

223rd General Assembly Commissioner's Report
June 16 – June 23, 2018
Rev. Dr. Hal Bennett

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) meets biennially in even-numbered years. It consists of commissioners and advisors elected by each of its 173 presbyteries. The General Assembly (GA) is full of activities that keeps everyone more than busy: business sessions, committee meetings, an exhibit hall, daily worship services, and mission tours sponsored by the Committee on Local Arrangements. The Assembly acts on hundreds of items of business, which it receives through the reports and recommendations of various assembly entities, and through overtures from mid-level councils; Synods and Presbyteries. The Assembly elects a moderator or co-moderators at the beginning of its assembly each time it meets.

The 223rd General Assembly was held in St. Louis, MO from June 16 – 24, 2018. The theme for the 223rd General Assembly was ‘Renewing the Vision: Kin-dom Building for the Twenty-first Century’ (“But strive first for the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”) Matthew 6:33. The Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy was the host for the Assembly.

There were five candidates vying for the position of moderator(s) of the 223rd Assembly. This year there were two co-moderator teams and one moderator candidate running for the office at the 223rd General Assembly. A team of co-moderators, Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintron-Oliviert and the Reverend Cindy Kohlmann, were elected on the fourth ballot as Co-Moderators of the 223rd General Assembly.

There were three major reports on the denominational roles, structure and future to be considered by the Assembly (Committee #4) grounded in “the Way Forward Commission, the All-Agency Review Committee and the 2020 Vision Team shaped much of the debate and discernment regarding the assembly business.

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION:

The 2020 Vision Team outlined a vision for the entire denomination, calling on the PC (USA) to be prayerful, courageous, united, serving and alive. During listening sessions, the team reported that it heard “growing excitement about new ways of doing and being the church,” and the “frustration with systemic and structural barriers to adaptive change that would enable the church to meet the challenges ahead.” The Vision Team also mentioned, the “anxiety about finances at the congregational, mid-council and General Assembly level.”

The Way Forward Commission and the All-Agency Review Committee recommended restructuring the denomination’s ‘A Corporation’, the corporate structure of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The committee seeks to strengthen the role of the stated clerk, Rev. Dr. J Hebert Nelson, II, who speaks to and for the church in matters of faith and practice, except as the General Assembly directs.

A contentious point during the conference was the discussion pertaining to the restructuring of ‘A Corporation’ (A Corp). The Presbyterian Mission Agency Board asked that the General Assembly to divide A Corp into two corporate agencies: the General Assembly Corporation and the General Assembly Mission Corporation. The request for a “deliverance,” the permission to divide, was the Presbyterian Mission Agency’s response to the recommendations of the Way Forward Commission and the All-Agency Review Committee. However, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church cited a decision that allowed for an extension on A Corp’s structure, which allowed for a more collaborative decision by the Way Forward Commission (WFC) and All Agency Review Committee (AARC) to report.

As a commissioner at the 223rd assembly, I was assigned to Committee #9, Peacemaking, Immigration and International issues. There were two issues that occupied the majority of the committee’s session time together, as the committee listen to scores of testimonies (pro/con) on two

issues (an overture on ‘Prayer & Peace on Kore’ and a resolution ‘to stop the separation of families at the U.S. boarder’ from Central America). Of particular interest, the 223rd GA approved several social justice initiatives and Committee #14 urged the Assembly to approve the overture to add Dr. King’s ‘Letter from the Birmingham Jail’ to the Book of Confessions, as a Contemporary Statement of Faith (but not with Constitutional Standing).

In conclusion, I felt the Holy Spirit move at one of our worship services when the assembly was asked to pray, in each native language the Lord’s Prayer. It was like the birth of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13). I heard individuals around praying in French, German, Arabic, Spanish, Hebrew, and English. It was for me a Kairos’ moment.

Respectfully Submitted,
Commissioner
Rev. Dr. Hal Bennett, II

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Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

The Spirit at Work: Reflecting on General Assembly

They call us the "frozen chosen" and we pride ourselves on doing things "decently and in order," but at the 223rd General Assembly, I experienced my fellow Presbyterians melting and swaying, marching and shifting, defying every stereotype and welcoming in a new and exciting chapter for our denomination. Indeed, this assembly was a testament to the countless ways in which the Spirit is at work within the Presbyterian Church(USA): urging us to stretch and grow side-by-side, opening our hearts to connect across lines of difference, and calling us to courageously respond to the needs of our ever-changing world.

