

GA 224 Commissioner Report – Mike Wilson

It's difficult to describe this year's very...different General Assembly. In one sense it was just another Zoom meeting, albeit a gigantic one. And especially from a technical standpoint, the coordinators are to be commended. It seemed to work exactly as it was envisioned. Access was easy and the directions clear. Time spent clicking around PC-Biz before the sessions helped me find things quickly when I needed them.

Of course we might have expected that it wouldn't all go according to plan and the very first plenary on June 19 was an hour behind after the first two hours. So the election of the co-moderators was put off until the following night in an unscheduled meeting.

The election of our co-moderators went off smoothly and *they* are to be commended for getting to Louisville from Minnesota and Alabama (a full day later than any of them expected to be traveling) and then diving right in. Because I was in a smaller Zoom conference with them before the plenaries on matters concerning San Francisco Theological Seminary, I know they had a very full schedule and a steep learning curve.

But because of a minimized agenda and limited time, I sensed – and felt – a good deal of frustration. As an SFTS graduate, I was among those seeking to address the concerns about the decision by the Committee on Theological Education (COTE) to remove it from the list of official PCUSA seminaries. However it quickly became clear that those concerns were, quite understandably, not as important to other commissioners. But there were other concerns that *did* resonate more substantially, particularly around matters of race and especially around black women and girls. Unfortunately there was almost no opportunity – again, given the time available – to do more than acknowledge those concerns and make a few important but hardly adequate changes to the language of a few of the overtures we did take up.

In a full, in-person assembly there might have been opportunity to more fully and satisfactorily take up issues that have so recently demanded our attention. In a week in Baltimore we might have been more nimble and able to change our priorities. But without trying to second guess those responsible for setting the agenda and determining how much time we would or could spend online, that was not possible or did not happen.

Personally, I would have been willing to spend significantly more time online. After all, I had already blocked out a full week for the assembly. So I wonder if we might have been more successful if we had demanded more from the commissioners, including addressing urgent overtures in online committees, along with scheduled but undefined time for emerging concerns. The Friday and Saturday plenaries felt rushed and inadequate. What if we also had full days scheduled earlier in the week, perhaps Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday with a day off on Thursday? Certainly the technical wizards proved they could make it happen.

Also missing, and impossible to create online, is the intangible sense of connection and purpose that comes from gathering away from home and spending in-person time with other

commissioners. There was no opportunity to grab a meal with someone from another presbytery. There was no way to build trust because someone risked being vulnerable in a committee. No chance to pull aside someone you disagree with and listen to their point of view. In an almost literal way we were each inside of a box and unable to communicate beyond it.

And finally, there was a strange sense of dislocation at the assembly's end. After Co-Mod Rev. Gregory Bentley gave the benediction, the screen shut down and we got the "Your Zoom meeting has ended" message. So one moment I was connected, at least online, to more than 600 people, people who I could see by clicking through the more than thirty 25-commissioner Zoom screens. The next moment I was cut off, sitting alone in my dining room.

On a positive note, we were shown plenty of video of how much preparation the Baltimore Committee on Local Arrangements made for this assembly. I can only imagine their disappointment at not seeing all of their wonderful plans and gracious hospitality come to full fruition. And so even virtually, I want to give a huge shout of gratitude to our hosts for what I know would have been a wonderful experience in their fine city.