

Update on PCUSA's 223rd General Assembly -- June 16-23, 2018

by Rev. Scott Mann, GA Observer

The General Assembly of our denomination acted on hundreds of issues as a response to the biblical mandate to be God's faithful people in this world: seeking justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God. Christian forbearance and respect again marked the spirit of the assembly. I am grateful BelPres sent me as an observer and contributor where possible. As expected our Presbyterian family agreed on most issues and worked hard to listen and seek a way forward on issues of disagreement. Please note that local congregations and individuals are free to agree or disagree with denominational decisions and none of these actions require or forbid any ministry decisions at BelPres. Below are my reflections on several GA actions and I am glad to answer questions about these or any GA actions or process. Please contact me at smann@belpres.org or 425-454-3082.

Overview—General Assembly is our representative denominational church council convened every two years. It must take action on all business that properly comes to it from regional presbyteries and other PCUSA groups. Each presbytery elects equal numbers of pastors and elders and they are entrusted to study, listen, debate, and discern the will of God to the best of their ability. GA elected two women as Co-Moderators of PCUSA, an African-American woman as new Chief Executive for the Presbyterian Mission Agency, and an African-American man serves as PCUSA's Stated Clerk.

Israel/Palestine & Peacemaking—GA again sought to advocate for peace in the world, the Middle East and particularly in Israel/Palestine. We reaffirmed PCUSA's support for a two state solution including Jerusalem's status, grassroots efforts bringing together Israelis and Palestinians, human rights for all Israeli citizens especially minorities, positive investment in the region, concern about violence in Gaza and Israeli land use in occupied areas, reaching out in open dialogue with our Jewish interfaith colleagues, and freedom of speech. GA prayed for, encouraged, and actively supported the ancient Christian communities and our partners especially in the Middle East. As usual, GA sought to moderate a third way when proposals were overly partisan and as usual GA's actions are being misrepresented in the media. I urge fact checking media reports with primary sources or simply talk to me.

GA also urged peace efforts in Syria, Iran, South Sudan, North Korea, Nicaragua, Central America, Madagascar, and Yemen.

LGBTQIA+—GA approved a resolution affirming several things including the full dignity of transgendered persons and their right to be free from violence and injustice. It also gave thanks for those seeking how best to show hospitality and Christian love to sexual minorities despite theological differences.

Stewardship of Creation—GA again reaffirmed our process of corporate engagement through investment. We celebrated some progress with influencing large fossil fuel corporations toward better stewardship of the environment. GA voted against divesting from fossil fuels, preferring to advocate in cooperation with our partners as corporate shareholders. GA promoted environmental justice.

Other Issues—Among many other actions, GA called for an end to separation of families at the border, strengthened policies against misconduct, harassment and abuse, issued recommendations for drug policy including opioid abuse, and condemned racist nationalism and gender injustice especially for women of color. GA advocated for suicide prevention, prevention of gun violence, and a moratorium on US executions. PCUSA commended MLK's *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*. Hundreds of Presbyterians marched to protest St Louis' practice of cash bail and took an offering to release some detainees awaiting due process. PCUSA continues to support outstanding mission work around the world.

The Future of PCUSA—GA adjusted its governing structure and initiated a review of its funding model, recognizing that per capita should be increased as little as possible while still allowing for the Church to fulfill its essential mission. GA urged expansion of paid family leave and approved reduced budgets to reflect a shrinking denomination.

PCUSA Statistics—PCUSA has 9300 churches with 1.415M members, a decline of 43% over 20 years. We are 90% white. 72% of churches have under 150 members (66% under 100). 72% of Presbyterians are in 300+ member churches. The recent wave (since 2012) of over 600 church departures has abated, over half to ECO, the most recently formed Presbyterian denomination. PCUSA has launched 540 new worshipping communities in the last several years.

People repeatedly thanked conservatives for staying in PCUSA and engaging so helpfully. Again, BelPres encourages anyone with denominational questions or concerns to contact me at smann@belpres.org or 425-454-3084 x3344. For the full list of GA actions, see www.pc-biz.org. Thank you very much for your prayers.