

**Report on the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA)  
June 30-July 7, 2012 ~Pittsburgh, PA  
Teaching Elder Commissioner Bill Campbell**

It was a privilege to attend the 2012 General Assembly and I thank the presbytery for the opportunity. I walked into an incredible feat of programming and planning that was pulled off with organizational excellence. The team that organized this GA was hard working and gracious, and the process of bringing nearly a thousand commissioners and delegates together for deliberations and decisions has been well refined.

A special thanks to Bobbi, Bert, and to all of our Presbytery staff for their hard work in training us for the event, and their support throughout. They demonstrated the Christlike servanthood that Scriptures call us each to emulate.

The assembly was held in Pittsburgh's central business district, a triangular tract carved by the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers, which coningle to become the Ohio River. So did two rivers of tradition and thought merge to create the forces that drove this national assembly. Currents of conservative and progressive theology flowed into committees and plenary sessions to create a mighty, and sometimes disjointed flow, often spinning off eddies and whirlpools of special interest that moved in incongruous directions.

It was fascinating and sometimes troubling to notice the divergent currents that swirled their way through our national assembly:

- Momentum around the proposed redefinition of marriage came out of committees with support in the crowds by displays of rainbow colors and seemed sure to win on the floor of the assembly. Yet, hidden back-currents of concern about unity in our denomination bubbled up in the midst of the river, causing the effort to fail by a narrow margin.
- Prior to the marriage debate, our confessions took on primary significance in the assembly. Support for a meticulous retranslation of the Heidelberg Catechism and a call for the presbyteries to study the Behlar Confession for hopeful adoption (this is the very creed the presbyteries had recently turned it down) floated victoriously through the plenary assembly. Then came the marriage debate, during which it was pointed out that the confessions unanimously describe marriage as between a man and a woman. Under pressure for clarification on the importance of confessions, the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, the clerk, and eventually the commissioners (by a 70% vote) declared that guidelines in our Book of Order trump theology in our Book of Confessions. Sadly, our denomination seems confused on the source of its authority, for even our new Form of Government tells us that Scripture is our primary source of authority, followed by our Confessions, and then our Polity.
- Intense political and emotional energy fueled several hours of debate about divestment from companies supporting Israel—a debate on which people within major theological camps are divided. Yet, throughout the week the energy and time given to developing ministries of prayer and discipleship, areas on which all sides of the theological spectrum should be able to agree, was nearly imperceptible.

These are just a few of the swirling eddies I noticed as the two great rivers of progressive and traditional theology fomented into a whirling mix over a brief few days. The post-assembly challenge is for us to keep the river in its banks that it might become a unified flow for the life of the church. Aware that this would be our task, the committee on which I served, Church Orders and Ministry, secured General Assembly endorsement in its call for us all to acknowledge “that faithful Presbyterians earnestly seeking to follow Jesus Christ hold different views about what the Scriptures teach concerning the morality of committed, same-gender relationships...the Presbyterian Church (USA) does not have one interpretation of Scripture in this matter.”

Conclusion: We will attempt to keep the riverbanks intact with our polity even if we are not well blended in our theology. One problem: History bears witness that this approach does not work. We are repeating the mistake of the “Fundamentalist/Modernist Controversy” in the last 1920s. We cannot find true unity unless we delve deeper into relationships with each other and into a more faithful study of God's Word. Too long have we debated issues of sexuality rather than come to deep understanding of God's heart and mind on these matters. God calls us, not to debate, but to ministry. We are the church.

The General Assembly is asking us to launch into a two-year study on marriage. Perhaps this will be an opportunity for the various factions within our church to step together into the flow of God's unchanging revelation that the church might truly become one in spirit and purpose for the glory of God.

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Teaching Elder Commissioner Riley Covin**

I thank the Presbytery for the honor of being one of your commissioners to the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PCUSA in Pittsburgh. The only other time I have been a commissioner was to the Charlotte Assembly of the PCUS in 1975. What a contrast! At Charlotte, we were all southerners, mostly male and overwhelmingly white. There were no controversial issues. At Pittsburgh, all 50 states were represented and about half of the commissioners were female. Although the percentage of African Americans has not changed much, the number of Asian Americans has shown a dramatic increase and included our new Moderator, Neal Presa, born in Guam of Filipino parents.

It was my first visit to Pittsburgh. I discovered it was a city that had reinvented itself after environmental restrictions shut down the steel mills in the '70s. They used that as a blessing instead of a curse, and have become one of the most environmentally friendly cities in the US. They developed a cultural arts district in the midst of downtown, so that it is thriving. It has attracted many non-polluting businesses so that they now have more employed than they had before the current recession. We found it a friendly and welcoming community.

