

GOD IS TURNING THE WORLD:

THE 222ND GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.) » Portland, Oregon » June 18-25, 2016

BY LESLIE SCANLON, *Outlook* national reporter

Commissioners to the 2016 General Assembly sang “The Canticle of Turning” more than once while gathered in Portland to elect new leadership and consider business ranging from climate change to church confessions. They sang, “Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.”

After the assembly took several historic actions — choosing female co-moderators; adding the Confession of Belhar from South Africa to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions; and electing the PC(USA)’s first African-American stated clerk — this felt to many like a time of turning for the church.

Themes of reconciliation and justice — particularly racial justice — were woven through the week. Plenary sessions began with personal testimonies — for example, Therese Taylor-Stinson, moderator of National Capital Presbytery, describing her rise in leadership in her church and then hearing someone say: “The little colored girl is in charge today.” Participants recited together almost as a litany sections from the Belhar

confession, affirming the biblical mandate of unity won for us in Jesus Christ.

As the country struggled again in the wake of the violent massacre in Orlando, as floods devastated parts of the country, and as the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, Presbyterians sang, “This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which holds us bound, till the spear and rod can be crushed by God, who is turning the world around.” Prayerfully, the actions of the 222nd General Assembly are part of that transformation.

Some highlights of the assembly:

BELHAR. It took the PC(USA) two tries and more than six years to adopt Belhar — which was written in the heart of South Africa’s struggle against apartheid. It becomes the first PC(USA) confession from the global south. Godfrey Betha, vice moderator of the Uniting Reformed Church of Southern Africa, told the assembly: “Your decision affirms you say to your children, you say to all, ‘When you come to us looking for a glimmer of racism, don’t come to our church.’”

NEW AND DIVERSE LEADERSHIP. This assembly marked an historic change in leadership. On June 24, the assembly elected J. Herbert Nelson II, a third-generation Presbyterian pastor and the director of the denomination’s Office of Public Witness, to a four-year term as stated clerk, replacing Grady Parsons, who is retiring.

Nelson becomes the PC(USA)'s first African-American stated clerk. The assembly also made history in choosing T. Denise Anderson and Jan Edmiston, both teaching elders, as its co-moderators. It's the first time an assembly has elected co-moderators (rather than a moderator and vice moderator) and the first all-female moderatorial team; Anderson — who is African-American — is, at 37, the youngest moderator ever elected.

2020 VISION TEAM. Responding to an idea from its The Way Forward committee, the assembly voted to create a 15-person “2020 Vision Team” to set a new vision for the denomination by 2020. The vision team will draft a guiding statement to “help us to name and claim our denominational identity as we seek to follow the Spirit into the future.”

ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION. Responding in part to concerns raised by review committees for the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Office of the General Assembly, the assembly voted to create a 12-member administrative commission with the power to determine the structure and function of General Assembly agencies.

MIDDLE EAST. The assembly adopted an amended version of a report called “For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace” — which addresses Israel's violations of Palestinians' human rights. The assembly also reaffirmed the PC(USA)'s long-standing call for a

two-state solution in Israel-Palestine.

FOSSIL FUELS. Choosing an approach some described as a “middle way,” the assembly voted 391-161 to pursue a process of trying to influence energy companies through stockholder engagement rather than divesting comprehensively from fossil fuel companies. Some commissioners contended Presbyterians have a moral obligation to act swiftly and boldly to reduce their carbon footprint.

APOLOGY. By a vote of 463-51, the assembly stopped short of issuing an outright apology to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer or questioning — but voiced the church's deep “regret that, due to human failings, any person might find cause to doubt being loved by God” and the denomination's “deep sorrow” over members and congregations who have left over disagreements regarding sexual orientation.

HOPE. The new leaders both challenged the PC(USA) to become more diverse and engaged with a hurting world, and sounded a theological vision of hope. Edmiston called on Presbyterians to “look at what breaks God's heart in your neighborhood,” and then to act.

“We are not dead. We are alive,” Nelson said of the PC(USA). Led by God, “we are transforming the world, one person at a time.” ●
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