

From Past Moderators, Co-moderators, and Vice Moderators of The General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and Predecessor Church

Dear Siblings and Friends of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),

Grace and peace in the name of Jesus Christ our Brother, Savior, and Lord! We, as past Moderators, Co-Moderators, and Vice Moderators of previous General Assemblies, issue this statement out of grave concern for what occurred during the 224th General Assembly (2020) and the work we feel is yet undone in our walk with Jesus.

We watched with great joy as the Assembly elected two capable leaders as Co-Moderators, both of whom are BIPOC (an umbrella term for Black, Indigenous, and people of color), including our denomination's first Indigenous Moderator. We saw commissioners exhibit great enthusiasm for racial justice, even amid an abbreviated Assembly. However, we also witnessed micro- and macro- aggressions towards the Co-moderators, commissioners, corresponding members, BIPOC generally and Black women specifically in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). And, despite numerous attempts by commissioners, the 224th General Assembly adjourned without addressing the plight of Black women and girls.

As leaders who have been and continue to be deeply committed to dismantling racial and gender inequality, racial and gender inequity, and in calling out white supremacy and misogyny in the Church and in society as sin, what occurred at the 224th General Assembly was nothing short of white supremacy, white privilege, misogyny, and hypocrisy expressed as indifference, apathy, and outright inaction. These ubiquitous viruses are what is endemic in society, and, sadly, in the Church. You can well understand our moral indignation when we rightfully expected that we as a Church would have come a long way in translating our prayers and statements for #BlackLivesMatter to actual official, public actions by the Assembly that would confess, reckon with the truth, and repent.

Instead, the 224th General Assembly chose to do otherwise. The Assembly acted to defer to 2022 any consideration of Item 02-020, the Disparities Experienced by Black Women and Girls Task Force. The Assembly voted down an amendment to specifically name Black women and girls in Item 00-29, "On the Church in this Moment in History: Responding to the Sin of Racism and a Call to Action." The Assembly voted down one attempt to suspend the rules to allow for a discussion of a statement on Black women and girls, and then voted down by a narrow margin a second attempt to reconsider suspending the rules to allow for a discussion. The Assembly then considered new business concerning the creation of a task force to study the plight of the pre-born. That was voted down, but during a vigil of silence lamenting police violence against Black people, a commissioner who supported that new business displayed a sign in protest that read "Pre-born lives matter." While the diversity of perspectives is one of the things we treasure about our tradition, we should note that proclamations of "Black Lives Matter" have been co-opted in abortion debates, which have then been used in very racist ways to misrepresent abortion practices in Black communities and deflect from the realities of police brutality. This is,

once again, a racist affront to Black women, Black girls, and Black grief in a time when we were invited to sit with one another in that grief.

The torrent of signals and votes for inaction concerning Black women and girls grieves us. The Assembly did not heed the wise and prophetic counsel of two corresponding members — both of whom are Black women clergy — our fellow Moderator colleague, The Rev. Denise Anderson, and The Rev. Kerri Allen, moderator of the Task Force. Their advocacy for action was set aside and ignored. And, though ultimately corrected, we should wrestle with how we could have omitted The Rev. Dr. Joan Salmon Campbell, — the first Black woman Moderator of the reunited Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) — from the original memorial to recently-deceased Moderators.

What is at stake? Why are we emphatic and categoric in calling the Church's attention to this travesty and injustice? Read and internalize the words of the preface of the Task Force Report:

This report has been prepared in response to the immediate effects and long-term consequences of interpersonal and institutional violence perpetrated against black women and girls in U.S. society and in the PC(USA). This intersectional (race/gender) and multidimensional (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) violence manifests in dehumanizing expressions of black womanhood (e.g. pejorative stereotypes) and in theopolitical sanctioned and socially accepted practices of disenfranchising (e.g. policing, silencing, making invisible, criminalizing). The dehumanizing tropes are intended to negate black female identity and the disenfranchising practices serve to restrict black female access to resources and opportunities otherwise afforded to those who enjoy hegemonic race/gender/sexual privilege.

