

Commissioner's Report – Rev. Carolyn Poteet

I want to offer my sincere gratitude to the members of the presbytery of Western North Carolina for allowing me the opportunity to serve as your commissioner to the 219th General Assembly of the PC(USA). I feel like I have now said “Carolyn-Poteet-Minister-Commissioner-from-Western-North-Carolina” so many times, it has become my new full name! It was an incredible experience to see God’s Church at work, in all of its diversity, complexity, passion, and dedication. And I can honestly say, I now know more about Robert’s Rules of Order than any of you would ever like to hear.

Two challenges you gave me during my commissioning stayed with me all during my time in Minneapolis – to go with an open mind and to vote my conscience as the Holy Spirit led. I went to Minneapolis thinking I had my mind made up about a lot of issues. On some of them, I saw consensus rise out of division and was able to change my vote. On others, I saw scriptural standards remain firm, and my conscience had to stay aligned with scripture.

I served on the Mission Coordination Committee, which oversees the General Assembly Mission Council and the GA Mission Budget. When we arrived, we had before us requests for well over \$2.5 million of new funds from the Mission Budget – a budget that is now *half* of what it had been ten years ago. Our whole committee was painfully aware that we were going to have to make very tough decisions about who got funded and who didn’t. Through three days of committee meetings, I watched opposite sides argue their passions. And then something special happened. Because they actually had to listen to each other – often for the first time ever – they began to talk to each other, and time and again, they came up with a consensus solution that undoubtedly cost far less than the original proposal. Several cost nothing at all. By the end of the week, our committee’s approved items had dropped from \$2.5 million to about \$350,000 over the next two years. This does include reinstating the Office of Collegiate Ministries and the headquarters support for Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association.

While we were finding consensus in our committee, the same thing was happening in many other committees. As our other commissioners can tell you, both the new Form of Government and Ecumenical committees dealt with most of their disputed issues. The most incredible evidence of consensus, though, goes to the Middle East Peace committee. By the end of the committee meetings, this group voted *unanimously* to approve the amended report. Even Former Vice President Walter Mondale blessed the report! During the Assembly, it passed 558/119.

The issues of ordination, marriage, and pensions were difficult for the WNC delegation, because we were divided. On Tuesday night, our delegation went to dinner together, and several of us were able to share the tears we brought with us from our congregations. My congregation weeps over these issues because we have already lost members over them, and because our church has split three times in the last few decades. We are doing all we can to be faithful and loyal to the PCUSA, but we find it harder and harder when we see the distance growing between our confessional standards and our actual practices. As I shared these tears, another commissioner shared with me the tears from his church, where his congregants came to him weeping over not feeling welcome and accepted in this denomination. I had the sense that in these tears, we are far closer to answers than we are in the midst of debates.

The Assembly did vote to remove the fidelity and chastity language from our Book of Order, again. And once again, this will go back to our presbyteries for a vote – brace yourselves. One striking thing about this vote was that it was actually much closer than last time. Only 50 votes separated the two sides.

I testified about how my vow as a single pastor to live in chastity had been an unexpected blessing in the life of my congregation, especially for women living in abusive situations, for widows, and for teenagers struggling with temptations.

The Civil Unions & Marriage committee had a fascinating outcome. The Special Committee on this issue had prayed for consensus for two years, but in the end, they had a majority report and a minority report. The majority report said there were many different opinions that needed to be considered, and the minority report said there were many different opinions, but the scriptural and confessional standards needed to be held in the highest authority. As the Assembly debated the two reports, they essentially got merged together, so now all churches will receive *both reports*. The consensus that the committee itself could not achieve, we discovered in the Assembly.

Following that vote by the Assembly, we prepared to vote on all the other overtures about changing the Book of Order standards about the definition of marriage, plus two authoritative interpretations about whether or not pastors could marry people with civil marriage licenses. But then a commissioner made a motion to answer all remaining business with the report itself. The report had called for two years of study on this issue, and he urged the assembly to spend those years studying, rather than taking action now which would eliminate time to study. Much discussion followed that motion, but it did pass – by a total of 24 votes. The vote came up for reconsideration the next morning, but assembly voted 60%-40% to let the decision stand and study the report for two years.

The final big issue of the Assembly concerned extending benefits to same-sex domestic partners through the Board of Pensions. The call for justice was the argument that won the day, but my conscience was more in line with the commissioner who pointed out that it is important to live out the standards we have agreed to in our constitution, even through our benefits package. Unfortunately, though, this is no longer the case. To offer these benefits will increase the BOP budget by 1%, or \$7million per year. This will be particularly hard on small churches who are already having a hard time paying a full-time pastor's salary. In my testimony to the assembly, I encouraged them to find a middle way. Churches wishing to provide insurance for non-ordained staff with domestic partners do already have alternative means, but small churches who already struggle to afford full-time pastors do not have alternative means. The possibility of a "relief of conscience" option was mentioned, but in private, a BOP official said that it was impossible to absolutely guarantee that funds would not be co-mingled. I did sign a formal protest about this decision, continuing to urge the BOP to find a middle way.

Another thing I learned during my time at GA was that we Presbyterians are very good at speaking for the voiceless, but we are not as good at listening to them. Several Hispanic, African-American, and Korean commissioners shared deep convictions from their own communities and said they were disappointed that these concerns were not being heard by the larger body. Two ecumenical delegates also spoke prophetically to us. The first, a representative of the African delegation, stood and prayed after we had voted in favor of changing G-6.0106b. Three times, he repeated the phrase, "Lord, forgive us for the ways we have offended you."

The most powerful ecumenical speaker was the Archpriest Siarhei Hardun, from the Orthodox Church of Belarus. He rose in black robes and a long beard, and we all laughed with delight when he said, "I bring greetings to the Reformed church, from the unreformed church." He offered a brief critique about our changing the Nicene creed 1000 years ago, but suddenly he began commenting on our debate on ordination:

I was really struck while listening to your discussion about homosexuality, same-sex marriage, civil unions and other moral issues. Christian morality is as old as Christianity itself. It doesn't need to be invented now. Those attempts to invent new morality look for me like attempts to invent a new religion – a sort of modern paganism. When people say that they are led and guided by the Holy Spirit to do it, I wonder if it is the same Spirit that inspired the Bible... My advice as an Ecumenical Advisory Delegate is the following: 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'" (Romans 12:2).

He spoke as a prophet to all of us. It is easy to confuse our own conscience, our own passions, with the heart of God and with the Spirit of God. May we all learn to discern better between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God.

After all of you had commissioned us that day in February, I gave you a final challenge – "Pray for us!" I am forever grateful to all of you for your prayers, your support and the way we are bound together under one Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.