, Belhar calls on the church to **“stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged.”** We heartily rejoiced in this historic opportunity to lift up its emphasis on a church that reflects love and equality for all God's children.

In other action, the Assembly took a decidedly “middle way” in the two most potentially divisive overtures. One dealt with a proposed ‘apology’ to the LGBTQ community for teachings and actions that have created marginalization. Heaven knows that's something many of us in this congregation have experienced. But the nearly unanimous Social Justice committee instead approved and sent to the floor of the entire Assembly a statement of ‘regret.’

You may be interested to know that while More Light Presbyterians supported the original apology, the progressive yet more moderate Covenant Network of Presbyterians supported the regret approach. Of further interest, and something I would

be more than happy to discuss with any of you in detail, **I also sided with the regret instead of the apology.**

Why? For one, forcing an apology from those who do not empathize and identify with the harm or hurt that has been done would be insincere, therefore not a true apology. While it might be fun to watch them squirm in having to apologize, it does very little to actually heal broken relationships. That does not mean, however, that many of us still feel the pain of not receiving a well-deserved apology.

Second, those of us on the progressive, inclusive, pro-LGBTQ debate have for years demanded freedom of conscience from the traditionally held interpretation of scripture and church law on this issue. It was just two years ago, at the last General Assembly, where the denomination approved the right of same-sex couples to marry. So to turn around at this Assembly and deny others their right of freedom of conscience in relation to biblical interpretation, through a forced apology, would not only be divisive, but inappropriate. **I am among those who believe we took the more grace-filled approach – at least at this time and place.** For one important thing we've learned in national church politics is sometimes timing is everything.

Saying that, I realize that I'm running out of time. So I will briefly mention the other "middle way" decision of another hot-button issue – comprehensive fossil fuel divestment. There's something you don't hear mentioned very often in a sermon. Yet it is indeed an issue of interest to Tulsans, as well as the environmentalists among us. Instead of complete and total divestment, the Assembly, by a vote of 70%, decided to pursue a process of trying to influence energy companies through stockholder engagement. Only then would it move to possible selected divestment.

Quickly, now, here is a partial list of some of the other important items of business. The Assembly acted to:

- approve a new Directory for Worship (the middle section of our *Book of Order*) - affirm and strengthen our efforts at peacemaking, including the re-affirmation of a 2-state solution between Palestine and Israel
- affirm ways of non-violence
- uphold human rights, especially in the Middle East, including the well-being of children in Palestine and Israel
- encourage the review and possible revision of civil rights policies, like police training and the use of force
- strengthen interfaith relationships
- affirm science's contribution to the story of creation and evolution – how I wish Harold Hill were still alive to see how we've finally made a clear stand on the side of science!
- address climate change issues
- condemn so-call 'conversion' or 'reparative' therapies designed to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity
- equip and mobilize congregations to better serve those living among us with HIV-AIDS
- uphold and support clergywomen,
- re-affirm reproductive choice,
- encourage dependant care, child/youth protection, and family leave policies at all levels of the church
- extend time limits on abuse reporting in instances of gross negligence

- address and improve the worsening plight of the African American male through a program in 5 select cities
- rescind the action of the previous Assembly to reduce the number of synods (that was from the committee I moderated)
- remove the requirement that those who take Communion must first be baptized
- support the process of refugee settlement, including a return to the Sanctuary Movement – which this congregation participated in during the 80s
- apologize to Native Americans, especially to those who were and are part of 'stolen generations' during the Indian-assimilation movement, namely former students of Indian boarding schools, their families, and their communities – that would include our beloved Dwight Mission
- and one more, form a 2020 Vision Team to set a new vision and guiding statement for the denomination.

I realine – again – that this has been more of a report than a sermon. And I also recognize that few of you will remember all the important things accomplished by this General Assembly. Therefore, I will close by quoting J. Herbert Nelson as he was installed as Stated Clerk, **As a denomination, we are not dead. We are alive.” Led by God, “we are reforming and transforming the world, one person at a time.”**

You and I, and College Hill, are part of that reformation and transformation. Each and every one of us is called to be a difference maker.

Amen.