

## *223rd General Assembly \* Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) St. Louis, Missouri*

### **Summary**

What follows is a not-altogether-brief summary of the actions of the 223<sup>rd</sup> General Assembly, held last week in St. Louis, Missouri. For a more comprehensive look at the Assembly and its actions, please go to the website of the Presbyterian News Service (<http://www.pcusa.org/news/>) or the Presbyterian Outlook magazine (<https://pres-outlook.org/>). You can also order summary bulletin inserts from Presbyterian Outlook (<https://pres-outlook.org/2018/03/2018-ga-bulletin-inserts/>).

*(At right, PTCA commissioners were teaching elders the Rev. Barbara Anne Keely and the Rev. David Parker; ruling elders Walter “Rocky” Rockenstein and Philip Romine; and young adult advisory delegate Janimah Igwacho.)*



### **Climate Change**

In perhaps the most intensely debated issue, the Assembly chose not to divest in fossil-fuel companies, instead asking its Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) group to maintain its investments in the fossil-fuel industry, while continuing to advocate for more environmentally friendly business practices. It also directed MRTI to report back to the 224<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in 2020 with an assessment of every fossil fuel company they maintain in their portfolios, naming specific corporations for MRTI to engage aggressively — including, “but not limited to, Chevron, ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips, Marathon Petroleum, Valero Energy, Phillips 66, Duke Energy, Ford [and] General Motors.” The Assembly also approved the overture from the PTCA asking for the church’s advocacy in a carbon-pricing plan that would use the marketplace to reduce the level of carbon pollution. Tomie Evans was the PTCA overture advocate.

## Theology

The PTCA sent an overture recommending that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopt Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" as a "contemporary statement of faith, a reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy and inspiration" but without any formal constitutional standing — meaning it's not part of the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. The Assembly voted to go another way — to commend it to the church for study, and also to begin the process toward including it in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. That process toward confessional status will take a minimum of four years. Dean Seal was the PTCA overture advocate.

*(At right, PTCA YAAD Janimah Igwacho stands with PC(USA) stated clerk J. Herbert Nelson.)*



## Internal Structures

The question of internal structural issues garnered perhaps the most intense scrutiny going into General Assembly. In the end, the debate was relatively quiet at General Assembly. The assembly approved a change in the governance of the PC (USA) A

Corporation — a secular corporation the church uses to handle its business — that will shift the corporation from the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board to a shared governance model with 11 members from five of the six PC(USA) agencies. This was the recommendation of the Way Forward Committee created two years ago to look at governance issues and internal conflict in the PC(USA) structure. Additionally, the Assembly sent the draft guiding statement of the 2020 Vision Team to the church for study and comment — a statement which says "God calls the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to be **Prayerful, Courageous, United, Serving, Alive.**" And it instructed the six PC(USA) agencies to conduct a collaborative self-study of the per capita model and its ability to provide adequate funding "in the immediate and longer-term future and to explore alternative and creative funding resources for both."

## Per Capita & Budgets

Regarding per capita, the Assembly voted to increase the per capita rate to fund the Office of the General Assembly to \$8.95 per member in 2019 and 2020. The additional \$1.22 per member is a 15 percent increase from the 2018 per capita rate of \$7.73 per member. The Office of the General Assembly had proposed back in February an increase of 39 percent in per capita; that was scaled back following significant opposition across the church. The Assembly also approved Presbyterian Mission Agency budgets of \$71,589,237 for 2019 and \$70,531,957 for 2020. Rocky Rockenstein, PTCA moderator and a ruling elder commissioner, appeared daily before the Assembly to provide updates on the Mission Agency funding in light of Assembly decisions.

## Social Justice

The most dramatic statement on the PC(USA)'s commitment to social justice came when commissioners voted with their wallets and feet, not their electronic keypads. On Tuesday afternoon, having collected \$47,000 in the opening worship service offering, Presbyterians marched to the City Justice Center and presented the money as bail for incarcerated non-violent offenders. *(At right, Walter "Rocky" Rockenstein participates in the march.)* Stated clerk J. Herbert Nelson said of the effort: "It's about building a heart and passion for ministry and the love of Jesus that drives us out of the church and into the streets."



The Assembly, in more standard forms of voting, approved actions:

- calling for an immediate end to the government's zero-tolerance policy toward families illegally entering the United States, and to promptly reunite parents and children who have been separated and to place families.
- declaring an imperative for the Reformation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in being a transformative church in an intercultural era;
- directing the PC(USA) to take strategic steps in advocating for the rights of U.S. citizen residents of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico;

- asking the denomination and congregations to pray and to take decisive steps in response to the heightened rate of gun violence in the United States; and
- calling for an immediate moratorium on all executions and asked the PC(USA) to continue to stand against capital punishment.

## Family Leave Policy

The PTCA sent a series of overtures to the General Assembly asking for a more widespread and generous family leave policy for ministers and other church workers. So did a number of other presbyteries. In response, the General Assembly voted to establish a six-person task force with the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to report to the 2020 General Assembly, with the committee saying it simply did not have enough time to formulate good policy in limited meeting time. The PTCA overture was one of those referred to this new task force. In addition, the General Assembly passed a resolution that directs the agencies of the PCUSA to improve their family leave policies and “strongly urge and recommend all synods, presbyteries, and congregations to create a family leave policy that each member congregation can adopt,” including a minimum of 12 weeks leave. The PTCA has already begun work on a revised family leave policy, as instructed at the January Presbytery meeting.

*(At right, PTCA commissioners speak from the floor at the assembly.)*

## Middle East

One area of contentious debate at General Assemblies in the recent past has been the PC(USA)’s stance toward Middle East issues. This year, not so much. General Assembly approved a resolution that cited the killing of more than 20 Palestinian medics serving the wounded and called for inquiry into violations of international humanitarian law by the Israeli military. The Assembly also approved an action that emphasizes efforts initiated by Israelis and Palestinians to “come together in building honest





understanding and peace, working together to address inequality to pave the way to reconciliation.” Similarly, it approved a measure urging Presbyterians to reach out in open, truthful dialogue with Jewish colleagues, engaging the issue of the Israeli occupation of Palestine.



*(At left, PTCA commissioner Walter “Rocky” Rockenstein speaks from the podium at the assembly.)*

### **Other News**

- The Rev. Diane Moffett was elected as the new executive director of the Presbyterian

Mission Agency.

- A PTCA-generated overture regarding accusations in disciplinary cases was answered by actions toward a different overture, but in a way consistent with our request. Peter Soulen, chair of the Presbytery’s Bills and Overtures Committee and our overture advocate, helped craft the Assembly’s response.
- And the Assembly, on its consent agenda, approved an overture from the Synod of Lakes and Prairies to re-draw the boundaries of the PTCA and the Presbytery of North Central Iowa, by moving one Minnesota township (and thus the First Presbyterian Church of LeRoy, MN) to North Central Iowa.

And two final observations...

- Unlike many past years, there was little discussion or debate on issues related to sexuality. During one brief debate, however, on creating a task force to investigate the formation of a LGBTQIA+ advocacy group, a young adult advisory delegate, speaking in favor, told the Assembly that, because of the acceptance he felt in the PCUSA, he was naming his understanding of self as a bisexual in public for the first time. When he ended his remarks, at least twenty other YAADs ran to him from all over the floor to embrace him. That was shortly after another YAAD said, in a different response, that she is asexual. Both were moving displays of love for another.

- In the Social Justice Committee room, where heavy emotional issues like suicide and the death penalty and gun violence were on the docket, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance had two counselors available at all times for those committee members, should they need it.

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