As a commissioner, I had the privilege to serve on the Mission Coordination Committee. This committee is primarily responsible for discussing overtures that affect the work of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. We discussed overtures that called for the church to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and to acknowledge that the land in which we stand was once forcibly stolen from Native Americans. There was an overture that spoke about the critical need for increased mental health resources for churches. Overture 10-03 asked the church to listen to the stories of LGBTQIA+ persons and the ways in which they have been historically hurt by certain PC(USA) policies and practices. Overtures like these were calls for self-reflection, repentance, the breaking down of white supremacy, and a vow to reach out like never before. In short, they dared the church to truly live into its calling to "be the church" in this especially critical time.

My experience in plenary was filled with passionate debate and prayerful struggle. There were many difficult moments and long nights, as well as hopeful signs that the PC(USA) is open to stretching and growing. One highlight was the opportunity for me to teach several thousand Presbyterian attendees to Salsa dance. To my mind and heart, this form of dance is all about letting go of fear and allowing the Spirit to surprise our bodies and connect us across differences. Dancing together felt like a metaphor for this assembly. No matter the challenge before us, when we awaken ourselves to the Spirit and trust Christ as our touchstone, we are able to take bold leaps of faith together.

223rd General Assembly Commissioner's Report
June 16 – June 23, 2018
Mimi Michael

Reflections on General Assembly June 16-23, 2018 in St. Louis, MO

Thank you very much to this presbytery for the privilege of serving as a commissioner to the 2018 General Assembly, to Bobbi White and Cam Murchison for the excellent training and support, and to my fellow commissioners from PWNC; it was a pleasure to serve with you. I share here some of my first, second, and lasting impressions of General Assembly:

- * It was tremendously inspiring to be surrounded by hundreds of dedicated and passionate Presbyterians who work tirelessly to serve Jesus Christ in their churches, communities and world. It enlarged my vision as to the impact the church makes and left me encouraged.
- * The daily worship was meaningful and inspiring, and guided and centered our work.
- * The emphasis on and experience of inclusion throughout the week was beautiful, and was well expressed in the hymn commissioned for this assembly, "Draw the Welcome Circle Wider."
- * The Presbyterian Church (USA) has very talented, capable and diverse leaders who serve our denomination. The intentional efforts to ensure that diverse backgrounds and experiences are represented in all levels of church work is right and results in a stronger church that reflects God's vast kingdom.
- * We visited local churches for Sunday worship and were encouraged to hear the "Gospel from St. Louis." Churches across the presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy provided excellent examples in the way they responded to the crisis in Ferguson with community engagement and love in action.
- * The movement for churches to go outside their church buildings, engage their communities and world, share the gospel, and seek justice led to our participation in a peaceful march through the streets of St. Louis to the justice center to highlight the inequities of cash bail for minor misdemeanors and to present a \$47,000 offering to be used for bail. This group was no "frozen chosen," and I was very proud of our denomination.
- * Young Adult Advisory Delegates (17-23 year olds, 1 appointed from each presbytery) who are not just the church of the future but who are leading our church now with their energy, imagination, intelligence, and love were articulate and provided significant contributions to the discussion that helped shape decisions made.
- * Daily highlights were the church and interfaith leaders from the US and around the world who attended as ecumenical guests, brought greetings and important perspectives, and prayed at the beginning of each worship service. Despite the differences we are united in faith, and we all benefit when we are in relationship.
- * The numerous overtures handled by thirteen committees and then voted on by the whole will give guidance to our national church, mid-councils and congregations for future focus and work. The assembly spoke to national and international concerns including the separation of families on the border; mental illness; gun violence; systemic racism; and situations in the Middle East, Korea, South Sudan, Puerto Rico, and Nicaragua. Included were measures to restructure the denomination and increase per capita giving. Though an overture to divest from fossil fuel companies failed, the urgency to act on all levels to respond to climate change was clear.

It was an experience that I will not forget and that will shape my future. May we all as Presbyterians be filled with hope and courage to more faithfully follow and serve Christ in our churches, communities, and world.

Mimi Michael, Ruling Elder from First Presbyterian, Newton

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Roger W. Rizk

A Journey of the Soul

My General Assembly experience was a wonderful kaleidoscope of emotions, spirituality and deep searching of my mind and heart. It was an assembly attended by Presbyterians and ecumenical leaders from all over the world.

