

REFLECTIONS FROM RULING ELDER COMMISSIONER JAN LEWIS, REGARDING THE 221st GENERAL ASSEMBLY, JUNE 13-21, 2014

We waited as strangers at US Airways Gate B13 in Charlotte, NC on June 13th only to find after landing in Detroit that many of us were on a common mission. We were enroute as commissioners, advisory delegates, observers and other church officials to General Assembly. Then, eight days later, we gathered again for our return flight, but this time we gathered as friends and colleagues having shared more than a week of worshipping, learning, discerning, dining, fellowshiping and decision making on behalf of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Our plane was not unlike Detroit's "People Mover" which carried us back and forth from hotels, restaurants and places of local interest to the COBO, General Assembly's Headquarters, on the shores of Lake St. Clair (Detroit River) which separated the city of Detroit from Windsor, Canada. The association of blue, black and red badges created instant recognition and mutual bonds as workers called to serve the church.

The Assembly's theme was *Abound in Hope*. From Saturday's opening worship and reaffirmation of our baptisms, the election of our new Moderator, Heath Rada, and the unanimous confirmation of Vice Moderator, Larissa Kwong Abazia, to our closing worship and service of communion, this once in a life time experience filled me with hope for our denomination.

Twenty area Presbyterian Churches hosted members of the Assembly for Sunday Morning Worship. Buses converged at COBO and departed for destinations in and near Detroit. I chose to visit Westminster Presbyterian, a beautiful structure with magnificent stained glass windows and a racially diverse congregation. J. Herbert Nelson II of the PCUSA's Office of Public Witness delivered an inspiring message. The service ended with prayer for one of its youth who was about to leave for her pre-college experience. She was headed for my alma mater--Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia. What a delight!

My committee was Congregational Vitality. Almost without exception, our members had questioned having received such a "light" assignment. "Why weren't we asked to tackle the big issues?" we bemoaned. Then God stepped in. As we wrapped up our work, after having considered the overtures which had been entrusted to us, we concluded that ours was one of the most important of assignments because we dealt with issues of being the church in the world. Our excursion into the streets of Detroit, for example, opened our eyes and our hearts to the concerns of the people as well as to the vast opportunities for ministry. This was an experiment in Missional Living--an initiative which our committee recommended the Assembly approve which encourages Presbyterians to reach out to those in their communities in service in the name of Christ. We learned about congregational cycles and strategies for revitalizing declining churches. We affirmed 1001 Worshipping Communities and recommended the Educate a Child, Transform the World Initiative. Our focus was the heart of the church.

I expected contention during plenary debates; however, I was pleasantly surprised with the orderliness of procedures and with the demeanor of the Moderator and Stated Clerk I respected the times when debate was suspended for prayer and when we bounced beach balls about the hall to celebrate the end of a difficult

evening's work.

It was the Spirit which filled the Assembly that was most impressive. Regardless of whether our business concerned proposed amendments to the *Book of Order* or to the *Book of Confessions*, the authoritative interpretation of marriage, per capita changes or divestment from companies, decisions were made "decently and in order." We were the Church in the world and not the world in the church!

I was honored to have served with our other commissioners and youth advisory delegate. Thank you, Northeast Georgia Presbytery, for entrusting me with this noble task. I left Detroit at peace with the decisions that had been made. Let hope abound!

Yours in Christ,
Jan Lewis, Ruling Elder Commissioner

REPORT FROM JIM HIERS, RULING ELDER COMMISSIONER TO THE 221ST GENERAL ASSEMBLY, JUNE 2014

THE 221ST. GENERAL ASSEMBLY, DETROIT JUNE 2014 Preliminary general comments: "The Assembly of Yes"

The meeting had many pluses. Detroit was a good host much to my surprise. Their airport is sparkingly new in the areas I saw. Maybe I liked it so much because Delta upgraded me to first class for my return without my even asking because of my Million Miler status. The volunteers from the Detroit Presbytery were well organized, extremely pleasant and so helpful. I worshiped at First Ann Arbor where the outgoing moderator preached and the music program was outstanding as was the hospitality.

The Assembly met long hours. The worship portions were excellent. We elected the right moderator, Ruling Elder Heath Rada, of the Western North Carolina Presbytery, who had as his running mate for Vice-Moderator, Larissa Kwong Abazia, a young Chinese-American pastor of a multicultural, multiethnic church in Queens, New York.

The meeting must have cost millions and I question the need for meetings every 2 years. I know GA previously met annually, but now there are fewer members in PCUSA. The late hours had many motions and overtures passing almost automatically because the commissioners were tired and the hours late. This aspect could be streamlined so that more items could be put into the omnibus motion (consent agenda), etc. Other steps could be taken to at least cut off about 2 days of a GA thus saving thousands and accomplishing the same in less time.

