

Report on GA from Beckie Price

I had the honor to serve on the Way Forward Committee, under the incredible leadership of Committee Moderator, Cindy Jarvis. I also had a preconceived notion on what this report would say - I was completely wrong. I left Pittsburgh feeling apprehensive about being a part of our church on a national stage. I returned overwhelmed in gratitude for having attended, ready to be a part of the next step forward in our denomination.

What I learned at GA is that this denomination is not just a group of people who collect per capita and print books about our rules. It is a collection of amazing people who share in the commitment of spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ; and the advantages of being connected to a larger denomination blessed with an abundance of resources is a gift that God has blessed us with, and we should be grabbing hold of more strongly.

As the Moderators and Stated Clerk were calling commissioners to be a presence in our communities, devastating flooding was happening a mile from my church. I was being taught what it really means to be a part of a national denomination, at the exact same time the incredible members in my church were working as a living, real-time example of what the local church should be in our community. I came home with information, and a sense of a larger identity, that my church needed to be able to continue their flood recovery efforts. We are now leaning on the strength and resources of our mid councils and national church organizations to sustain our commitment to disaster assistance now and in the future.

My experience at GA taught me to be proud again to be a part of the PCUSA. I would hope everyone would start to see our Presbyteries, our Synods and our General Assembly as an amazing network of truly wonderful people who are standing with us and wanting to help us bring Christ into our communities. We need to embrace our connectivity and do a better job of supporting each other, and also of asking each other for help. It is ok to agree to disagree on a specific vote or stance, because we all share the same priority of spreading the Good News of Christ, and we need each other to do it well.

Dan Beckstrom

It has been my privilege and pleasure to have had the opportunity to serve as a GA commissioner twice, first in 2010 and again this year. Both experiences were wonderful, times I will always remember. It is great to see our polity and processes at work. A few differences that I experienced this year:

1. 2010 was a different time that seems long ago. We were still wrestling with theological issues that divided us on ordination standards and marriage. At that time I was a member of a congregation that has since left the PCUSA over those issues and a cloud of “What will the folks back home think about this?” weighed heavily on me. It was refreshing this year to have those contentious issues behind us. I can’t imagine that any of the issues dealt with this year will motivate anyone to depart from the denomination.
2. In 2010, with the PCUSA sharply divided on the issues of ordination and marriage, one of the plenary sessions was interrupted by a peaceful demonstration. This year the demonstration took place in the streets, not an expression of internal disagreement, but to seek social justice for the people of St. Louis. St. Louis has a justice system that requires cash bail even for non-violent misdemeanors. I was part of a group of about 400 that marched to the courthouse to deliver the proceeds from the offering collected at the Assembly’s opening worship service to a local organization helping the poor with bail money. Over \$47,000 was raised to release pre-screened prisoners in need. Even though we were disrupting normal traffic flow in downtown St. Louis, many people passing by waved and shouted their support of what we were doing to help the poor in their community.
3. 2018 gave me an entirely different perspective on the Young Adult Advisory Delegates or YAADs. In 2010 the YAADs serving on my committee sat together and could be heard whispering how they would vote on many of the overtures we were reviewing. In an attempt to avoid the appearance of voting as a block, one or two would volunteer to abstain such that the final committee vote on some overtures was 41-0 with 2 abstentions. Odd. This year what I saw was much better. Several of the YAADs on my committee were well engaged in the process. We approved an overture addressing “The Challenge of Being Black in the PCUSA”. YAAD Kennerly Benratty of Norfolk VA spoke so passionately to the committee that he was invited by our committee moderator to present the overture at the plenary where he received a well deserved ovation. Overall, I came away with the impression that the YAADs do a great job informing each other of what to expect from each committee at the plenary. If the YAADs are the future leaders of the PCUSA, our denomination will be in good hands.
4. In 2010 the opening worship service was held on Sunday morning with thousands of area Presbyterians attending. Although it was a great service to experience, I prefer the way it was done this year. This year the opening worship was held on Saturday with local congregations hosting commissioners for Sunday morning worship. While registering for my GA experience, I remembered that the moderator of the committee I had served on in 2010 was from Giddings-Lovejoy Presbytery. I chose to attend her church on Sunday. The service was to be held in what they believe to be the oldest church west of the Mississippi – a small one room structure with no heat or running water, thus they only use the building a few times a year. When I learned the day before that the pastor I was hoping to see again had recently accepted another call in another presbytery, I considered avoiding port-a-johns and a picnic in 95 degree heat, but stuck with my original plan. The service and hospitality I experienced were exceptional. To hear traditional hymns played by a 3-piece jazz band was an unexpected treat. The sermon told the story of Rev. Elijah Pershing Lovejoy who had briefly served this congregation. In addition to