The challenge before the General Assembly and the PCUSA is whether or not we can reinvent ourselves, without losing our soul. We have experienced several decades of declining and aging membership. Our inability to agree on doctrinal and social issues has caused many congregations to seek dismissal and some persons to question whether we have a future as a denomination.

This Assembly took some steps to set us on a new course. We overwhelmingly endorsed an initiative to establish 1001 new worshipping communities by 2020, including new church development and thinking "outside the box" in organizing innovative ways of "doing church" such as ministries in shopping malls and coffee shops and with immigrant populations. Other recommendations included using bi-vocational pastors to serve small congregations and calling on church members ages 15-35 to assume greater leadership in growing the church.

A proposal to increase the amount given in our special offerings to \$20 million in ten years was approved. In an answer to our Presbytery's overture and that of others, the Assembly turned down a recommendation to add peacemaking to the One Great Hour of Sharing and another to institute a new offering for World Missions.

A sampler edition of the new hymnal to be published next year was distributed and used in daily worship. It contains a variety of new hymns and restores some "old favorites" such as "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."

A recommendation to divest Church Pension Fund and Foundation portfolios of stock in three companies whose products were considered to support oppression of Palestinians by Israel failed by a vote of 333-331 with two abstentions. A two year period of study and discernment regarding the meaning of Christian marriage was approved after a motion to change the definition of marriage failed.

Such issues were lengthily debated, but by and large the 220<sup>th</sup> Assembly proved that Presbyterians can agree to disagree without being disagreeable. Can we "reinvent" ourselves? That remains to be seen. But a people who claim to be "always reforming" ought to be able to, with Christ's help. I believe we can "do all things through Christ who strengthens us."

Thank you again for choosing me to be a commissioner.

Riley Covin

**Report on the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA)  
June 30-July 7, 2012 ~Pittsburgh, PA  
Teaching Elder Commissioner Margaret Torrence**

It was a privilege to participate in the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, and I am grateful to my colleagues for the opportunity to do so, yet I am left with much to ponder. It was an unsettled and unsettling assembly. We elected a vice-moderator who then resigned. Many votes were split. Numerous and disparate voices raised concern for our denomination.

Still, my predominant responses to the Assembly are a deep sense of gratitude for those who pour out their lives for the sake of Christ's church, and a renewed sense of call to join in that endeavor. Signs of servant leadership were pervasive at the assembly. Our opening worship and meeting were led by outgoing moderator Cindy Bolbach, who was too weak from cancer treatments to stand—yet whose voice rang with challenge and hope. During the course of the week we memorialized three other moderators and hundreds and hundreds of elders who had died since the last Assembly. I was moved by the cacophony of names read aloud in worship, knowing that each of those servants discovered life in Christ and then responded by bringing his or her gifts to Christ's table.

The gifts and longings of the next generation also were much on display in our gatherings. Our Theological Student Advisory Delegates (TSADs) and Young Adult Advisory Delegates (YAADs) challenged commissioners to imagine new ways of being Church—by discerning where God is moving in the world and then lending our energies to those same purposes.

In that same Spirit, the Assembly overwhelmingly voted to support a movement to create 1001 new worshipping communities over the next ten years, acknowledging that these communities may look quite different than the churches at which we gather on Sunday mornings. Our meetings were interspersed with video clips of creative initiatives already coming to life.

I also left the Assembly giving thanks for the servant leadership being offered by denominational staff members. I served on the Board of Pensions, Foundation, Presbyterian Publishing Committee, and the resource persons who appeared before that committee impressed us as extraordinarily competent and deeply committed to the Church of Jesus Christ. Our committee also had the privilege of endorsing a new hymnal, the product of hundreds and hundreds of hours of volunteer labor with the intent of giving "Glory to God".

It was a challenging task for commissioners to come together to act on roughly 800 items of business during the course of eight days. The Assembly's deliberations demonstrate that there is much work to do as we seek to discern the mind of Christ, but God has called each of us—and all of us—to that task. As one preacher challenged the Assembly: "-And when does God call someone and give them an easy job?" An ecumenical delegate to the Assembly, whose homeland once benefited from a cooperative Presbyterian vision, closed his remarks with this blessing: "May the gifts of unity with which you graced us, be yours as well."