The eight day meeting was filled with uplifting, inspiring and joyful religious services in which hundreds of people received communion by intinction.

There was a sermon by a Syrian minister now residing in Beirut who has devoted her life to building bridges rather than fences among Christians and Muslims. She inspired us with her messages of reconciliation.

There was a sermon by a Black minister from New York City who spoke to reaching out to the poor. She spoke to our conscience as Christians.

There was a sermon by a Sudanese minister who spoke to the importance of our American congregations creating partnerships with third world congregations. She gave thanks to her partner congregation from Des Moines, Iowa who were there with her in solidarity.

I attended a worship service in Saint Louis at an old biracial church which was situated at the intersection of a very affluent neighborhood and an economically struggling neighborhood. The young minister eloquently reminded us of the importance of developing and maintaining conversations between the affluent and disadvantaged in our cities and country. He left us with a strong message of Hope.

The General Assembly was a time in which Presbyterians from small and larger congregations came together to address important issues of our church and times.

There was a recommitment to existing church order to elect ruling elders to continue the important function of governance through our sessions as opposed to electing certain elders to only perform outreach positions within the church councils.

There was recognition that peace in the Middle East must come from within the region through the creation of a commission of regional leaders from the Middle East to speak to and work toward peace and reconciliation.

There was a commitment to continue important dialogue with corporations not responsive to peace and environment issues as opposed to total divestment from such corporations and losing the opportunity to create positive change.

There was a clear recognition of the need of the church to create paid family leave benefits for its clergy and lay employees to reach out to the important family and economic needs of our clergy and church employees.

There was a clear recognition of the need of our churches to speak with one unifying voice and to adopt the overture of our presbytery to avoid the endorsement or opposition to political candidates while retaining the all important right of our ministers to speak to important social issues of our times.

It was a wonderful time of unity in the midst of allowing all to speak and follow their consciences. It was a joyful time for our wonderful connectional church!

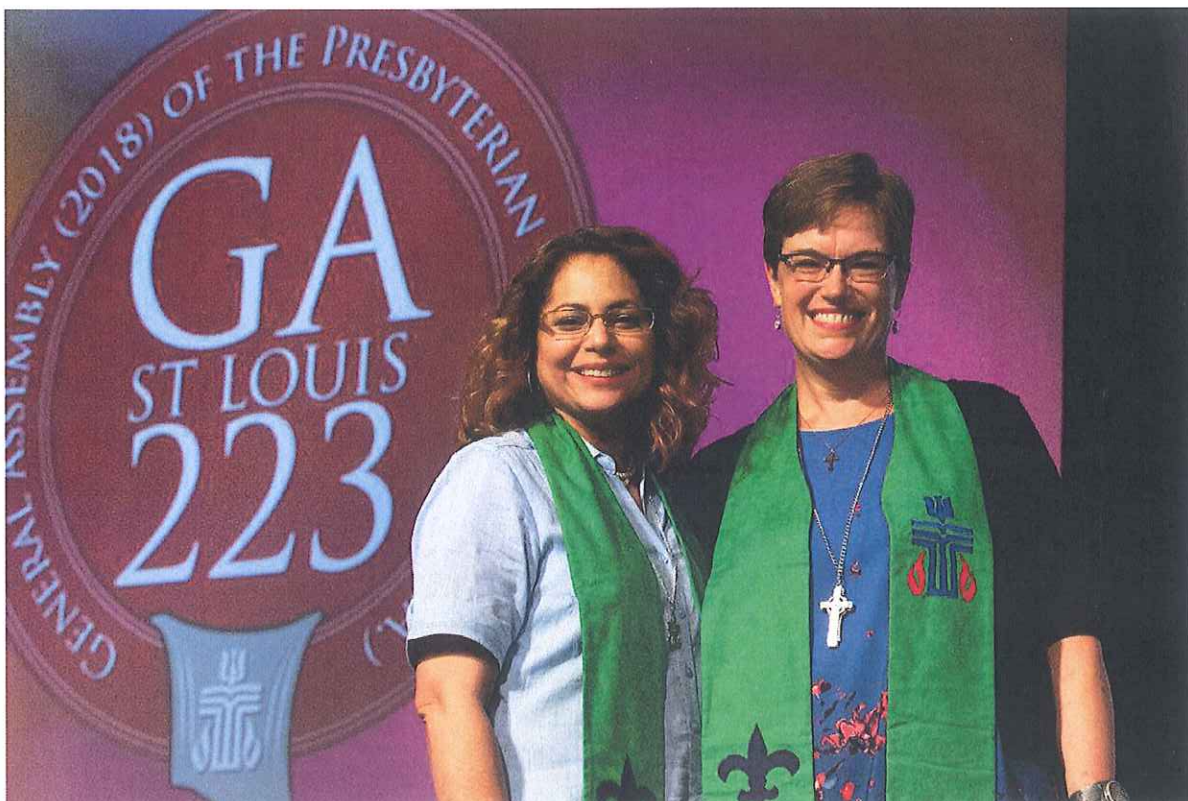
OFFICE OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY COMMUNICATIONS