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serving in the ministry, Rev. Lovejoy had a printing press and wrote and published anti-slavery articles. He was shot and killed by a pro-slavery mob before his 35th birthday in 1837. His death heightened the resolve of those opposed to slavery in such a way that his death had more impact than the limited distribution articles he wrote could have produced. The hosting presbytery of GA223 is named in his honor.

5. The opportunity to get to know fellow commissioners is another part of the experience. This year I had a great roommate – Rob Marrow. Sorry Rob, but I had an even better roommate experience in 2010 as my daughter, Kristin Widrich, was a commissioner from Charleston South Atlantic presbytery. The opportunity to share the GA experience as commissioners with her was priceless.

Commissioner Report on the 223rd General Assembly of the PC(USA)

Rev. Robert J. Marrow – Teaching Elder Commissioner

I would like to begin my report by thanking Pittsburgh Presbytery for the honor that I was granted to serve as a Commissioner for the 223rd General Assembly of the PC(USA) in St. Louis, MO. This was my first opportunity to serve as a Commissioner. One thing I can say with certainty, the week was filled with activity. I am extremely grateful to serve Christ in this capacity.

One of the highlights for me was the opportunity for daily worship. Each day, the worship was inspiring. On Sunday, the commissioners visited many of the congregations in the St. Louis area. I worshipped with the First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood, MO., where an old friend of mine, Rev. Dr. David Holyan, is the Sr. Pastor. The congregation also hosted a youth group from Virginia for the Hands and Feet Initiative held in the St. Louis area during the General Assembly. I enjoyed hearing their story.

I was assigned to serve on Committee 9, Peacemaking, Immigration, and International Issues. We had a total of 13 overtures and resolutions to consider. Committee work was scheduled to end on Tuesday afternoon. If the start of our first day was any indication of our finishing on that schedule, I truly thought that we may be in HUGE trouble. Fortunately, the afternoon and evening meetings went more smoothly. One of the bright spots of my committee work was seeing a familiar face as an Overture Advocate. Pittsburgh Presbytery concurred with a resolution from Shenango Presbytery concerning South Sudan. Rev. Dave Carver was the Overture Advocate from Pittsburgh Presbytery. Dave and two other advocates, along with mission workers and committee personnel presented and defended their case. The overture passed committee and moved on to the Assembly, where it also passed. Committee work can be tedious and difficult. We had approximately 60 commissioners on our committee. Each with their own level of understanding on each topic as well as a desired outcome for each item. Each individual possessed a level of familiarity with the process of committee work. Yes, Roberts Rules can be challenging. The committee discovered early on in its work the joy of parliamentary procedure when a substitute resolution was brought forth for consideration. We negotiated the process, slowly. But a well negotiated outcome was brought to the plenary from our committee.

Overall, I found the General Assembly to be sort of a very large session meeting... on steroids. There were so many items presented for discussion and vote, one could quickly lose track of what was happening on the floor. Each item had plenty of supporting documentation to read as background material along with the opinions of several agencies that deal with the area of concern. I was quite impressed with the electronic gadgetry that is utilized to read the business documents (PC-Biz), the behind the scenes work on tabulating the votes by the PC(USA) staff, as well as the visual wizardry they employed to make the happenings of the Assembly easily visible to all in the Plenary Room.

One aspect of the General Assembly that I found to be fascinating was our Young Adult Advisory Delegates (YAAD's) and Theological Student Advisory Delegates (TSADS). I see hope for the future of our denomination. Oh, don't misunderstand me on this one. I often disagreed with the decisions, thought processes and the proposals that were presented by these individuals. Often-times their contributions indicated a lack of understanding of Presbyterian Polity and sound budgeting principals. However, they demonstrate a definite willingness to learn. Many of these individuals also demonstrated a high level of intelligence and a desire to passionately serve Christ. With additional education and guidance from the church, they will hopefully gain a more wholistic understanding of the complexity involved in GA decisions. They are fully engaged and involved in making valuable contributions to Christ's church.

