

The General Assembly opened this morning with a prayer for the Presbytery and the state of West Virginia because of Thursday's massive flooding. It is hard to follow the news from afar, although I'm not sure it's any easier back home because it seems that news is still trickling in about the extent of the damages and the numbers of deaths caused by the flooding. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance has reached out to us and will be sending emergency funds as we assess the damage and determine the needs. PDA volunteers are also on the way to help and should arrive in the state on Saturday. The Synod of the Trinity is also making funds available to help us. They may be able to send volunteers too. It is amazing to me how many people have asked how we're doing after they see on my name tag that I'm from West Virginia. There are at least a couple of commissioners here who have been on WVMAW work camps. Friends, we do not stand alone.

The first item of business on today's docket was the election of a new Stated Clerk. There were two candidates, J. Herbert Nelson, who's the director of the Washington office of the PC (U.S.A.), and David Baker, the stated clerk of Tampa Bay presbytery. Each had the opportunity to speak and then answer questions.

Some quotes from Nelson: "I believe we are not dying, but we are reforming." "To think only about the survival of the church means our aim is too low." "I suggest we take the labels off others and off ourselves."

Some quotes from Baker: "I believe the PC (U.S.A.) is at a crossroads." "I would prioritize the resourcing of the presbyteries which resources the local congregations." "We can leverage technology to provide resources."

Baker certainly tried to position himself as the young and tech savvy candidate. That seemed to be his basic platform. Nelson seems to position himself as the choice of the Stated Clerk Nominating Committee, as a pastor who had worked in urban churches and in new church developments, and as someone experienced in managing a staff and solving problems. I thought both were competent but Nelson impressed me more. Commissioners agreed as they elected J. Herbert Nelson as the next Stated Clerk of our denomination by a vote of 447-112.

The next item of business was an attempt to reconsider Item 11-05 which dealt with the acknowledgement of how some in the LGBTQ community had been hurt by the church in the past. The Assembly decided not to do that.

Committee 6 Church Polity and Ordered Ministry was up next. They developed their own consent agenda which they brought before the assembly. That dealt with 8 items of business. The Assembly then approved their recommendation to appoint a task force to revise the Rules of Discipline. In 2011 we adopted a New Form of Government and added a Foundations of Presbyterian Polity section to the Book of Order. This Assembly is sending out proposed revised Directory of Worship. So by the end of the decade the Book of Order will have been completely overhauled.

The assembly then approved the proposal to recommend that we basically substitute the phrase "Minister of the Word and Sacrament" for "Teaching Elder" in the Book of Order. I basically thought that was a weak argument (not that I get to vote) but the assembly decided to send it on to the presbyteries anyway.

The assembly then spent a great deal of time on Item 06-07 and 06-10 both of which sought to clarify the relationship to the PC (U.S.A.) of someone who had renounced the jurisdiction of the PC (U.S.A.) during judicial process (i.e. someone who has been accused of some kind of misconduct but chooses to leave the church rather than go through a trial in the church courts.) In the end the Assembly decided to send to the presbyteries for their vote this proposed amendment of G-2.0509 which would say, "Whenever a former teaching elder has renounced jurisdiction in the midst of a disciplinary proceeding as the accused, that former teaching elder shall not be permitted to perform any work, paid or volunteer, in any congregation or entity under the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and in any congregation or entity under the jurisdiction of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)"

unless and until the person rejoins the church, comes forward and resubmits to the disciplinary process.”

This was a fascinating conflict but one that wasn’t resolved until after lunch. Worship came next. The preacher was Jerry Andrews, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in San Diego and a friend of mine who performed the wedding of my daughter. The highlight of the service was the Rose City Jazz Quartet which played while we went up to receive communion.

After lunch the assembly was able to finally decide what they wanted to recommend about how we handle someone who renounces the jurisdiction of the church. They then debated whether we should require seminaries to provide training in evangelism. They decided they would encourage but not require that.

