

GENERAL (PRESBYTER) NOTES ON THE 218TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY

I've been waiting to see what I can add to the reports which have been coming out of the General Assembly last week in San Jose, California. There are so many reports out there already. The most official can be found online at <http://www.pcusa.org/ga218/> with a listing of most of the major decisions and links for more news. There is also a pastoral letter from our denominational leaders being sent to each congregation (a copy can be found online at <http://www.pcusa.org/gac/ga218letter.htm>). Let me instead give a few observations and then some hopes.

First, your presbytery's commissioners and advisory delegates were thoughtful and faithful throughout the Assembly, participating fully in the committee business and in all of the plenary meetings. Serving on behalf of the presbytery at a General Assembly meeting is a long and grueling task, but they felt the prayers of those at home throughout the week. Together with the rest of the Assembly, they consistently sought the mind of Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in their work. The Assembly was, on several occasions, not of one mind, but it was marked by a distinct lack of bitterness and protest displayed at previous Assemblies.

Second, this Assembly seemed to look for middle ground, perhaps even if it meant approving seemingly contradictory proposals. I don't yet understand all that happened there, or what it will mean for our denomination and our congregations in the days to come, but it was a portrait painted in contrasting tones.

For example, the Assembly approved a continuing dialogue between Christian, Jews, and Muslims (the three monotheistic religions of the world), but admitted that there is no agreement between these three faiths in the way that God has been revealed. The Assembly approved a continuing emphasis on peace in the Middle East, but did not call for the withdrawal of forces from Iraq and turned back further actions regarding divestment in the Middle East. The Assembly ordered the development of a curriculum for youth which includes human sexuality, but insisted on a balance of viewpoints in its development. At the same time a revision of printed materials on reproductive option was ordered which more clearly reflects the balance of the General Assembly position which supports a woman's right to choose but urges that abortion should be the choice of last resort. The Assembly called for a more pastoral response to congregations seeking to leave the PCUSA, but at the same time approved a fund for assisting presbyteries engaged in litigation over property (it was noted that the vast majority of the lawsuits over property have been filed by congregations, not presbyteries). There was a strong affirmation of the more missional design called for in the proposed revision to the Form of Government, but a referral back to the presbyteries for study (general consensus was that the concept was good, but some of the details need further discussion).

Of course, the most controversial actions were the range of motions regarding ordination and sexuality. Without trying to pretend that I know yet what all of these mean for our presbytery or denomination, the actions included: a refusal to change the definition of marriage as between one man and one woman (W-4.9001), but continued support for civil rights for same-sex couples; a revision of the "fidelity and chastity" paragraph on ordinations standards with one that calls us to

fidelity to the "standards of the Church" (G-6.0106b); and a new authoritative interpretation for G-6.0108 which underscores the right of "scrupling" on behalf of candidates for ordained office, but retains the right of governing bodies to determine whether or not those scruples should disqualify one for office. Most interesting is the fact that authoritative interpretations are effective immediately, while changes to the *Book of Order* require the approval of a majority of the presbyteries. As such, if the history of previous efforts to remove the "fidelity and chastity" clause is any indicator of how the presbyteries will vote, we could have a situation in which the current Constitutional standards remain in the *Book of Order*, but the previous binding interpretations are gone. The Advisory Committee on the Constitution explained clearly to the Assembly that both must be approved if any change in the ordination standards is to become effective. This may lead to a rush of new overtures to the next General Assembly (heads up to those who served as alternate commissioners this year and may serve in 2010). Time and much debate will clarify these actions.

Gradye Parsons, the newly elected Stated Clerk, offered this advice to the Presbyterian Church (indeed all major denominations today), taken from the Gospel of Luke, "Get into the boat. Go across the lake. There will be a storm. You will not die." We live in a time in which all the world seems to embrace the storm rather than trust in the One who calls us to set out from the safe haven of the shore. Our confidence resides in Christ Jesus our Lord, and none other.

My hopes include a fervent prayer that we will study and pray together as we seek to hear Christ's call to us today. Where is Christ in the actions of the General Assembly? Where is Christ in our actions here in our congregations? There is much good to be said about the ministries of each of our congregations and I pray we will not forget that.

There will be times for conversation. The Synod is hosting a conversation among presbyteries on August 11-12. Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery will be setting up listening sessions among our churches. Of course, any Session desiring conversation with myself or our GA commissioners only need ask - we will gladly respond.

My final hope is that each of our presbytery's leaders - elders, ministers, educators - will find the peace and strength of Christ in their hearts as we seek together the answers to important questions in the days ahead. It is an honor to be able to serve in this presbytery and I look forward to the year to come. I truly believe God is doing a good thing here in Eastern Oklahoma.

Peace to you all,