

Stated Clerk's General Assembly Report

July 13, 2010

The 219th General Assembly was my first General Assembly. It would be most accurate to say that this was an enlightening and, at the same time, mildly frustrating learning opportunity for me. Enlightening in that it covered the whole gamut of issues and challenges facing the church today; frustrating in that the stated clerks have neither voice nor vote at these meetings. Still, I enjoyed observing the process while silently imagining being in the position to form conclusions and make recommendations.

I was proud to serve in a small way by working at Maggie Lauterer's moderator candidate booth for several hours on Saturday. Many people from around the country accepted our invitation to introduce Maggie and to hear for themselves what she had to offer as the prospective Moderator. It was encouraging to see folks go very purposefully from one booth to the next, taking the time to find out more about each of the six candidates. While the process did not lead to the conclusion we had hoped for, it was a respectful and collegial campaign that ultimately led to the election of a fine moderator and vice moderator who navigated the complexities of the plenary meetings with considerable grace, humor and efficiency.

I spent significant time each day through Wednesday morning observing committee meetings, including the Middle Governing Bodies Issues, New Form of Government, Church Polity, and Civil Union and Marriage Issues committees. Then, beginning after lunch on Wednesday, I attended the bulk of the plenary sessions through Friday night.

On Monday morning Bobbi White and I attended a breakfast presentation sponsored by the Presbyterian Lay Committee, entitled "A Matter of Trust: Church Property and the Case of the 'Trust Clause'". We had detailed conversations with the keynote speaker, attorney Lloyd Lunceford, author of "The Guide to Church Property Law." I'm not sure that we learned much that we didn't already know, but it was an interesting insight into a thorny subject, and we were received graciously.

Of the major issues before the commissioners, the one I had been most informed about prior to the assembly was the Form of Government Task Force Report ("new Form of Government" aka "nFOG"). To say the least, a proposal to rewrite the portion of the Book of Order that contains most of the "rules" that govern how we do things as a denomination was certainly daunting. Many people questioned the wisdom of such a sweeping matter. I compare it to proposals in the past to simplify the federal tax code – a very desirable goal that seems impossible to attain. Nevertheless, a substantial majority (more than 2/3) voted to accept and implement the task force's recommendations. From my own study and my observation of the committee discussions, I share the perception that this is a salutary proposal for change that in the years to come will speak to us more about what we can do in the furtherance of our ministries, and less about mandatory ways of accomplishing the goals of our ministries. Assuming that the proposal is ultimately adopted by the presbyteries, adjustments and accommodations will be necessary and it will take time to iron out the kinks, but in the long run I believe it will help us more than hurt us and I would urge the presbytery to support it.

There were, of course, some painfully difficult issues that were dealt with in committees and on the assembly floor. Unfortunately many of these have been reduced to inaccurate sound bites by the media that serve only to misinform and enflame members of the denomination. There are very helpful materials available from the General Assembly office that can assist in clarifying the information. At the same time, there are multiple sources of analysis and opinion (including, I suppose, the General Assembly office itself) that will impart a subtle or not so subtle slant on the information. I highly recommend reading from multiple sources for the sake of discerning a balance.

I was surprised to see that despite the vast differences of opinion between individuals attending the assembly, everyone conducted themselves graciously and with obvious respect and forbearance. Ok, there was one moment of protest in the plenary hall when a band of disgruntled people marched through the hall with TV camera teams in tow. The commissioners and observers simply stood or sat silently while the procession made its way through the room, and then they returned to the business at hand. No fireworks, no shouting, no harm done. The protesters defeated their purpose.

The thing I most enjoyed about the assembly was the wonderful string of worship opportunities offered throughout the week. The variety of music, the blend of traditional and modern elements in the services, the integrity of the manner in which the word was shared, all led me to moments of deep reflection and closeness to the throng of believers who surrounded me. This was a very rich and encouraging experience and I am deeply grateful to have been given the opportunity to attend. I look forward to future assemblies.

Bert Sigmon