

Nelson calls Presbyterians to action

Speaking at Synod School, Nelson says: 'Do something for the Lord'

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STORM LAKE, Iowa — The Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson II is calling the church to do what is just — to do what is right.

Nelson, stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), spoke each morning last week during the annual Synod School of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, telling Presbyterians to “get off your blessed assurances and do something for the Lord.”

Synod School, the annual midsummer ministry of the synod, takes place every summer during the last week of July at Buena Vista University here. This year, registration totaled 686, a record by for the week-long event that ran July 23-28.

Speaking with prophetic authority, Nelson asked Synod School attendees to consider their place in their communities. “The society we are in has changed around us,” he reminded in one of his addresses, and added, “We need to examine if we are the community we’re supposed to be.”

Challenging the church to become involved in issues of social justice, Nelson quoted from the Bible’s book of Matthew when he said, “You go. Remember, ‘I’ll be with you always.’”

This year’s Synod School carried the theme, “Let Justice Flow,” and Nelson has preached to that theme through his convocation addresses.

Nelson, the son, grandson, and nephew of Presbyterian pastors, is the first African American to lead the denomination, which has a 300-year history in the United States. His appearance at Synod School marked the first time the stated clerk of the PC(USA)’s General Assembly has served as the event’s convocation speaker.

Nelson thanked Synod School for the time of rest, and for the opportunity to “be with God’s people in a different type of way.” And then he called Presbyterians to stand up to combat the divisiveness that has spread through society, splitting everyone into categories — or attaching labels — for politics, race and citizenship.

Holding up the Bible he carried when he spoke, Nelson said, "I don't see left, right or middle in the Holy Writ." He added, "Those [divisions] are the forces that we are contending with today. We either love Jesus or we don't."

Stating the issues of immigration, refugees, jobs, justice, equality and environment, Nelson said, "This is a part of the DNA, the culture, of the Presbyterian church."

He added, "Irrespective of our views right now, we've got to get involved right now." And Presbyterians need not be afraid. Quoting the well-known song, Nelson said "Jesus loves me this I know because the Bible tells me so. ... That's enough."

Nelson placed specific calls to action. "The message today is ... how faith relates to justice," he said, challenging Presbyterians to do "the one thing you do that you do well that people can count on you to do."

While leaders in Washington "struggle with how to bring back or recover 'one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all,'" Nelson said, the church needs to "go deep on the issue of social justice."