Had the 224th General Assembly considered this report, or suspended its own rules to discuss and consider a public statement, the Assembly and the wider Church would begin to grapple with the realities of our Black women and girl siblings, the violence perpetrated against them often in silence, and that for so many is fatal. The Assembly missed an opportunity, and we grieve that. But more than that, we weep because the Church which we love, in which we serve, and for which we continue to serve refused to declare unequivocally, "This must stop!"

As with this Assembly's theme, we pray and serve "From Lament to Hope." We call upon all of us, in all of our ministries — congregations, worshipping communities, fellowships, mid-councils, national agencies, theological institutions, historically-related colleges and universities, camps and conference centers, young adult volunteer sites, mission co-worker assignments, etc — to reckon with, confess, and repent of white supremacy, white privilege, and misogyny particularly against Black women and girls, for we believe, in the words of the Belhar Confession:

“ . . .that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream; that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged; that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others.”

May it be so.

Yours in the work of God's justice,

Elder (Dr.) Thelma Davidson Adair, Moderator, 188th GA (1976), UPCUSA

The Rev. John Fife, Moderator, 204th GA (1992), PC(U.S.A.)

Elder (Dr.) Patricia Brown, Moderator, 209th GA (1997), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. Dr. Fahed Abu-Akel, 214th GA (2002), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. Dr. Susan Andrews, Moderator, 215th GA (2003), PC(U.S.A.)

Elder Rick Ufford-Chase, Moderator, 216th GA (2004), PC(U.S.A)

The Rev. Dr. Byron A. Wade, Vice Moderator, 218th GA (2008), PC(U.S.A)

The Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow, Moderator, 218th General Assembly (2008), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. Landon Whitsitt, Vice Moderator, 219th GA (2010), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. Dr. Neal D. Presa, Moderator, 220th GA (2012), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. Larissa Kwong Abazia, Vice Moderator, 221st GA (2014), PC (U.S.A.)

Elder (Dr.) Heath Rada, Moderator, 221st GA (2014), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. T. Denise Anderson, Co-Moderator, 222nd GA (2016), PC (U.S.A.)

The Rev. Dr. Jan Edmiston, Co-Moderator, 222nd GA (2016), PC (U.S.A.)

Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, Co-Moderator, 223rd GA (2018), PC(U.S.A.)

The Rev. Cindy Kohlmann, Co-Moderator, 223rd GA (2018), PC(USA)

An Open Letter to the 224th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA)

You, the 224th General Assembly, particularly the white commissioners and advisory delegates, have harmed us.

The 224th General Assembly took place in an unprecedented time. The result, however, was a set-up: a concentrated time of systemic maintenance with little room for the Holy Spirit to move. The process options and rules fostered divide-and-conquer, looking-good strategies at the expense of meaningful action. Your actions for Black Lives were insufficient. You deleted lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning/queer, Two-Spirit, intersex, asexual, and other orientations and genders (LGBTQ2SIA+) persons, Brown people, Black women and girls, Native Americans, Arab Americans, Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Desi Americans, and Hispanic/Latinx people out of hastily-written, unvetted policies. You focused like a laser on financial implications without any consideration of their oppressive, marginalizing, and colonialist implications and ramifications. You chose efficiency and expediency, while disenfranchising the exact communities which you then lifted up as illustrations of supposed denominational diversity and inclusion. Any shortfall was blamed on technology and the pandemic.

Even as you desultorily participated in some racial justice oriented work, you made no space to mention the disproportionate impact of the pandemic:

- the high rates of death among Black and Indigenous communities,
- Indigenous communities suffering from starvation and lack of resources while neighboring white communities grow rich from Native American money,
- the high rates of infections among Hispanic/Latinx communities,
- the high rates of hate crimes against Asian Americans
- the extreme vulnerability faced by undocumented immigrants, many of which are considered essential workers and are not afforded equal protections or resources

People are dying, and you asked, "Can you hear me?" People are lamenting, living with fear, and you galloped past into hope and celebration with condescension - and without the genuine truth-telling, repentance, and humility which Biblical hope invites.