**Report on the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA)  
June 30-July 7, 2012 ~Pittsburgh, PA  
Ruling Elder Commissioner Frella Beck**

I was humbled and honored to attend the 220th General Assembly, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from June 30th to July 7th. As an alternate, I was called to replace Jay Crane, on Monday, June 25th. A bountiful "thank you" goes to our Presbytery Office for arranging last minute travel and hotel accommodations and especially for the prior preparation for the Commissioners, Alternates and Advisory Delegates. Preparatory meetings were held on 3 different occasions, starting in March; a huge notebook was compiled, speakers arranged and there were many communications via the Presbytery Office. In talking with Commissioners from other Presbyteries, it was clear that our preparation was unusual. Bobbi White and Bert Sigmon also attended the G.A, encouraged each of us onward/upward and shared 2 meals with those of us from the Western North Carolina Presbytery.

Each issue seemed important and I was glad I attended the "Riverside Conversations", a pre-assembly experience regarding key issues. The General Assembly convened with an opening worship and worship was held each day. I found it to be very meaningful and spirit-filled (for me). Committees meetings began on Sunday night and continued into Wednesday, with the G.A. Plenary continuing Wednesday through Saturday morning. I was assigned to the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee; it was an opportunity to hear from other faiths around the world and was not a controversial Committee.

The "issues" and their resolutions can be accessed at <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/assembly-brief-220th-general-assembly-2012/>. I was relieved that further study and discussion will precede some of the weightier decisions. Some of the votes were very close, indicating a great difference of opinion, and interestingly a motion to reconsider/re-vote did not pass. There were amendments on amendments, perfecting the amendment, perfecting the main motion - dependence on parliamentary procedure, colored cards to wave just to "get a feel for what people were thinking" and voting by Commissioners (using hand-held electronic devices) after being "advised" by the 4 Advisory Groups (Ecumenical - 15 members, Missionary - 8, Theological -24, and Young Adult Delegates - 160 ). There were 688 Commissioners (344 teaching elders and 344 ruling elders), and 100 Corresponding Members (voice but no vote).

Things that surprised me: I was among the oldest there; there is "youth" in our church! 44% of our churches have no pastors; 60% of Presbyterians have college degrees; 7-10 churches are "lost" each month; the total amount given to the 4 major Church offerings, added together, amounted to \$7.00 per member; Pittsburgh is a beautiful city - no longer a dirty industrial city; the YAAD's (Young Adult Advisory Delegates) were very visible, contributing, asking questions and full of energy (despite their gatherings from 10pm to 1 a.m. each night).

Prayerful Concerns: Past Moderator, Cindy Bolbach is fighting cancer, but came and moderated until the new Moderator was elected. He is the Rev. Neal D Presa; his choice for Vice Moderator was elected-the Rev. Tara S. McCabe, but she resigned the next day realizing her election was divisive. Those opposed had used the "social media" and spread the word of their objection. The Rev. Tom Trinidad was then elected as Vice Moderator and Grady Parsons, Stated Clerk, was re-elected to a 2nd term of 4 years. They need our prayers!

My final impression is that I am overwhelmed by the joy, peace, unity (of the goals) and love of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its people. We live in changing times and our Church recognizes this and pursues what it is that God would have us to do. We are dedicated to streamlining what we have, to being good stewards of our resources, to growth (1001 initiative), to mission, to love our earth, our brothers and sisters throughout the world and to love and serve our Lord. *In the words of Isaiah (40:31): "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."*

**Report on the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA)  
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Ruling Elder Commissioner Gayle Deas**

The 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly was a stimulating, beautiful, challenging, frustrating, hope inspiring exercise in Presbyterian polity and service to God. The scriptural theme of the assembly was taken from Isaiah 40:31 “Walking, Running, Soaring into hope”, but as I moved about the different venues of the assembly and heard the many conversations, some heated, I began to feel the Mark 2:1-12 passage about the hope of the paralytic as interpreted by the outgoing moderator, Cindy Bolbach, more suited the tone of the assembly. As Jesus preached to the people in a small home, the crowds pressed about Him so fiercely, that getting close to Him was nearly impossible. Friends of a paralytic man, not wanting to miss the opportunity for healing, climbed on top of the house and tore a hole in the roof in order to lower the man down to Jesus. Jesus, seeing the friend’s faith, forgave the man’s sins, and told him to take up his mat and go home. Ms. Bolbach challenged us to “be disciple who will take risks to commit ourselves to lift someone we don’t know, even someone we don’t like. To soar on wings like eagles, run and not grow faint and help people meet Jesus”. She described the way we strived to be both as commissioners and as Christians.

