

## General Assembly Report, Day 7 – Thursday, June 21

Several observations:

1) The elephant in the room seems to be “How are we going to pay for all this?” I mean, there are some neat ideas, programs that will help our churches and help share the gospel, programs that will make a difference in the lives of hundreds or thousands of people here in the United States as well as around the world. I can’t argue with the intent of these programs; I probably would have voted for them myself if I had a vote. But it’s not like the commissioners can claim ignorance. Each day, they hear reports on the financial impacts on the per capita and financial impacts on the mission budget. \$50,000 here, \$150,000 there, \$300,000 somewhere else. It adds up.

Yes, God is a God of abundance, and maybe some people backstage have a plan that will cover all these costs. Maybe we have more money available in reserves than I thought we did. It makes me nervous, though, because I’m not sure I understand how this is going to work out.

2) The co-moderators are doing an excellent job. Yes, they have good people helping them, but they are handling the debates very carefully and very well, maintaining good humor, and trying to make sure everyone has a chance to be heard. God has put them in the right place.

3) The report of the Way Forward Committee was probably the most complex, technical piece of business that I have ever seen presented at a General Assembly meeting. To be honest, I didn’t really understand it coming into the Assembly myself. At times, I thought we were getting lost in the weeds. Commissioners would come to the microphone wanting to ask a question (most of the time very good questions), but before they could be called on, someone else at another mic had made an amendment or an amendment to an amendment, and they were never called on. Yet, everyone maintained a good spirit, and somehow it all worked out. Most of the recommendations were adopted by an overwhelming margin. Obviously, the Holy Spirit was at work. But I also have to give credit to the commissioners.

Committee 9, Peacemaking, Immigration, and International Issues, was the first to report this morning. Item 09-02, On Support and Prayer for the People of South Sudan, was adopted by a voice vote. That probably could have gone on the consent agenda, but they wanted to raise awareness and support for the people of South Sudan. I thought I heard someone say we’ve been sending mission workers to that country for 150 years.

The report on Item 09-04, On Endorsing Affirmations Regarding the Welfare of Our Neighbors in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, was a response to a request from the Reformed Calvinist Church of El Salvador and called for hiring a mission worker in El Salvador who would work on immigration policy as well as work with refugees who have been returned to that country. It also called for hiring a national grassroots organizer who would work on immigration issues. That request, however, was struck at least partly because of the potential cost, but that was one of the few times that happened. The final vote was 463-45.

Item 09-10, A Study of Socio-Economic and Political Realities of Central America, would update the denominations 1988 policy on Central America. It was approved by a vote of 415-88.

Item 09-14, Stop Separation of Families, was a Commissioner’s Resolution responding to recent news events and was amended to reflect the Executive Order issued by the President on June 20. Among other things, it puts us on record as opposing the separation of families, calls for reuniting parents and children that have been separated, and asks that parents who have been separated from their children be given information on their children’s location and the chance to communicate with them regularly until they are reunited. This generated some controversy, but it eventually passed 484-34.

Item 09-12, On North Korean Refugees, also originated as a Commissioner’s Resolution. I learned a lot about North Korean Refugees by reading the original resolution, the rationale, and the

comments made by various advisory groups. It was eventually approved after some amendments and attempted amendments by a vote of 481-37.

Item 09-06, A Resolution on Global Order and National Purpose, was referred with comment to the Advisory Committee for Social Witness Policy. It calls for a study of the existential threats facing our nation and our world in cooperation with other ecumenical partners. Hopefully, something useful will come of this.

While a good part of the debate this morning seemed tiresome, somehow we got ahead of schedule and moved on to the report of Committee 11, Social Justice Issues. The Assembly was able to approve Item 11-10, A Gospel from St Louis: Lessons from Congregations Seeking Racial and Economic Justice, by a vote of 459-10 and Item 11-03, On Recognizing the Reverend Henry Highland Garnet's Prophetic Voice, by a vote of 485-9. I ended up talking with Gavin Meek, Interim Executive in Hudson River Presbytery and former interim pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Morgantown, while these two items were being discussed, so I really need to go back and read them to see what they're all about, especially the one on St. Louis. While I've enjoyed my time here, this city seems deeply divided racially and economically. There's a lot to like with its parks, transit system, baseball team, and good restaurants, but I'm not sure I'd want to live here. Reading this report would give a helpful perspective and might change my mind. It would certainly give me something to talk about with my son-in-law who grew up here.

The rest of Committee 11's report was postponed to a later time so we could move to worship. The Rev. Floretta Barbee-Watkins preached a sermon on Luke 13:18-21 titled "The Radical Difference." Two quotes: "We become so accustomed to the affluence that we live in that we think we are the radical difference." and "You cannot heal the pain you do not feel." All in all, worship at the General Assembly is a wonderful treat.

