

General Assembly Report, Day 6 – Wednesday, June 20

On Wednesday, the General Assembly started to hear reports from its committees and vote on their recommendations. There were some important actions taken and thankfully little controversy.

My day started with the Peace Breakfast. Liz Theoharis, the author of Always With Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor, was scheduled to be the speaker, but she was replaced by Denise Anderson, co-moderator of the 222nd General Assembly. Her sermon built on the Why We Can't Wait a book written by Martin Luther King Jr. She pointed out, "We can never be the church we are called to be when we are too concerned with keeping people comfortable." It was a rousing sermon that got the day off to a great start.

The Assembly opened with the Ecumenical Worship Service. Najla Kassab, a native of Lebanon and a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary who was the first woman to receive a preaching license and the second woman to be ordained as a minister by the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, delivered the sermon titled "Towards a Kingdom of Reconciliation." Two comments from my notes: "The church is called to build a culture of reconciliation, not fear" and "I don't think you need a fence; I think you need a bridge."

The rest of the morning was spent talking about the financial implications of the recommendations coming from committees and information concerning nominations to some of the groups to be created by upcoming votes.

On a sad note, the Assembly was informed that the brother of Emily Fonder, the Young Adult Advisory Delegate from Nevada, had died yesterday and that she had left to be with her family.

After a lunch break that was filled with seminary luncheons, the Assembly resumed by passing a Consent Agenda consisting of items that had been approved by a vote by at least 80% of their committee. Most of them received a significantly higher percentage than that. That one vote took care of something like 80 items of business

Committee 7, Ecumenical and Interfaith Issues, was the first to report. The only item they brought for a vote was the recommendation to explore the possibility of developing a covenant relationship with the Gereja Masehi Injil di Minahasa (GMIM), a small Christian denomination in Indonesia. That was approved overwhelmingly.

Next up was Committee 14, Theological and Church Growth Issues and Institutions. The Assembly voted to approve the recommendation in the report from the Special Committee to Study the Reformed Perspective of Christian Education in the 21st Century to encourage the Presbyterian Mission Agency adjust to a shift in Christian Education paradigms and practices to focus on lifelong Christian education and faith formation, especially intergenerational ministry.

Alton Pollard III was approved as the new president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

The Assembly approved developing a task force to create a letter accompanying the Confession of Belhar addressing the issue of race in the United States. After a couple of wordsmithing amendments that changed "unfair" to "unjust" and deleted the word "near" before the word "genocide," the motion was approved 439-1. (I'm sure the English teachers among the commissioners will sleep more soundly tonight.)

Item 14-04 called for adding constitutional questions to the Installation of Ministers of Word and Sacrament to be answered by members of the presbytery. This is not a bad idea, although the overture was not necessarily well thought out based on comments from the Advisory Committee on the Constitution. The Committee decided to disapprove the motion by a vote of 27-20. In explaining the wording of the motion, which was awkward because they were voting yes to disapprove the overture, the chair of the committee made what may have been the most unusual comment of the day: "We voted Yes to say No." Perhaps they'll make t-shirts with that phrase.

Item 14-12 generated the closest vote of the day and perhaps the most extended discussion. On a 269-236 vote, the Assembly voted to add comments from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to the resolution that called for an examination by members, congregations, and presbyteries of what it means to be a people Reclaiming Jesus. The final vote on the amended motion was 434-80. I had never heard of the Reclaiming Jesus movement or statement. It sounds like it might be worthwhile to look into. The Presbyterian Mission Agency was also directed to develop supplemental materials from the Reformed Perspective for this material.

Item 14-05 came from the Presbytery of the Twin Cities and called for adopting Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" as a Contemporary Statement of Faith (but without constitutional standing). The committee decided to recommend this document be added to the Book of Confessions. Their reasoning was that people might actually read and study it this way. Otherwise, they said, if we just commend it for study, few people will actually do anything. I think they're probably right.

After some lengthy wrangling, the Assembly voted to approve the recommendation 352-160. I think the statement's worth reading and studying. You can find a pdf of it [here](#). I'm not sure, however, whether it rises to the level for inclusion in the Book of Confessions. At least people will be reading and studying it, though, and that's probably the main point.