You called upon the Creator of Breonna Taylor, of Nina Pop, of Oluwatoyin Salau, of Alexa Negrón Luciano with a prayer for Black women and girls that was exceedingly harmful. It was insufficient action at the time, and it was also offensive, patriarchal, and violent.

You erased the impact of young adults. Not providing for committees to meet and do needed work during the assembly inhibited all advisory delegates, many of whom are young adults, from exercising voice AND vote as influence on the business of the assembly. You disenfranchised young adults who are a part of our body of leaders now, not just in "the future."

You dared, as a General Assembly, to correct and parse the definitions of Brown and Black, and Black female and Black male, and in so doing you silenced Brown and Black voices.

We expect better. We expect compassionate, justice-oriented policies that systematically eviscerate the harm of oppression caused by the church that we love and support.

We expect that our denomination will Trust Black Women and Girls.

Today we call upon the great cloud of witnesses, particularly the Black women and girls, Native Americans, Arab Americans, Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Desi Americans, and Hispanic/Latinx saints, those we name BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), who have suffered through the creation, splits, and reunification of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They did not receive what was promised in the rhetoric of our Church in the past. We did not receive what is promised in our present.

We never needed white folks, white institutions, or white systems to authenticate us. This lament is a declaration of justification, which does not require your permission (cf. Romans 5:1-5). This lament demands respect, and calls upon the justice of God to be made manifest in this denomination.

Do better, Presbyterians.

We also told the ancestors; jagenagenan bsendagewat. (All our relations - they are listening)

Signed,

Kerri N. Allen, Teaching Elder, Corresponding Member to the 224th General Assembly;
Moderator Predicament of Black Women and Girls Task Force; Chair Mission Responsibility
through Investment

[Lindsey Anderson](#), Teaching Elder, Presbytery of Detroit; Corresponding Member to the 224th
General Assembly, outgoing Chair General Assembly Nominating Committee

Ashley DeTar Birt, Teaching Elder, Presbytery of New York City; Member Predicament of Black
Women and Girls Task Force; Co-Moderator of More Light Presbyterians

Nataliy Kremes-Parks, Student, Youth Advisory Delegate for the 224th General Assembly,
Presbytery of the Western Reserve.

Laura Mariko Cheifetz, Teaching Elder, Presbytery of Middle Tennessee; Corresponding
Member to the 224th General Assembly, Co-Moderator of the Special Committee on Financial
Sustainability and Per Capita

Anna Kendig, Teaching Elder, Moderator of the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area

Amy Kim Kyremes-Parks, Christian Educator, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, Presbytery of the
Western Reserve

Shavon Starling-Louis, She/her/hers, Teaching Elder, Hunterville, NC, Presbytery of Charlotte

Lauren Theresa Mosadum Randall Sanders, Candidate, Ruling Elder, Heartland Presbytery

Eric A. Thomas, Teaching Elder, Presbytery of New York City

Jessica Vazquez Torres, member, Presbytery of Greater Atlanta

Larissa Kwong Abazia, Teaching Elder, Monmouth Presbytery

Amaury Tañón-Santos, Teaching Elder, Albany Presbytery

Addendum

Some of you will ask what you can do. We have two suggestions:

The first is to actually act upon all the excellent policies already in place throughout the church. We suggest they be funded and everyone be equipped to live them out, instead of pushing them off onto one token staff member.

The second is to create cultures that stop disempowering and start equipping your existing equity accountability systems (like CORs - Committees on Representation, or anti-racism commissions) within the church, and that you raise the bar and hold yourselves to account in meaningful, personal and systemic ways. One possibility is to create roles at every council level whose sole purpose entails thinking strategically with commissions, committees, and entities about how to fulfill these expectations. These new positions need to ensure that there is lived accountability in 100 Witherspoon, and throughout the Church. No more lip service about how the right policy needs to be in place. In other words: do the work.

And please, do not call any of the signatories to explain yourselves or commiserate. Some of us are tired. At this time, spare us from having to appease your guilt.