It was the longest "political convention" I have ever witnessed, but it included prayer and excellent worship services as well.

COMMITTEE 10, CIVIL UNIONS AND MARRIAGE ISSUES

This committee was to and did "Consider Matters related to: Amendments to the form of government, Rules of Discipline and Directory for Worship related to marriage and civil unions; referrals defining marriage." I was a Ruling Elder Commissioner of this committee and have been asked to report on it. There were 68 members including the moderator, vice moderator, Youth Advisory Delegates (YAAD) and 2 Theological Student Advisory Delegates. In the plenary meetings, (the general open meetings) of the General Assembly (GA) these Delegates are only allowed an Advisory Vote, but in

committees their votes count. One reason they are not allowed to vote in GA meetings is that they are not ordained. On this committee there were 14 such delegates. I was impressed with their general dedication and interest. Voting in the committee was via paper ballots and private. The best I could tell from the verbal comments all but 1 (maybe 2) of these delegates were in favor of all changes suggested. One was an extremely articulate spokesman, a young male, from Detroit Presbytery, who was against changing the definition of marriage. He referred to scripture and sin which he claimed would be encouraged, enhanced, continued and ratified by a change permitting same gender marriage. Scripture otherwise was not discussed with specific references generally during the committee meetings.

We were instructed to, and did, refer to "same gender marriage" and used this terminology. No discussion was undertaken about Civil Unions which would not be true marriages.

OVERTURES TO THE COMMITTEE

The 2012 GA committee had 13 overtures including one to confirm the "current Definition of Marriage and current authoritative interpretations of Marriage". An overture is a proposal/resolution from a council (GA, synod, presbytery or session) to recommend the requested action. The committee this time, 2014, had only 7 overtures and not one requested confirming the current definition of marriage. There was no overture to leave the definition in its present form.

First, we heard an hour of 1 minute statements from individuals just coming in to express their opinions and not official advocates on the overtures. Next, advocates for the overtures appeared. Overture 10-02 from Cascade Presbytery had concurrence from 16 other presbyteries recommending a change in W-4.9000. On the overture to issue an Authoritative Interpretation of W-4.9000 to affirm pastoral discretion on performing same gender marriages there were 19 presbytery concurrences. The presbyteries were each allowed to make presentations. We must have heard about 40 or more speakers all urging the approval of these overtures. During this time there were no speakers against the overtures. Commissioners were permitted to ask questions and express opinions related to the question. The presentations for change were extremely well orchestrated and carefully planned. There was no organized opposition. There were meetings of the proponents of the requested changes before their presentations and many people were wearing rainbow colored cloths reflecting their support of the cause throughout the week.

The major thrust of the presentations started with many pastors telling stories about how painful the experience of having members of their congregation ask them to conduct their marriage, but the pastor had to refuse because of the rules against same gender marriage in states (19 + D.C.) where such marriages are legal, but the constitution of the PCUSA prohibits such marriages. The stories were touching and frequent. Some of the speakers were persons desiring marriage as they were in a same gender relationship and had been for years and wanted to make a legal and church blessed long term commitment. One argument for same gender marriage is that it will encourage same gender couples to make long term commitments.

VOTING IN THE COMMITTEE AND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Overture 10-03 was for an Authoritative Interpretation of W-4.9000 to grant Presbyterian pastors to marry same gender couples in states that allow such marriages to occur legally. This passed in committee 51-18. With slight amendment it passed in the plenary GA 371 to 238. An Authoritative Interpretation (AI) becomes effective at the end of the

meeting, June 21, and does not require votes from presbyteries. Interestingly the Advisory Committee on the Constitution (ACC) recommended the disapproval of this overture. The ACC, in an attachment to the overture, indicated it suggests an interpretation contrary to the clear statement in W-4.9000. The words “a woman and a man” are clear and unambiguous. This reflects the opinion that the Overture conflicts with W-4.9000 of the *Book of Order* part of the constitution of PCUSA. During the plenary GA meeting, a representative of the ACC spoke and gave a differing opinion.

Article VIII, 47, of *Robert's Rules of Order*: “Votes that are Null and Void Even if Unanimous: no motion is in order that conflicts...with the assembly's constitution or by-laws, and if such a motion is adopted, even by a unanimous vote would be null and void”.