I served on the Mission Coordination committee whose main task was to monitor the impact Assembly decisions had on the per capita and mission budget. Our committee wrestled with the subjects that ranged from the change of the name of the General Assemblies Mission Council to the Presbyterian Mission Agency, funding of a study on the status of women employed by the church, changes to the way special offerings are promoted, collected and distributed, as well as, a request for special offerings by Native Americans. We debated the validity of Bloomfield College’s request to be added to the list of historically Black Presbyterian Colleges and to receive monies from the Christmas Joy Gift offering. Our committee passed a request to provide additional support for Young Adult Volunteers and to continue to support and uplift women of color by providing education, theological support and providing for a Women of Color consultation in 2013. A request to provide added support for our Hispanic community by multiple means, but especially by translating all website and essential church publications to Spanish was approved.

Regular plenary sessions started on Wednesday July 4<sup>th</sup> and continued daily through Saturday morning July 7<sup>th</sup>. Most sessions started at 8:30 and continued until 9:00 at night. There was much debate as we strived to discern God’s will in our lives. Some of the livelier debates took place around the divestment from the companies Motorola, Hewlett Packard and Caterpillar and, the definition of Christian marriage. Through much prayer both corporate and individual, the body was able to come to a decision in both of these emotionally charged subjects.

The Youth Advisory Delegates added valued insight in committee and in plenary. YADs often interjected a much needed voice into arduous debates and added a lightness to such complexities as the “substitute motion” (Arggh!). Their energy livened us, lifted us and let us know that we were not just making decisions for today, but for the future of our children and youth as well.

I would like to thank the Presbytery of Western North Carolina for the opportunity to serve the church by attending the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly. The experience is not one that I will soon forget. I would also like to thank Bobbi White and Bert Sigmon for the excellent preparation that they provided for the commissioners prior to going to assembly. They made sure we knew what to expect, the more pressing topics, and even provided for training on connecting to PC-Biz. Not many commissioners came to GA as well prepared as the seven of us.

I know God’s Love and Grace has blessed the Presbytery of Western North Carolina and will continue to do so. Our job is to soar on wings of eagles, run and not get weary and strive to be disciples that help people meet Jesus.

Respectfully,  
Gayle Deas

**Report on the 220<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the PC(USA)  
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Ruling Elder Commissioner Barbara Ross**

Just attending the General Assembly was a wonderful experience, and I am very grateful for the opportunity to represent our Presbytery.

I was the Moderator for the Committee on Authoritative Interpretations. Our charge was to review the work of a Special Committee appointed by the 2010 GA. The Special Committee reviewed all of the Authoritative Interpretations issued by the GA or the GA Permanent Judicial Committee since reunion (1983). The special committee recommended that of the over 300 AIs issued approximately 50 be retained. Those recommended to be deleted are not actually lost, they are like e-mails and/or Facebook—they just remain for historical reference.

Some of the other committees dealt with issues which required a much longer time and had many, many people who wanted to speak to them about their issues. Meetings frequently lasted well into the night.

I was impressed with the organization of the entire event. The resources which were made available to committees were fantastic. Each committee was assigned a committee assistant, a parliamentarian, a resource person, an audio/visual technician who made sure that the equipment we were provided worked properly and every moderator had a vice moderator.

There were wonderful worship services, with speakers using the same text, and each one was very different from the previous one/or the next. The text (Mark 2:1-12) was suggested by the outgoing Moderator, Cindy Balboch. All worship services used the sampler of the new hymnal. By using the sampler, we all were given an idea of what the new hymnal would contain.

Each presbytery had a young advisory delegate—referred to as YADs. They were present and engaged in all presentations, committee work and plenary. They voted on each question in order to advise the commissioners what the young people were thinking about the particular issue on the floor. They exhibited thoughtfulness, they were involved, they participated and met following our late evening plenary session—well past midnight. Your YAD is Emma Frellick and she did an outstanding job!

As we moved through the agenda of each plenary session, there was worship, prayer and more prayer time utilized. Frequently, during debate, the Moderator would call for a time of prayer and discernment.

Wonderful music was provided for worship, for our “stretch breaks” and as commissioners were wandering around the get the blood circulating back into our legs, because having to sit for long periods is certainly hard on the body.

The quality of the speakers (those who actually preached as well as presenters) was very good. The meals served were mostly good and the July 4th fireworks were spectacular!

I encourage you (if you haven't already) to go to the PCUSA web site and read the reports provided there. It is a wonderful education.

Again, I thank you for the opportunity your afforded me to attend GA. It was an inspiring, exhilarating, tiring and phenomenal experience.