

Do you not know that God's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to try trivial cases? *1 Corinthians 6:2*

### **Body Judgment**

I began writing this column from Louisville, having just finished a meeting of the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC). This is my fourth year of a six-year term, and I continue to be amazed at the amount of work the volunteers of the GAPJC put into this service. There is one commissioner from each synod. About half the commissioners work for the church at some level, so they are not having to give up vacation time to do this. About half the commissioners are attorneys. (Those two groups are not mutually exclusive; at least one or two were attorneys before they started working in the church.)

In this meeting we held a hearing of the first GAPJC case considered under the new “Church Discipline” section of the *Book of Order*, and I was asked to be the chair of the case committee. This was the first time I chaired a case committee, and it was extremely daunting. The best description of the case committee's role is to be the “law clerk” for the GAPJC; we were to do all the research and writing, but it was up to the full commission to make the decisions. To be honest, since we were also commissioners, we were considered as the content experts, so we did have quite a bit of influence.

We had a small case committee—just three of us. I was blessed to have on the team Chad Herring from Kansas and our old friend Rocky Supinger, formerly of Claremont, who is still at Fourth Presbyterian, that grand old church in Chicago. We did quite a bit of prep work before the meeting, but crunch time came when everyone gathered, for three days, pretty much meeting from 8 am to 11 pm, in worship, discussion, a hearing, much deliberation, and a lot of writing. It's actually pretty impressive to see this group, which is in my limited experience the most conscientious group of volunteers focused on one specific task for the national church. It reminds me of the General Assembly, which calls on hundreds, maybe thousands, of folks to organize and deliberate in a meeting that spans weeks in intense discernment of God's will for our church and our role in the world.

As I write this, I'm aware that the number of hours that church members give to their congregations—and the 100 or so volunteers we have serving San Gabriel Presbytery, like the other 165 presbyteries in the PC(USA)—is immeasurable. And your work is not focused on a few meetings a year or one big assembly every two years; the faithful service to one's congregation is constant. I'm also aware that there are many people working through Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and many other programs, and that's just in this one denomination.

One does have to marvel at the ways Jesus calls us into action, and the number of people who respond with consistent, persistent, diligent, faithful service, many for most of their lives. Thanks be to God!

I don't know enough about other faith traditions to know for sure, but we Presbyterians have the reputation of spending an inordinate amount of our precious volunteer time doing the “business” of church. It can actually feel, to some, to be a waste of energy, to work so hard in making decisions, en masse with strict procedures to ensure everyone is heard. I guess that's what happens in a church that points back to an attorney/pastor/theologian/political leader as its theological lead (for those who don't know, I mean John Calvin—though John Knox might also fit this description, for Scottish Presbyterians at least). And it continues, partly because we tend to attract members who believe in this kind of self-determination.

So why do we do it?

We Presbyterians hold certain work principles as very important. Though we don't often say them out loud, they infuse the way we live together. It's like breathing—we don't usually talk or even think about breathing, but we rely on it—and we'd make a ruckus if we couldn't do it anymore!

I'd say one of our most valued principles is the priesthood of all believers, which means every one of us has a ministry, and we are all gifted to reflect God's greatness and wisdom in making us. We also believe that we did not choose the congregation we connect with—God put us there, and God had a reason for doing so. Together, we are the body of Christ, and we cannot discern the will of God, or reflect God's glory to the world as individuals; we can only be the body of Christ as a gathered people. And in the United States, we believe in the separation of church and state—not meaning we separate ourselves from the rest of the world, but we don't want the state to tell us what to do in our church.

Interestingly, this all clicked for me when I was in Hawai'i, attending a meeting on Hawaiian sovereignty at the mother church for native Hawaiians, Kawaiaha'o. One of the speakers was a Native American law professor who specializes in sovereignty, Rebecca Tsosie. She is Yaqui, a tribe based in Mexico and Arizona. Besides teaching, she works as an appellate judge for two tribal court systems in Arizona. She made a strong case for Native people to hold themselves accountable, because she asserted that an essential characteristic of a sovereign people is the ability to govern and police themselves. Her question seemed a parallel to Paul's question to the Corinthians: how can you expect others to respect your sovereignty unless you can show that you can manage and even correct the people in your community?

Indeed, it is a sign of mature self-governance when a community can discern their common values and rules of life together, and even better when they can elect and entrust a smaller group to support, guide, correct, and even admonish their own church community. And that's what we do in the Presbyterian Church. It's why we move so slowly to decide on things, have so many meetings, and yes even argue so much—because we believe that the best way forward is together, even if it takes time to meet and pray with each other to find the path, decide together what to do about it, and hear the more reluctant members of the community as they say their peace about the decisions, believing all members have wisdom to share, whether or not they agree with the majority.

Two weeks from tomorrow, the people of the United States are called to contribute their wisdom through voting. I pray that you do so as you are guided by the Holy Spirit, as we seek to live out our faith in our jobs, our personal relationships, and in our civic engagement. May God guide all of us to determine a future of peace and justice for all people in the United States, and to use our resources in wise and compassionate leadership for the sake of all the world's peoples.

With prayers for faithful wisdom,

*Wendy*