This creates an abomination in that W-4.9000 has not yet been amended because the changes to it will not be made until and unless approved by a majority of presbyteries. We will not know this until a year from now, meanwhile the AI is declared in force while W-4.900 still has not been approved and clearly says “a woman and a man” in defining “marriage”. The committee's recommendation on overture 10-02 on amending W-4.9000 which passed in the committee 49-18 was, with the addition of the insertion of “traditionally a man and a woman” after the words “two people”, (added in place of “a woman and a man”) passed in the GA plenary session 429-175. This is a potential constitutional amendment to be voted upon by the presbyteries.

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE PASSING OF THE OVERTURES

Never have I seen in 35 + years of law practice such a massive one sided presentation on an issue. There was no overture for status quo and no organized opposition to the above overtures. Each was amplified by concurrences from many additional presbyteries with overtures falling in like cannon balls from Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. It became evident about an hour from the start of the committee meeting that these overtures were going to be successful. The overtures passed, I feel, because: (1) social culture was ripe for these changes; (2) the methodical organization of favorable advocacy was overwhelming, (3) the legal changes in the laws of additional approval states since 2010 and 2012 and (4) the change in the demographics in PCUSA. The changes passed in the committee as well as the GA easily and the votes were not even close.

From 2012 through 2013, 89,296 members left PCUSA. The membership reductions for 2014 are, of course, not yet known. Between 2010 and 2013, 255,891 have fled. These people were mostly “conservative” who would have opposed the overtures which now passed handily. I heard almost no discussion about these losses and what passage of these changes might do to cause even more departures. There were some claims from change advocates that membership would actually increase as the “closed door has been opened”.

CONCLUSION: At the present time these changes do not apply to marriages in Georgia as same gender marriages are not allowed. Challenges to such prohibitions are being decided in other states in Federal District and Courts of Appeals, with rulings which generally are holding the statutes or constitutional provisions unconstitutional. The stage is set for this issue to reach the U.S. Supreme Court perhaps before the next GA with the court probably ruling the same way.

The Authoritative Interpretation, which is now in force, grants pastors/teaching elders the ability and permission to perform marriage of same gender couples in states (now 19 +D.C.) which allow such marriages to occur legally. “Exercising such discretion and

freedom of conscience under the prayerful guidance of Scripture, teaching elders may conduct a marriage for such couple..." "In no case shall any teaching elder's conscience be bound to conduct any marriage except by his or her understanding of the Word, and the leading of the Holy Spirit." They are not required to perform such marriage and may do so only in a jurisdiction where such marriages are legal. The session has to approve the use of the church's facilities if the wedding is to take place at the church.

This is not as simple as the press reports in saying "Presbyterians Approve Same Gender Marriage". There are conditions to be met as shown and such must be legal in the jurisdiction where the marriage takes place. Pastors/teaching elders have discretion to exercise and sessions retain control of the use of church property.

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Reflections from Reverend Bob Prim, Teaching Elder Commissioner, on the 221st General Assembly 2014

I write this with gratitude to Northeast Georgia Presbytery for electing me to be one of your commissioners to the 221st General Assembly in Detroit. Being alongside Jim Hiers, Jan Lewis, Holly Shoaf-O'Kula, and the Youth Advisory Delegate Olivia Aldridge was a pleasure. Jim and I were elbow to elbow all week, and the sometimes tedious work was made lighter by Jim's dry sense of humor. We all took our assigned work very seriously and very few votes were missed.

I am also filled with pride for our denomination. We did our work enveloped by worship and in a respectful manner. It is often said of us -- quite often in a mildly derisive way -- that we do things "decently and in order." Well, in the cases of conversations about sensitive issues, I celebrate our ordered and honoring ways.

I served on the "Theological Issues and Institutions" committee. Some of our work was perfunctory; e.g., we approved a list of Presbyterian related colleges, universities, and secondary schools. This gave me a chance to endorse Rabun Gap - Nacoochee School; a school my children will attend next year! Our committee also affirmed a celebration of John Knox's 500th birthday. The most impacting work we did was to send to the full body of the General Assembly our recommendation for the inclusion of The Belhar Confession in our *Book of Confessions*. This recommendation was approved by the commissioners by a vote of 86 percent. Each of the presbyteries will now vote and if 3/4 vote in favor it will be included. I and others will plan event/events to introduce the confession and offer the rationale for including it in our *Book of Confessions*.

