



RENEWING THE VISION: *Kindom building for the 21st century*

by Leslie Scanlon, *Outlook* national reporter

The 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) St. Louis, Missouri – June 16-23, 2018

Presbyterians took to the streets at the 2018 General Assembly, with hundreds marching from the convention center to the City Justice Center with \$47,200 in donations – money the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) collected during opening worship, and which was used to bail out people incarcerated for minor offenses who could not afford to pay their fines or make bail.

It's a "passion for ministry and the love of Jesus that drives us out of the church and into the streets," J. Herbert Nelson, stated clerk of the PC(USA), said during a midweek rally.

This was a General Assembly that felt viscerally linked to the news of the day: climate change, immigrant parents being separated from their children at the borders, gun violence.

Over and over, this question came up: **How to put faith into action?**

Florella Barbee-Watkins, pastor of The Avenue Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, preached that it's easy to get discouraged, but Jesus, faith and love move people forward even when they are weary. The PC(USA) has "made some bad biscuits," Barbee-Watkins said, but confession and a willingness to "deal with the urgent needs of our siblings and the church" propel Christians to action. She challenged: "Beloved, rise up, let's make some new biscuits."

Climate change. The assembly voted 332-178 to continue corporate engagement with oil and natural gas companies, working through the denomination's Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee, rather than to divest the PC(USA)'s holdings in fossil fuel companies. This was one of the hardest-fought issues at the assembly, with 40 presbyteries supporting an overture for fossil fuel divestment, saying the church has waited long enough to act to protect the earth, and with others contending it's better to stay at the table and use the investments as leverage to push for industry changes.

Family separation. The assembly voted 484-34 to approve a resolution calling for an immediate end to the government's policy of separating parents from children as migrants attempt to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. It calls for federal authorities to promptly reunite parents and children who have been separated, and to place families "under the care of the community," rather than in detention.



Per capita. The assembly approved a General Assembly per capita rate of \$8.95 per member for 2019 and \$8.95 for 2020 – up from \$7.73 per member in 2018. That was a source of constant tension during this assembly: How to meet urgent ministry needs, from drug addiction to mental health to ministry with small churches, while not raising per capita so high it raises resistance from mid councils and congregations?

The Way Forward. The assembly approved a report from the Way Forward Commission, which the 2016 General Assembly created to consider changes needed at the top levels of the denomination. The action will mean a new, more equitable governance structure for the PC(USA), A Corporation (a secular corporation used to conduct church business). Also part of that proposal: a financial sustainability study and a commitment to translate PC(USA) resources into languages other than English.

Leadership. Taking four ballots to do so, the assembly elected as its co-moderators Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri and Cindy Kohlmann, an educator and a mid council leader, a ruling elder and a minister, two “audacious, spirited, bold, unapologetic women,” as Cintrón-Olivieri put it. She is a native of Puerto Rico, for whom Spanish is her first language.

Race and inequality. From preaching to marching to overtures, the need to confront structural racism and systemic inequality echoed through this gathering. As a sign of that commitment, the assembly voted 352-160 to begin the long process of adding Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” to the PC(USA)’s Book of Confessions.

World concerns. The assembly spoke to concerns around the world — including in Yemen, Korea, South Sudan and Nicaragua. One tangible example: The assembly agreed to make the PC(USA) a partner with a Salvadoran church working to reduce gang-related violence in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador — violence that’s causing people to flee for their safety.

#MeToo. The assembly voted 474-19 to have the PC(USA) confess its failure to listen to survivors of pastoral sexual misconduct; to report annually the number of sexual misconduct charges brought in the denomination; and to set up a task force of survivors of sexual abuse.

Social justice. This assembly felt pulled to public advocacy. It called for a moratorium on imposing the death penalty. It asked Presbyterians to pray for a movement of the Spirit to end gun violence. It voted to affirm the dignity and humanity of people of all sexual orientations. Time and again, the assembly acted to tell the world, “This is what Presbyterians stand for.”

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