

General Assembly Report, Day 5 – Tuesday, June 19

“The system is no longer working.” – The Rev. J. Hebert Nelson II, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

OK. Wow. That’s pretty blunt. Nelson also commented, “There is a lack of trust, a lack of accountability. We have an unhealthy denominational culture, with restrictions on free speech, threats of intimidation and legal action, and a lack of transparency. I don’t believe the system we’re in is going to be able to carry us down the road much longer.” (I’m taking these comments from notes I made on his opening remarks and the responses he gave to several different questions from members of the committee.)

Nelson and the Rev. Diane Givens Moffett, the new President/Executive Director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, both spoke to Committee 4, The Way Forward. They were asked to meet with the committee as it was reviewing the recommendations coming from The Way Forward Commission, a group appointed by the last General Assembly. Apparently, they had released a pretty blistering report last week, which I haven’t seen and I don’t think has gotten much publicity yet. I’m almost curious enough to try to track it down.

I spent all my free time today with that committee. Occasionally, it felt like I was watching a soap opera unfold. At other times, it felt more like I was listening to an opera, in that even though they were speaking English, I couldn’t figure out what they were talking about or what they were trying to say.

J. Herbert Nelson indicated that he thinks the roots of these problems can be traced back to the 1983 reunion that merged two different denominational cultures. As I’ve thought about this, it seems to me they reflect a lack of funding maybe more than anything else. As long as the church had enough money and enough people to keep things going, there wasn’t much of a problem. Now that money is getting tight, we face a number of problems as different agencies, committees and programs compete for limited funds and increasingly limited staffing. They all tend to protect what they have, look more critically on the work of others, and see things through a competitive rather than a cooperative lens. It’s sad as well as frustrating, but it’s not entirely unexpected.

I think the questions now becomes what do we do about this and how do we move forward in a way that reflects trust and respect, if not love, for one another. We’ve got good people in place, and they’re trying to do good things. I think they’ve all got good intentions. Increasingly, though, they seem to be butting heads and stepping on each other toes, and they don’t seem to be able to cooperate as well as they could or should. Hopefully, the committee will have figured something out to at least be able to make some preliminary suggestions. When I left to attend the protest march scheduled for 3 PM, it looked like they still had a lot of work to do and seemed to be hamstrung as they awaited a ruling by the Advisory Committee on the Constitution as to whether some of the recommendations coming from the Way Forward Commission were unconstitutional. It’s possible once they had a ruling one way or the other that things fell into place and they were able to wrap things up before dinner. We will see.

This afternoon, four of us from West Virginia joined about 400 other Presbyterians in a march to the St. Louis City Justice Center to protest the practice of cash bail, which has caused hundreds of poor people convicted of non-violent crimes to be jailed simply because they could not come up with the cash to pay their bail. I’m sure many motorists were unhappy with us as police blocked traffic allowing us to walk in the streets for the approximately 10-block trip. Here’s a link to a local news report on the march: <http://fox2now.com/2018/06/19/presbyterian-convention-goers-march-on-st-louis-justice-center-to-bail-out-non-violent-offenders/>

We were able to deliver a check for more than \$47,000, which will help set free more than three dozen people. While I’m sure hosting General Assembly has had a positive economic impact on St. Louis,

I'm glad we could specifically help out the individuals who will be set free, and hopefully we will also draw even more attention to what seems a patently unjust system.

This evening, 13 of us gathered at Lombardo's Restaurant for our presbytery dinner. We had a good group, a good time, and some great food.

Tomorrow morning begins with the Ecumenical Worship Service. Najla Kassab, president of the World Communion of Reformed Churches will be the preacher. Then we'll move into committee reports and voting on their recommendations. Maureen Wright and I will be serving as floor parliamentarians, which means we're primarily helping with the microphone system. She gets to work all three sessions tomorrow. I work the morning and evening sessions but get the afternoon off. There is a possibility that it will be a long day. Please pray for us and for all those who have gathered here in St. Louis as we seek to discern God's will for the Presbyterian Church.