

ECHOES OF ST. PAUL: A REPORT ON THE 219TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.)

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BY JACK HABERER, *Outlook* editor

About 900 commissioners and advisory delegates worshiped and prayed, deliberated and discerned, all aiming to advance the mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They gathered in Minneapolis under the theme, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living waters.”

However, this city has a twin. Few folks had time to wander over there, but St. Paul was just around the corner.



CYNTHIA BOLBACH

The other St. Paul was just around the corner, too. From the Apostle’s rejection of legalism in favor of freedom to his complex teachings on family, from his love of Israel to his vision of Jews’ and Gentiles’ union in Christ, from his proclamation of grace to his teachings on justice, his voice reverberated throughout the assembly hall.

As always, the GA began with the election of a moderator. Cynthia Bolbach, an elder and lawyer from Arlington, Va., was elected against a field of five ministers. The apostle who called all believers – not just clerics – to stir up their spiritual gifts might have smiled over that vote. Bolbach told the assembly: “Elders rule.”

After three days of working in committees, the commissioners voted to adopt a simplified Form of Government section of the church’s *Book of Order*. This mission-focused document, if ratified next year by a majority of the 173 presbyteries, will jettison hundreds of rules, entrusting judgment calls to local governing bodies.

The assembly voted to form a commission to accelerate the reorganization of some presbyteries and synods. They specified that the commission could act only with agreement by the affected governing bodies.

The GA voted to add the Belhar Confession to *The Book of Confessions*. Written in South Africa to eliminate Apartheid, it calls for an end to racism and subjugation, and calls for equal rights under the Lordship of Christ. Final adoption requires ratification by 2/3s of the presbyteries plus a final assembly vote in 2012.

The commissioners made peace among Middle East peacemakers. After several Jewish organizations erupted with cries of anti-Semitism this past spring over a report by the Middle East Study Committee, the GA committee struggled to find its way. Finally, a cluster of commissioners and other PC(USA) leaders huddled together across ideological lines, generating a set of amendments that were added by the assembly committee. In a stunning, Damascus Road moment – some leaders called it a miracle – the committee voted unanimously to adopt the modified document, and the Assembly followed with an 82 percent affirmative vote. Leaders of both the Jewish and Palestinian communities expressed their gratitude.

A second study that bridges theological understandings of Christians and Jews met resistance due to the absence of Palestinian Christians' participation in the study. The report was referred back to the writing team with instructions to consult with them and report back in 2012.

The commissioners did adopt for study a paper assessing theological understandings between Christians and Muslims.

The GA authorized a special committee to retranslate the Heidelberg Catechism – originally written in German in 1563. The committee identified scores of problems in the existing translation. They will join with scholars from the Reformed Church and the Christian Reformed Church who already are retranslating Heidelberg for their adoption.

The study of apostolic teaching on family life continues as the GA sent out for study both majority and minority reports addressing same-sex marriage. They took no action on calls to allow same-sex weddings in states where that is allowed.

The church's struggle to find one mind regarding the ordination of those in same-sex partnerships will be tested in presbyteries for the fifth time in 14 years, as they will be asked to ratify a new constitutional amendment (approved by 373 to 323). It requires officers to submit "joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ" in all aspects of life, but would remove the requirement that candidates for ordination live a life of "fidelity within a marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness."

Consistent with the denomination's longstanding commitment to equal rights for gays and lesbians, the GA called upon the Board of Pensions to provide medical benefits for those in committed same-gender relationships and their dependent children.

The Assembly also re-established its collegiate ministries department and passed resolutions on gun violence, poverty, the Afghanistan War, the Gulf oil spill, immigration, and women being coerced to end or continue a pregnancy. ●

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