Once again, I am grateful for this opportunity to serve as a commissioner from Pittsburgh Presbytery for the 223rd General Assembly of the PC(USA). It was truly a blessing to serve the body of Christ, alongside of colleagues and friends, while doing the work of Christ. I will continue to keep our presbytery and denomination in prayer for the vitality of our witness to the world as a valued portion of the body of Christ.

Rebecca Abbott

The 223 general Assembly of PCUSA was exhausting and emotional and exiting and exhilarating all at the same time. I did not know what would lay ahead of me when I accepted the nomination to go, but it turned out to be a challenge that I would not trade for anything. I did not know at first how this time was shaping me.

My first impressions were that it was amazing to be in community with so many likeminded people; people within a decade of my age as well as all ages. This was a group who is living out God's plan with social justice in the forefront of their minds who practice loving daily without judgement of others to make our kingdom one where it was apparent God is here! Affirmation was a word used often among the TSAD's to describe the environment we were working to achieve.

What I thought would be the most important things to me in the beginning was the overture on a grant for Mental Illness as I have learned in the last 2 years that many people suffer from mental illness and many churches hurt this group of people by telling them they are not Christian enough or making them feel like outsiders in their own congregations. Also, Middle East issues often weigh heavy on my heart as many people discriminate and hate on Islamic people without knowing their heart or story first. I was least interested in anything having to do with church politics or money. Of course, with God's funny sense of humor, I was on Church Polity and ordered ministry.

The kinship and affirmation were apparent when one of the YAAD's came out as bisexual on the plenary floor with his parents potentially watching the lives stream at home. Immediately after his miraculous confession, he was surrounded by a group of people (YAADS, TSADS as well as a co-moderator) helping him to know he made the right choice and feel supported.

Something that struck me deeply was when we were talking about the #metoo pins. I was telling a pastor friend from Washington County about how I get into arguments with some friends over the meaning behind it. There was another pastor at the table who mention how passionate I am about the subject and asked me if I had a story about it. My jaw dropped, the eyebrows went up on the woman next to me, and the woman next to him almost kicked him under the table. I asked if he knew what that meant, and after he replied yes, and I don't have to share I declined. I was completely taken out of my comfort zone by surprise which does not very often happen. Instead, I shared a story that spoke to the condition of our society and how victims get treated as the ones also at fault and how often even family members blame various types of abuse on the woman rather than the man committing the travesties. He thanked me for sharing and we changed the subject. I still felt uneasy about the situation. The next day, before we left God had our paths cross time and time again. Wondering what God was up to, I finally sat down with him when we ended up at the same restaurant for lunch. Before he left, he shared how thankful he was that I was willing to talk to him about that subject. He said it really moved him deeply because he wants to be a person who is there to help woman in need and point them in the right direction and my feedback and input further inspired him to want to help, as well as ways to act where he was from in Florida. After remembering that God sometimes works wonders when we are pushed outside of our comfort zone and feeling that this is a social justice issue that I want to address as well as one that other may need to address, I decided to make the next theme for TRAIL group discussion #metoo so woman and men can share their stories in a safe space.

Rebecca Abbott

By far my largest take away is the power that each of us holds if we chose to utilize it. Between the #metoo moment and listening to how the Young Adult Advisory Delegates want vote because they want to make a bigger difference, or how they want to be an Elder without having to serve on a counsel, I began to realize that some of us are missing the power we hold. You do not have to be a commissioned ruling elder to make a positive impact in our kingdom. Every person in our Presbytery (and world) has a unique story to share with a valid and meaningful message. We shouldn't be afraid to share our stories as they may help other people to overcome, or move others to be more compassionate, or even create a new inclusive environment among our churches where others feel alienated when really, they should feel like the belong. Church is not somewhere that perfect people go, it is a place where we come together, broken, and find healing. When we begin talking to one another, that healing can begin, and when we begin talking to the world, we can shine Jesus light, so others can see.

So, now you can see why this time in St. Louis was hard, but it was worth every ounce of energy. Thank you for sending me.