The afternoon began with tributes to Jack Rogers and Ben Weir, who had both served as a Moderator of the General Assembly – Weir in 1986 and Rogers in 2001. Both had passed away since the last General Assembly in 2016. They showed a film clip of "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood," which was a take by Jack Rogers on the TV show of a more famous, fellow Presbyterian, Fred Rogers. The best part was when Jack Rogers asked, "Can you say 'Presbyterian Ethos?'" (Well, I thought it was funny.)

The rest of the afternoon was spent on the report of Committee 04. The Way Forward. Item 04-05, the 2020 Vision Team Interim Report, was approved by a vote of 499-10. Among other things, they call the Presbyterian Church to be

**Prayerful**  
**Courageous**  
**Useful**  
**Serving and**  
**Alive**

(In case you didn't notice, the first letter in each word spells out PCUSA.)

The Assembly probably spent more than an hour on Item 04-03, Way Forward Commission Report. In the end, it was time well spent. I'm not sure there's a short way to summarize it. Among other things, it clarifies and strengthens the office of the Stated Clerk; creates a "Diverse Voices Table," which will be composed of the heads of the 6 agencies that make up the PCUSA (the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Mission Agency, Board of Pensions, Presbyterian Publishing House, Presbyterian Foundation, and the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program); and restructures what is known as "A Corp," which is the corporate structure of the Presbyterian Church. Previously, the trustees of A Corp were the Board of Directors of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. That could be seen as a conflict of interest since that one agency was essentially able dictate the cost of what are known as "Shared Services" (Legal, IT, Property, Accounting, Payroll, Personnel, Mailing, Translation) to the other five agencies.

The chair of the committee offered this analogy. "It's like 6 siblings, 4 of whom live in one building and 2 of whom live elsewhere, being told by one of the siblings how much they have to pay to keep the family household running." With the passage of this item, the size of the A Corp board is reduced and will now be composed of representatives from each of the 6 agencies plus 3 at large representatives. At least that's how my notes read. To be honest, it was hard to keep track of all the amendments and the amendments to the amendments. It didn't help that I had to wear the headset and listen to the communications between the floor parliamentarians and the platform trying to keep up with who wanted to say what at which mic.

Finally, someone had the sense "to call the question and all previous questions," which, when approved, stopped debate and allowed commissioners to vote on the amendment on the floor at the time and then the item itself as amended. It was like waving a magic wand. After all that, the final vote was 474-47.

It was also like a pall was cast over the Assembly or like everyone suddenly got tired of making amendments. Item 04-04, Report of the All Agency Review Committee, was approved 442-11. No one spoke or commented. Item 04-06, Dividing A Corp into Two Corporations, was disapproved by a vote of 482-13. (The original motion came from the Presbyterian Mission Agency, which withdrew it after several weeks. Apparently, they came to the conclusion this really wouldn't work.) Again, no one spoke or commented.

Item 04-07, A Resolution to Require Race Audits of the Six PC(USA) Agencies, was approved 489-18. Again, no one spoke or commented.

Item 04-08, On Amending the Organization for Mission, was approved 499-11. Again, no one spoke or commented.

Item 04-09, Presbyterian Mission Agency Board Manual of Operations, was approved 494-15. Again, no one spoke or commented.

They say that all good things must come to an end. It was like the dam broke on Item 04-02, A Resolution on Prioritizing Translation and Accessibility in the PC(USA). People seemed to go crazy, making up for lost time with their zeal for offering amendments. (More than 600 Presbyterians wordsmithing a document is not a pretty sight.) Eventually, someone came up and said the magic words, "I move the question and all previous questions" and order was restored. The amended resolution, which was probably not all that different than the original resolution, was approved 504-10.

With that behind them, the Assembly recessed until 8:30 AM tomorrow morning. There was a concert by Kirk Whalum, a Grammy-winning jazz musician. He was excellent. I left early in hopes of finishing my daily report and getting to bed before midnight. (I didn't quite make it, but I was pretty close.)

The Assembly has a lot of work left to do. I think we still need to deal with the report of Committee 12, Middle East Issues; Committee 08, Environmental Issues, which includes the recommendation to divest from fossil fuels; the rest of Committee 11, Social Justice Issues; Committee 06, Church Polity and Ordered Ministry; and Committee 07, Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations. Plus, we'll have to come to terms with the financial implications, although that might be pushed back to Saturday morning.

I doubt if we'll get done before midnight. It wouldn't surprise me if we go past 2 AM. We have to be done with the closing worship service by noon Saturday. That's a hard deadline, so we will keep going tomorrow until we're done. Fortunately, I'm not working at a microphone tomorrow evening, but my practice is to stay until the end. If we go past midnight, I probably won't write a daily report until I get back home. It won't be as fresh, but I'm sure it will be more coherent. We'll see what happens.

Please pray for the commissioners. I suspect most of them, like me, are ready to go back home.