

## REPORT ON THE 219<sup>TH</sup> GENERAL ASSEMBLY

### PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

Minneapolis, MN, July 3-10, 2010

For the 85<sup>th</sup> Stated Meeting of Presbytery of Western North Carolina, July 27, 2010

By Elder Commissioner Paula H. Wallace

The privilege to serve as a commissioner to the 219<sup>th</sup> General Assembly has been one of the most exciting and humbling experiences of my life and I would like to thank the Presbytery of Western North Carolina for this awesome opportunity and responsibility. Sharing some of my experiences while serving at General Assembly on your behalf will be a pleasure.

As I made preparations to attend General Assembly I received from my own church, across my cluster D, around our presbytery, and from over the country many cards, letters, and words of prayers and support. This reminded me that commissioners all over our General Assembly were being lifted up in prayers by Presbyterian churches everywhere—what a wonderful feeling to be a part of this church. The theme for our assembly was John 7:38 - *Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.* As the week progressed we truly felt and lived this theme in our hearts.

Since I was on the committee for the Form of Government Revision and it had such a huge agenda, we began our work with an eight-hour session on Friday, July 2, prior to the assembly convening on Saturday. It was at this first meeting that we prayed from The Book of Common Worship: *"Be with us, members of the General Assembly. Help us to welcome new things you are doing in the world, and to respect old things you keep and use. Save us from empty slogans or senseless controversy. In our deciding, determine what is good for us and for all people. As this General Assembly meets, let your Spirit rule, so that our church may be joined in love and service to Jesus Christ..."* With this prayer our committee began over three days of prayerfully studying issues, considering overtures, intently listening to concerns, referencing the Task Force and the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, amending words and/or sections of the proposed new Form of Government for our church. Finally on Tuesday afternoon, with a vote of 37-5, our committee sent the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Revised Form of Government to the full Assembly. What a feeling of accomplishment! I, along with many of my fellow committee members, had come to this work open to the will of the Holy Spirit, with minds not made up, willing to listen and discern.

Saturday morning dawned early with Riverside Conversations where commissioners had an opportunity to choose two 90-minute topics from the General Assembly smorgasbord in order to become better acquainted with the issues. I chose The Middle East Study Commission and the Civil Union and Christian Marriage Task Force Report. I learned from both presentations.

Saturday was exciting to officially open General Assembly and go through the process of electing a new moderator. Our own Maggie Lauterer from Burnsville First did an excellent job in her stand for moderator and we had fun meeting fellow commissioners while campaigning for Maggie. Cindy Bolbach, an elder and attorney, from National Capital Presbytery was elected from the six candidates on the fourth ballot late Saturday night.

The inspiring Sunday worship with thousands of people attending was a joy to behold! Music, dance, art, the first ever GA baptism and inspiring words of former moderator, the Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, preaching from Isaiah 64 gave added emphasis to the words we sang, *"All creatures of our God and King...lift up your voice and with us sing... 'Alleluia! Alleluia!'"*

Wednesday was the very inspiring Ecumenical Service of Worship and Communion led by the Rev. Peg Chamberlin, Pres. of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA. The songs of the Minnesota Boy Choir were very moving and spirit filled. The service was held in the beautiful Westminster Presbyterian Church. Wednesday was also the beginning of the plenary sessions of the General Assembly and the Belhar Confession passed its next step on the journey to becoming a part of the eleven creeds and confessions in our Book of Confessions, which has not had an addition in nearly thirty years. It now must receive a two-thirds vote of our presbyteries to be included. The work of correcting the translation problems of the Heidelberg Catechism was voted to continue and be completed

by the 220<sup>th</sup> (2012) General Assembly. Linda Valentine was also unanimously accepted for a second four-year term to serve as executive director of the General Assembly Mission Council.

After dinner the event my committee had been waiting for was scheduled. When discussion ended, the General Assembly voted 468 to 204 to send the proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and revised Form of Government to our 173 presbyteries, which will require a majority vote to replace our Book of Order. Moderator Bolbach called this a “monumental day for the church...to not just survive, but thrive.”

Thursday proved to be another soul searching day for the General Assembly. A 566-104 vote was taken to approve a 21-member middle governing body commission with authority to act on the Assembly’s behalf in responding to realignment requests from presbyteries and synods. However, this commission can only act upon a majority affirmative vote of the affected presbyteries and/or synods. The assembly rejected overtures to eliminate synods or to create new synods based on theological affinity rather than geography.

By a narrow 50 vote margin (373-323-4) the fidelity-chastity ordination standard was sent back to the presbyteries for another season of debates and votes where a majority must approve it for a change in the Book of Order. Again there are local options where the installing governing bodies have the responsibility of determining if candidates meet the standards for office.

The afternoon session saw the report “Christians and Jews: People of God” referred back to the Office of Interfaith Relations and Theology and Worship to rewrite after broader consultation. The report “Toward an Understanding of Christian-Muslim Relations” was approved as amended to be sent to the churches for study and guidance.

That evening the Assembly readied itself for another momentous debate on the definition of marriage. The Report of the Special Committee to Study Issues of Civil Union and Christian Marriage was approved. Then an amendment was made to combine both the majority and minority reports from the special committee and this passed with a 70% majority. Next a motion was made from the floor that the action just taken would be the response to all overtures pending from Committee 12 on Civil Union and Marriage Issues. That motion passed 348 to 324. So our Book of Order definition of marriage does not change at this time.

Friday morning the GA approved the amended Middle East report “Breaking Down the Walls,” which spotlights the Israeli-Palestine conflict. A number of amendments the committee made aided the acceptability of the report. The Report of the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment which called for all corporations doing business in Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank to confine their business activity solely to peaceful pursuits, etc. was passed by the assembly after debate and information on the investments of Caterpillar were discussed.

The assembly also called for the US to end direct combat operations in Afghanistan and increase humanitarian and economic development there; to end its use of seven military bases in Colombia; restoration of sustainable agriculture in Haiti; and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula and the reunification of North and South Korea.

The great hymns and songs of the church will forever ring in my heart as they were sung each day as we assembled in Minneapolis. I will forever remember the people doing the work of a church that is reformed and always reforming, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Thank you again for this great opportunity to serve,  
Paula Wallace, Elder Commissioner