We then took a dinner break. The evening session dealt with the work of three committees. First was Committee 13, Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program, Presbyterian Publishing Company, and Presbyterian Foundation. The Assembly approved Item 13-04 electing Tom Taylor to a third term as the President of the Foundation. We also heard from Marc Lewis, President of the Presbyterian Publishing House, Jim Rissler of the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program, and Frank Spencer of the Board of Trustees.

Committee 5, Mid-Councils, was next. Their chair reported that every item on their agenda passed unanimously. They still brought two items to be voted on. The first, Item 05-03, created an Administrative Commission to deal with the dispute between the Presbytery of Cincinnati and the Synod of the Covenant. That was probably the best resolution to a messy situation.

Item 05-09 came from a Commissioner's Resolution "On the Challenge of Being Black." One salient point stuck out during this debate: There are 441 African-American Congregations in the PC(USA) and 70% of those churches have vacant pulpits. I think that probably qualifies as a crisis.

You could say they saved the best for last as Committee 10 Mission Coordination brought 11 recommendations to the floor. Item 10-04 dealt with the Presbyterian Mission Agency Work Plan. For the next two years, they will emphasize three areas of work: 1) Congregational Vitality, where churches prioritize faithfulness over self-sufficiency; 2) Poverty, where the denomination fights unjust economic systems perpetuating destitution and need; and 3) Structural Racism/White Supremacy, where Presbyterians dismantle structures and ideologies oppressing people of color. (I think I got these right. I heard them summarized several different ways.) It passed on a voice vote.

Item 10-02 called for "a collaborative study of the place and purpose of the humanities in the teachings of PC(USA) liberal arts colleges and universities." It passed on a voice vote.

Item 10-03 was a resolution on determining the need for a LGBTQ+ Advocacy Committee. This was amended to a LGBTQIA+ Advocacy Committee. (I think I and many commissioners learned that this refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual individuals. The + refers to gender fluidity.) This change reflects the most inclusive and preferred language. The request came from the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns. They were not sure whether they could or should keep up with all this. It passed 412-106.

Items 10-13 and 10-12 both dealt with the Doctrine of Discovery. As I understand it, this refers to the way Native American lands were taken by European settlers and then by the American people and government. In some ways, it summarizes the mistreatment experienced by Native Americans and

Alaska natives. Both passed – Item 10-13 by a vote of 460-62 and Item 10-12 by a vote of 449-67. (The differences reflect that not all commissioners are in their seats or awake all the time.)

Item 10-11, On Establishing a Grant to Develop Resources to Educate Entities Regarding Serious Mental Illness Issues, probably generated the most discussion of the day. At least it appeared that way to my partner and me since we had all kinds of people that wanted to speak at our microphone. Mission Presbytery in Texas passed the original overture that recognized the 10th Anniversary of “Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness,” which was approved by the 2008 General Assembly. Among other things, the overture called for \$250,000 to be given as grants to be used by presbyteries, congregations, and seminaries of the PC(USA) to address the needs of people with serious mental illness. The vote to approve was 422-93.

Item 10-09 was the overture on Small Churches that our presbytery had supported. Yesterday, the committee reconsidered the action it took on Monday night. They came up with a substitute resolution that directs the Presbyterian Mission Agency to report to the 224th General Assembly (2020) on its efforts to strengthen the mission and ministry of small congregations, including the progress of implementing the Vital Congregations and Christian Formation initiatives. Considering the initial proposal came with a \$3.2 million price tag, this was probably a more reasonable end result. It lifts up the ministry of small churches, which was really our goal.

The final vote of the day was to elect Diane Givens Moffat as the new executive director/president of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. That was an easy one.

We adjourned around 10 PM and will reconvene tomorrow at 8:30 AM. We’re making progress, but we still have a long way to go. There is a jazz concert scheduled for tomorrow night, which should be fun but will take away time we might need, at least if we want to get any sleep on Friday night. But maybe the principle that work expands to fill the time allotted for it will still hold true. We’ll see.

Please pray for the commissioners to the 223rd General Assembly. They’re doing good work.