Tami Hooker

How could I have gotten so old, been so committed to social justice issues, especially those surrounding the incarcerated, and never been in a protest march? It's actually a bit embarrassing. Fear not! I had the chance to correct that at GA. So off I went, joining with hundreds of others to protest the cash bail system that unfairly impacts the poor. And once we arrived at the justice center, our stated clerk, Rev. J. Herbert Nelson speaking into a microphone asked those locked inside, "Can you hear us?" As someone who has seen the faces of inmates when they realized they have not been forgotten I knew they could hear us, were in fact straining to catch every sound they could and were soaking it in. What probably surprised them was that despite all the concrete between us, we "saw" them.

People wanting and deserving to be seen was a theme for me throughout the General Assembly. But like all people asking to be seen, those I encountered meant they wanted to be seen not through the lenses of those looking who might be tempted to define for them how they should feel or behave. They wanted to be seen as they identified themselves.

I encountered this early in my committee work. I served on the Mission Coordination Committee where we discussed requests to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and to see our indigenous Native brothers and sisters as the first inhabitants of this land, the need for an LGBTQ+ advocacy committee, overtures regarding relationship agreements with historically racial ethnic institutions and the Presbyterian women, a request for a grant so we might better serve God's children who struggle with mental illness and those who seek to care for them, and a mutual ministry agreement with Presbyterians from Cuba. I confess that the obvious relief from the advocate for the last overture caused me some sadness. What kind of welcome had he anticipated that made our unanimous vote such a relief, I wondered. Was he afraid we would see him through the lenses of politics rather than the lenses of shared Christian faith?

The plenary sessions provided more examples of people asking to be seen. They included those who had been affected by gun violence (as we all have been to a lesser or greater extent), the inhabitants of Puerto Rico still suffering from the effects of the hurricane that devastated their island, and immigrants who feared being marginalized by our church as they had been marginalized by our country. And I admit to being filled with gratitude and hope with the responses all those people received and the willingness of our church to see as they asked to be seen.

However, the request to be seen that surprised me the most was one that began in my committee. It was an overture regarding small churches requesting that we recognize membership numbers alone do not indicate the health of a church but a more comprehensive approach should be taken when determining vitality and the need of assistance. As this was discussed in committee, and I listened to the stories that were shared, I came to understand that many in these churches feel invisible in our denomination. They want us to see that they are doing ministry in Jesus' name and being faithful with the number of members and resources they have. It was a good reminder that the God who sees the marginalized in society also sees those who year in and year out continue to serve with whatever resources they have been blessed with. I wanted to shout, "Well done good and faithful servants. Can you hear us? Because we can see you and the ministry you do in Jesus' name".

My experience at General Assembly was a reminder that everyone deserves to be seen – even those we sometimes take for granted.

Reflections on the 223rd General Assembly **Trent Hancock**

This was my second stint as a commissioner to the General Assembly, and it was a vastly different experience. In 2010, I served as a commissioner from the Presbytery of Philadelphia and was assigned to the committee that recommended the change from “fidelity and chastity” to our current ordination standards. At that Assembly, we also received a controversial report on the Middle East – and a complete minority report. The votes on nearly every major issue were divided, 60-40. On the final day of the Assembly, protestors advocating for the church’s recognition of *all* marriages, were removed, peacefully, from the floor. Some in handcuffs. “Conservatives” wore Hawaiian shirts, and “Liberals” wore rainbow scarves to indicate which team they were on.

This year seemed tame, by comparison. A lot of good feeling, a lot of inclusion, and a lot of honest talk about how far we still need to go. Our world, and our church, has changed a lot, and while I would never hope for a return to the fights of 2010, I also had a sense that in the midst of the real progress we have made, and the new commitment, even zeal, to be a welcoming church, we have, perhaps, become somewhat blind to what we have lost. The reason for the good feeling, and the sense of belonging experienced by many for the first time, is that those with whom we disagree were largely not there. They have left. We have created a bigger tent for ourselves, and we should be justly glad about that, but as our tent gets bigger, in particular ways, we are in danger, I fear, of that big tent becoming an echo chamber for like-minded voices.

I am hopeful for our church. The Gospel continues to be proclaimed in new and powerful ways, and to see and hear about it, first hand, is a real privilege. But, I also hope that in the midst of our celebrations, for the new things God is doing among us, that we not forget our brothers and sisters who now feel left out and left behind. I hope we can continue to have real theological dialogue as a church, loving each other even when we disagree, rather than settling for a false sense of unity.