

Keep your tongue from evil,
and your lips from speaking deceit.
Depart from evil, and do good;
seek peace, and pursue it. *Psalm 34:13-14*

Pursuing Peace

It's now been ten days since General Assembly (GA) ended, but some of us are still talking about it. Unfortunately, a key part of this GA's aftereffects is the number of people who caught COVID during the event. Several folks tested positive during GA or upon their return home. I have had the blessing of preaching at two churches since GA ended, so I have tested myself several times, all with negative results. But at one church, it turned out that they had been hit with COVID outside of GA, so several of their staff were out already! While many people tested positive, I have not heard of anyone suffering from serious symptoms, so that's good news. Please pray for everyone's recovery, without serious complications.

Another lingering aftereffect of this GA was gratitude for the peaceable spirit of the meeting. One of our commissioners commented recently on the impact of this, her first GA, as her eyes were opened to the breadth and depth of the work of our denomination. While there were many actions taken by this GA, two issues took the most time and discussion up to and during GA. Last week I attempted to explain one of them, the issue of investment in and possible divestment from companies that profit from fossil fuels. The other issue raised the most attention before GA, which was first called OVT-01, then POL-01, as it was assigned to the Polity Committee. Because POL-01 suggests amendments to the Constitution of the PC(USA), the recommended amendments will be presented for ratification by presbyteries in the coming year; the recommendation requires a majority of presbyteries to ratify it before it can be inserted into the Book of Order.

Last week I decided not to attempt to discuss divestment and POL-01 in the same column, so I planned to write about POL-01 today. But then the shooting at Butler, Pennsylvania, happened, resulting in injury to former President Donald Trump and death for Corey Comperatore, an attendee of the rally. But in one important way, both seemingly disparate topics have an essential aspect in common: the importance of pursuing peace, even in the midst of disagreement.

First, a little background. POL-01 was presented as a two-part recommendation. The Polity Committee ended up splitting the overture into two separate recommendations, with the first recommendation being approved with little dissension and no revision. The proposed amendment being sent for presbytery consideration is underlined and in brackets:

1. Shall F-1.0403 be amended as follows:

The unity of believers in Christ is reflected in the rich diversity of the Church's membership. In Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, [gender identity, sexual orientation,] disability, geography, or theological conviction. There is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) shall guarantee full participation and representation in its worship, governance, and emerging life to all persons or groups within its membership. No member shall be denied participation or representation for any reason other than those stated in this Constitution.

The second recommendation in POL-01 was more controversial, as it would require added emphasis on adherence to the first recommendation for anyone being examined for ordination. For some folks, this seemed to be a return to the control imposed on presbyteries that was decried when the Book of Order prohibited the ordination of LGBTQ candidates—but this time, the control was to require presbyteries to assess specifically a candidate’s ability and commitment to the “principles of participation, representation, and non-discrimination found in F-1.0403”:

2. Shall G-2.0104b be amended as follows:

“b. Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.0404) **[and in the principles of participation, representation, and non-discrimination found in F-1.0403]**. Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

After much discussion in committee and plenary, the second recommendation was amended and approved for consideration of the presbyteries:

Shall G-2.0104b be amended as follows:

b. Standards for ordained service reflect the church’s desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (F-1.02). The council responsible for ordination and/or installation (G-2.0402; G-2.0607; G-3.0306) shall examine each candidate’s calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of ordered ministry. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate’s ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.0404) **], the Historic Principles of Church Order (F-3.01), and in the principles of participation and representation found in F-1.0403]**. Councils shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

By adding the “Historic Principles of Church Order,” this recommendation raises up the principles of individual conscience and mutual forbearance as well as inclusivity.

Perhaps just as important as the result was the discussion that led to it. Those who suggested the addition of the Historic Principles spoke with humility, and those who agreed to the changes made it clear they acknowledged the concerns of the minority. This is a huge improvement over the prior conflicts from a dozen years ago. While I don’t think our past conflicts led to physical violence, there were angry verbal attacks and the use of God’s name and word that approached spiritual abuse. I am encouraged that none of those attacks were brought back up.

In response to the assassination attempt of Donald Trump, there have been calls to dial down the vitriol in political rhetoric. Differences in policy are real and should be acknowledged, but there must also be concern for the humanity of political rivals. My hope is that this appeal for peaceable discourse will be honored. And I hope that our GA could continue to be a demonstration to this hurting world that differing opinions can be voiced in a context of mutual respect and love.

Praying for and pursuing peace,

Wendy