Highlights of actions of the 223rd General Assembly (2018) in 1,500 words or less

*Loosely based on the pre-assembly, top ten
General Assembly issues story*

Jerry Van Marter | Office of the General Assembly Communications - June 29, 2018

LOUISVILLE



Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri (left) and Cindy Kohlmann (right) Co-Moderators of the 223rd General Assembly - Photo by Michael Whitman.

Church Leadership: In one of closest elections in years, Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri (Presbytery of Tropical Florida) and the Reverend Cindy Kohlmann (Presbyteries of Boston and Northern New England) were elected Co-Moderators of the 223rd General Assembly (2018) on Saturday evening, June 16. On a fourth ballot vote of 266-253, they prevailed over another Co-Moderator team—the Reverend Eliana Maxim (Presbytery of Seattle) and the Reverend Bertram Johnson (Presbytery of New York City). A Moderator/Vice-Moderator pair—Ruling Elder Chantal D. Atnip (Presbytery of Carlisle), and the Reverend Ken Hockenberry (Presbytery of Chicago)—trailed.

In other actions involving Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) leadership, the assembly:

- Confirmed the election of the Reverend Diane Moffett as president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency.
- Confirmed the reelection of the Reverend Tom Taylor as president of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation.
- Confirmed the election of Alton B. Pollard III as president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Fossil Fuel Divestment: By a vote of 332-178, the assembly voted in favor of a minority report that called for the PC(USA) to continue its corporate engagement with fossil fuel companies—through its Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee—rather than divest from those companies. The Assembly Committee on Environmental Issues had voted 35-20 for the divestment proposal offered by the Presbytery of Hudson River. After the minority report became the main motion, it was approved by the assembly 409-106.

Israel-Palestine/Middle East: After spirited debate in the Assembly Committee on Middle East Issues that spilled out into the hallways of America's Center (St. Louis' convention center), the assembly raced through the committee's report in just thirty-five minutes on June 22. Among its actions, the assembly:

- Asked RE/MAX, LLC, to end its sale and rental of property on occupied, disputed land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The vote was 393-55.
- Voiced support for all efforts to bring Palestinians and Israelis together peacefully.
- Asked the state of Israel to fully comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in order to stop discriminatory practices and called on the U.S. government to rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council.
- Condemned the recent violence along the border between Israel and Gaza.

Per Capita: The assembly approved a 2019 General Assembly per capita apportionment of \$8.95 per member—an increase of \$1.25 (or 15.8 percent) per member over 2018. The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly had

originally proposed a 39 percent increase in 2019 to \$10.71 per member. At the assembly, General Assembly Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II, revised that request down to a 10 percent increase in 2019 (to \$8.50) and 2020. The Assembly Committee on General Assembly Procedures approve the 2019 request, but not the 2020 increase. The assembly added \$643,000 (or 45 cents per member) to the per capita budget by the actions it took, raising the final per capita apportionment to \$8.95. In other per capita-related actions, the assembly:

- Approved, in a slightly amended form, an overture from the Presbytery of Newton to establish a team of twelve to fifteen persons to “review the current per capita-based system of funding the ministry of councils higher than the session, for financial sustainability into the next ten years.”
- Asked the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly and the Office of the General Assembly to explore ways of reducing the cost of future General Assemblies.

