

God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Luke 4:18b-19

The Challenges of Inclusivity

General Assembly ended last week, as we all came home on the 4th of July. Thanks to technology, you can relive practically all of the GA by going to <https://ga-pcusa.org/>. There are videos of all the committee meetings and the plenary sessions last week that are easily accessed from that website.

When I look back on this GA, especially the plenary meetings, I was impressed with the generous spirit that seemed to permeate the body. There were multiple stories of folks, especially queer folks, who found love and acceptance in our churches. It seems that the Presbytery of Utah has a calling to be a welcoming community of faith in a state that is dominated by a church—the Mormon Church—that stands firm against homosexuality. But stories also came from commissioners and advisory delegates from many places, stories that celebrated opportunities to be a safe space for folks who have been ostracized, condemned, or hurt by churches in the past.

Indeed, it seemed to me that the word that most characterized this GA was inclusivity. Not only was there inclusion of LGBTQ folks, but there was great support shown to the new Stated Clerk, Jihyun Oh. Jihyun, who is Korean-American, is the first Stated Clerk who is a woman of color; Bronwen Boswell was the first woman Stated Clerk (though it was for the one-year interim before Jihyun was elected). We know Jihyun because she preached at both Knox and Interwoven just over a year ago, when many national staff members visited Southern California. She has also been the active champion of the Intercultural Development Inventory, which we used a couple of years ago to assess San Gabriel Presbytery's level of inclusion of people from various cultures.

In my estimation, this was also the GA when conservatives found their voice again. For several GAs now, I have felt that the conservative commissioners have been present but marginalized to the point of being silenced. I remember the last time we met fully in person (that was 2018!), and there were conservative debriefs each evening, and a very small group of folks attended, but I don't remember any of them speaking on the floor of plenary. In this GA, there was more comment from conservatives, partly in response to an overture, POL-01, which seemed to put pressure on people seeking ordination to speak in favor of LGBTQ inclusion.

Being such a “big tent” denomination has its challenges. For instance, one of the two biggest controversies in this GA was actually an old one, the push to divest from the fossil fuel industry. Led partly by the passionate and articulate advocacy of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates (YAADs), the plenary approved the recommendation of the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee, to call for immediate divestment from the fossil fuel industry (per overture ENV-02, with which San Gabriel Presbytery concurred). This overture bypasses the Mission Responsibility through Investment (MRTI) process, which takes many years of engagement with individual companies before possible divestment from an entire industry. The MRTI process has been upheld by the major investing agencies of the denomination, namely the Board of Pensions and Presbyterian Foundation. Those agencies only divest based on the decisions of the MRTI, so they resisted any immediate divestment, even if it was directed by the General Assembly.

But perhaps more compelling was the progress that has been achieved with the [Lowlander Center](#) in Southeastern Louisiana, a nonprofit that works with Indigenous communities like the Pointe au Chien Indian Tribe and others, and faith groups like the PC(USA), to advocate for restoration of coastal and bayous lowlands from the damage done by hurricanes and fossil fuel companies such as ConocoPhillips. Because MRTI facilitated direct contact with ConocoPhillips which resulted in some restoration of their wetlands, the tribe has asked for MRTI to continue to be in engagement with them and with ConocoPhillips.

Faced with the desire to continue work with the local Indigenous peoples and nonprofit workers in the area, and the investing agencies' resistance to comply with immediate divestment, the GA ended up rescinding their original support for immediate divestment of the entire industry, but inserted into the MRTI's recommendation to demand immediate divestment from the ten companies that most profit from fossil fuel exploration, development, and production of fossil fuels and with which there will be no promising engagement. This was a major disappointment from the environmental activists and especially the YAADs, so while there was appreciation for all sides, ultimately the GA chose to continue the course with the Indigenous communities and the existing policy commitment to MRTI.

That sounded complicated, and it is, but it is indicative of the complexity that the PC(USA) faces when attempting to use our significant investment resources in a way that promotes justice and other priorities of the church, such as protecting the environment—and to gauge the level of crisis voiced by the next generation of church leaders, namely the YAADs. The Assembly acted with concern for Indigenous peoples, nonprofit partnerships, individuals committed to existing practices, environmentalists who were on both sides of the discussion, young adults, and all those who receive benefits from the Board of Pensions and the national church. Such is the goal for every GA, that the many people impacted by decisions of the GA be heard and considered with compassion and respect.

The other issue that took the most discussion was the overture called POL-01, but it will take another column to explore it. In the meantime, I ask for prayers for the folks who have returned from GA, especially as several of them contracted COVID at the event. And may God continue to bless and work through the PC(USA), as we continue to seek to discern and follow God's will in all we do.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Wendy".