There were many important issues discussed but the two that received the most press and have been received with some anxiety in our denomination were from the Marriage and Civil Unions committee and the Middle East Issues committee. The marriage issues related to an Authoritative Interpretation of the Constitution of our denomination that would allow PCUSA pastors in states that allow same gender marriage to perform marriages for same gender couples. This A.I. passed by a 61 percent to 39 percent majority. This change does not require presbytery endorsement and is in effect now. The second part of the marriage issues was to change the *Book of Order* to say in the Directory for Worship that "marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally between a man and a woman." This definition broadens our understanding of marriage to include LGBT people; and the change was approved at General Assembly by a 71 percent to 29 percent vote. This new language has to be

approved by a majority of our presbyteries in order to be added to the *Book of Order*. For those who know me it will come as no surprise that I believe both of these changes to our understanding of marriage and the church's pastoral role in the lives of the LGBT people in our churches is biblically, theologically, and pastorally grounded. I look forward to having a decent and orderly conversation in our presbytery about this important matter.

The other contentious matter that came before this General Assembly had to do with divestment from three companies involved in "non-peaceful pursuits" in the occupied territories of Palestine. By a vote of 310 to 303 the Assembly voted to divest from Motorola, Hewlett Packard, and Caterpillar. The Mission Responsibility Through Investment committee has worked with these companies for 10 years and decided to recommend divestment because they did not believe any real progress had been made. There were strong Jewish voices on both sides of the issue. We heard from the Chief Rabbi of the Reform branch of Judaism in the USA and from a Lutheran pastor in the occupied territories. We heard a lot of debate. No one disagreed (who spoke) about the moral problems of settlements in the occupied territories. No one gave voice to any notion that the Palestinians should not have a viable state that exists alongside Israel (though one overture that was approved called for a study on the viability of a two-state solution given the facts on the ground today). The disagreement was over the effectiveness of divestment and what messages it would send. I went into GA with a mind divided on this issue. I ultimately voted in favor of the divestment for these three reasons -- 1) we had a committee that worked diligently for a decade on this issue and recommended divestment; 2) there is little doubt but that the Palestinians are oppressed; and 3) while we may receive a lot of push back from pro-Israel lobbies (Jewish and Christian) I see our pulling back from these three companies as engagement with Israel and with Palestinians as partners for peace. Partners have conversations and take actions with the well-being of all parties in mind and heart.

These are a few of my reflections and I reiterate my gratitude and my pride of my affiliation with Northeast Georgia Presbytery and with the PCUSA!

Grace and peace,

Bob Prim

Reflections from Reverend Holly Shoaf-O'Kula, Teaching Elder Commissioner, on the 221st General Assembly

"How was General Assembly?" people asked when I first returned, and I was at a loss to convey the experience in a word. How could I summarize an eight-day experience of worshiping, deliberating, praying, waiting upon the Spirit with 600+ commissioners and advisory delegates from across our denomination? How could I succinctly state my experience of working in my assigned committee where pre-Assembly preparation had expanded my knowledge of Immigration and Environmental Issues and presentations and deliberations broadened it further? How could I convey what the 221st General Assembly was like in a one-minute hallway encounter when I wanted to sit down for hours to share the particular moments I experienced as vibrant, tense, alive, Spirit-filled, emotionally-draining, tedious, amazing, nerve-wracking, surprising, inspiring and disappointing?

What I want to convey to you, the members of Northeast Georgia Presbytery, is my deep gratitude for being elected to serve as a commissioner and my abiding hope for

the PCUSA. Thank you for the opportunity to serve the Church in this way. The preparation of studying the overtures and their accompanying rationales as well the perspectives of various denominational agencies served not only to inform me but also has been helpful in interpreting for folks back home decisions that were made. Particularly since media reports seemed always sensational and sometimes accurate. Alongside (literally) Olivia, Jan, Jim and Bob, I, like the Assembly, sought the Holy Spirit's guidance in voting my conscience. Hilary was thoughtfully supportive, providing daily snacks and encouragement (not advice).

I served on the Immigration and Environmental Issues Committee and although we had a small number of overtures to consider one was particularly labor intensive: the overture that the PCUSA divest from fossil fuel companies. The committee finally decided to refer to Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) for their conversation with these companies and their recommendation. By referring to MRTI, the PCUSA continues to have "a seat at the table" as it shares its concerns.

At a time when many are discouraged about the PCUSA and declining membership, I witnessed reasons to be hopeful. The number of new worshipping communities is growing and their faithful creativity is responding to the changing context of ministry. The Educate a Child, Save the World initiative is engaging local congregations with their neighborhood schools as well as throughout the world. The enthusiastic and informed engagement of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates is shaping the Church now. The awareness of the weightiness of the decisions that were made and the accompanying genuine sensitivity and pastoral concern for those with differing perspectives signals a Church that desires to be inclusive of all God's children.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve. It has been one of the highlights of being a Teaching Elder.

Holly Shoaf-O'Kula