

Report to the Presbytery of Western North Carolina  
From Rev. Dr. James F. Bernhardt  
Commissioner to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly

The experience of a meeting of the General Assembly is both exhilarating and exhausting. When all the ministries of the denomination, and the many varied interest groups gather, energy is created. This energy finds its expression in several outlets: worship, business meetings, common interest gatherings, conversation, and fellowship. Commissioners to the assembly may become exhausted from paying such close attention to many details for a week. Still, there is a benefit that comes with the blessing of serving the church in this way. I am grateful to have been a commissioner from the Presbytery of Western North Carolina.

It was my responsibility to serve on Committee 10, Social Justice A: “The promotion of social righteousness”. Our committee responded to overtures dealing with: “protesting the blatant disregard for the use of our Lord’s name in broadcast and film”; caps on consumer interest rates and usury; against violence and discrimination against women; in support of equity and quality in public education; an effort to seek equity of pay among church workers in the General Assembly and across the church; and a renewal of emphasis on inclusive and expansive language in worship and the life of the church. Led ably by Teresa Cho, a minister from San Francisco (and Maggie’s vice moderator running mate), our committee listened and learned from many people who spoke to the issues; we amended items before us, and brought our report to the floor where everything we submitted was passed.

It was also my responsibility along with the other commissioners to attend all the meetings of the assembly plenary, to read and digest reports and actions coming to the floor, and to cast a vote on each item. I did my best to be guided by God’s Word and Spirit. I am particularly grateful for the Moderator of the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, elder Cindy Bolbach, who, despite my support of our own Maggie Lauterer, won the election on the fourth ballot and went on to lead the meetings very well. Most of the committees presenting, and the many people who provide information and support, did an excellent job. For the most part commissioners who spoke, asking questions and proposing amendments and motions, did a wonderful job.

The General Assembly is sending back to the presbyteries some work to do. Next year we will consider a new Form of Government, new wording for G-6.0106b, and the inclusion of the Belhar Confession in our Book of Confessions. We will possibly see changes to some presbyteries and synods through consultation and action by a General Assembly Commission on Middle Governing Bodies. We will study Marriage and Civil Unions, a concern for all Presbyterians, but more urgent for ministers and churches in the 5 states and the District of Columbia where same-sex marriage is lawful. Finally, we will watch how a new study group carefully guides the church’s response to the ongoing strife in Israel and Palestine.

A couple of pleasures for me came in gatherings to celebrate the new name of my seminary, Union Presbyterian Seminary. I heard the very hopeful vision of the school and met with some great leaders from Union in Richmond and Charlotte. Union will soon celebrate its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Another facet of the assembly was reunion with ministers and elders from across our denomination whom I have known for years but have not seen in a long time. It was also great to meet new friends with whom I served in this assembly. A real unexpected benefit in this assembly was the positive and thoughtful contribution of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates and Theological Student Advisory Delegates. I am inspired by their statements and their deep personal faith in Christ and their commitment to the church.

The theme for the week was from John 7:38, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Certainly, when so many believers gather in worship and service this is a profound truth in Scripture that is expressed in many ways. As the actions of this assembly begin to take shape in the church, I pray that God may grant the same spirit of honesty, mutual forbearance, compassion, patience and joy that was present among us in Minneapolis to guide us with Christ’s help to know the truth and to act with wisdom. Thanks be to God for all the commissioners to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, and especially for Annie Franklin our Young Adult Advisory Delegate, Maggie Lauterer, Carolyn Poteet, Heath Rada, Jackie Scott and Paula Wallace, our other commissioners. It was a joy and a privilege to serve with them.