Item 06-09 was in some ways historic. The Synod of the Northeast was asking for approval to allow churches to elect ruling elders who could be commissioned individually or serve on the session. The committee recommended disapproval of this overture. The assembly disagreed. However when the vote was taken to approve the overture, the assembly also turned that down. I had never seen that happen before. In the end they voted to refer this proposal to the Office of the General Assembly.

Committee 11 – Social Justice Issues was up next. My notes indicate they only brought two items to the floor which took up very little time.

It was then the turn of Committee 8 - Middle East Issues. We’ve had mission involvement in that part of the world since 1823 and today we have 14 mission workers serving there. Item 08-02 called for Advocating for the Safety and Well Being of Children of Palestine and Israel. It sounds rather non-controversial. It was amended several times. I think there was also a substitute motion. Finally the main motion was approved 464-95.

Item 08-06 was a report from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy which was titled “Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace. There was a minority report. There were amendments. There was debate. It took a lot of time. Some people were unhappy. Some were frustrated. Everyone was tired. By the time we got around to perfecting the substitute motion we needed to take a break to eat dinner. Some people apparently wanted to keep going though because they voted against the motion to recess.

After we came back, the main motion was finally approved as amended by a vote of 429-129. I think all 129 people who voted “No” spoke on the floor.

Item 08-07 wasn’t much better. It called for “Prayerfully Studying the Palestinian Civil Society Call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions. “ That finally passed 407-146. It seemed to me that most people were willing to have a study on this, especially a prayerful study, even if they didn’t think it was a particularly good idea.

One of the most encouraging parts of this committee’s report was the brief presentation by the Presbyterian Foundation on their efforts on Positive Investment in Palestine. You can find a video on that at <https://vimeo.com/98103271>. It’s worth watching.

Committee 9 –Immigration and Environmental Issues then had their turn. Some items they presented were pretty non-controversial. The Assembly endorsed the Collaborative Agenda for Environmental Stewardship, recommended that “Caring for God’s Creation” be added as one of the responsibilities of church membership, and positively responded to the needs of our brothers and sisters who are refugees or internally displaced. Others were not. Item 09-12 On Advocacy Against Factory Farming was substantially amended after several farmers complained.

The Assembly then spent over an hour trying to decide what to do with the recommendation to divest from fossil fuel companies. In the end they decided to accept a minority report, which as I understand it, basically encouraged the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee to develop some criteria to engage the fossil fuel industry and work with them to reduce the impact they have on the environment. Someone described it as selective divestment from companies

that are unwilling to change or do anything to help protect the environment. Someone else said it was working with companies that share our values and divesting from those that don't.

We were all tired by that point – or really before that point – but there was only one more committee to go: Committee 12 - Peacemaking and International Issues. You would think that by now Presbyterians would be tired of making amendments. You would be wrong. Most of the committee's report was non-controversial. The Assembly did spend time dealing with Item 12-06 Risking Peace in a Violent World and on Item 12-01 which involved the acknowledgement of the killing of Korean civilians in July 1950. That was mostly but not completely because both items had financial implications. In the end, while there were plenty of amendments we were still able to get everything wrapped up. Not everyone was happy with the results, but they were happy to be done.

We adjourned for the night at about 10:45 PM. The day seemed longer than it actually was. We ended earlier today than we did on Thursday. On Saturday we will be done by noon, ending with a closing worship service with Larissa Kwong Abazia, the vice-moderator of the 221st General Assembly as the preacher.

There will be some business, mostly focusing on the financial implications of the actions taken earlier in the week. That's usually pretty tame but there could be some surprises this year. In the past we have been able to draw on reserves to cover the extra costs of the items added by the assembly. The Presbyterian Mission Agency though has consistently said throughout the week that any programs that are added will have to be paid for by dropping programs or a reduction in staff. We'll see what happens.

One final note: I know it must be time to go home because I'm running out of clean clothes.