The Way Forward: By a vote of 474-47, the assembly overwhelmingly approved the report of The Way Forward Commission, which was created by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) “to discern the vision for structure and function of our denomination.” The Way Forward Commission was joined by the All-Agency Review Committee in many of its recommendations. The assembly also created a Moving Forward Implementation Team to ensure follow-through of the actions taken and to make “mid-course corrections” between now and the 224th General Assembly (2020). Among its actions on The Way Forward, the assembly:

- Restructured PC(USA) A Corp to be representative of five of the six agencies of the PC(USA)—previously the A Corp board was identical to the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board. The new A Corp board is composed of eleven members, representing each agency, with the exception of the Board of Pensions, plus at-large members.
- Strengthened the role of the General Assembly Stated Clerk, reaffirming that person as the “continuing ecclesial officer and Head of Communion,” naming the Stated Clerk as “constitutional and spiritual leader” for the life and witness of the church, giving the Stated Clerk ex officio membership on all agencies of the church, and giving the Stated Clerk consultative authority prior to the consideration for election of any candidate for chief executive of any of the PC(USA)’s six agencies.
- Authorized a “financial sustainability review.”
- Beefed up the denomination’s translation services and efforts toward greater inclusion, equity, and reconciliation between all constituencies of the church.

- Endorsed an “administrative action issued by the commission on June 12 calling for greater transparency, particularly in the Presbyterian Mission Agency, and freedom for national staff employees to speak their minds in addressing the prevailing culture without retribution or retaliation.

Racism/Poverty/Violence: The assembly engaged in various acts of public witness that sought to engage issues of racism, poverty, and violence in St. Louis under the umbrella of Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II’s, Hands and Feet initiative. In addition to a number of groups who came to St. Louis to engage in Hands and Feet service/learning projects during the assembly, several “mission trips” for assembly-goers engaged with various faith-based community groups to address poverty and racism in the city. The offering from the opening worship service raised more than \$54,000, which after a dramatic march by nearly 1,000 assembly-goers from America’s Center to the City Justice Center on Tuesday afternoon, was given to ArchDefenders, a faith-based group that bails low-level offenders out of jail. Nearly three dozen people, victims of St. Louis’ draconian cash bail system, were released from custody with the money. In its actions, the assembly:

- Approved “The Gospel from St. Louis,” prepared by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy.
- Initiated the arduous process of possibly including Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in the *Book of Confessions*.
- Strongly condemned “the unjust, racist disparagement of people and entire nations” and committed the PC(USA) to “a collective effort to solve the real problems facing our nation and the world.”
- Changed the church’s nomenclature from “racial ethnic people” to “people of color” and the name of the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns to the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee.
- Called for an immediate moratorium on the imposition of the death penalty and for the commutation of all death sentences to sentences of life imprisonment.
- Authorized a five-member task group with a black women majority to raise awareness of issues adversely affecting black girls and women in society and the church, and to develop action plans to address those issues.
- Affirmed and celebrated the “full dignity and humanity” and gifts of people of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

Immigration: Following on statements issued by General Assembly Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II, the assembly called upon the federal government to end family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border, to immediately reunite parents with their children, to inform every parent where their children are being held and their condition, to stop using separation of children from their parents as a tactic to force criminal

confessions; and called upon Presbyterians to support immigrant families, particularly parents and their separated children in any ways they can. The assembly also addressed war, violence, and human rights in Central America (particularly Nicaragua), South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Madagascar, and the Korean Peninsula.

Gun Violence: The assembly reaffirmed previous General Assembly policies designed to reduce gun violence, called all Presbyterians to pray for a movement of the Spirit to engage Presbyterians in nationwide actions to prevent gun violence, and urged them to create opportunities to study the issue of gun violence, with an emphasis on resources produced by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

Paid Family Leave: After long debate in both committee and plenary, the assembly referred to a task force to report back to the 224th General Assembly (2020) proposed actions to develop denomination-wide standards and financial support mechanisms for paid family leave for church workers.

Congregational Leadership: The assembly rejected, by margin of 425-57, an overture from the Presbytery of Monmouth that would have allowed congregations to elect and ordain ruling elders without requiring them to serve on session. The proposal was designed to provide more lay leadership in a church that is changing—leadership, for instance, for new worshipping communities, immigrant fellowships, and other nontraditional faith communities.

For the official record of the 223rd General Assembly (2018), visit: <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/> (<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/>).

For General Assembly News reports, visit: <https://ga-pcusa.org/general-assembly-news/> (<https://ga-pcusa.org/general-assembly-news/>).

[한국어] (</news/2018/7/3/highlights-actions-223rd-general-assembly-kor/>)

[Español] (</news/2018/7/3/resumen-de-las-acciones-de-la-223a-asamblea-general/>)

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