

## GA COMMISSIONER REPORT—TOM BURNS

Upon arriving, getting acquainted with the surroundings, and registering, I found myself having to adjust to the large number of people that I encountered. For me, coming from Buckhorn, a large crowd is around 200 people. So, getting use to about 2,500 enthusiastic Presbyterians proved a bit of a stretch for this country boy.

The first thing that I noticed and was greatly impressed by is the look of our church today. The diversity, the age difference among those gathered, and yes, there were plenty of young folks in attendance. Social justice issues were at the forefront for many Presbyterians. We shared in taking up an offering and delivered it to the courthouse in St. Louis to assist those who are in jail and are being treated unfairly because of an unjust bail bond system. I listened to Presbyterians from around the world sharing how they see God at work through the church in places like Africa, the Middle East and in Central America. I also was reminded of our ecumenical efforts to join with other faith communities to accomplish meaningful mission in some of the most troubled areas around the world.

Our time spent in worship, and in prayer helped me in the work that I participated in while serving on the General Assembly Procedures Committee. When praying the Lord's Prayer, I was reminded of the Church at Pentecost, where I heard those around me praying in their native languages while we all understood on another.

I also developed a deeper appreciation for Roberts Rules of Order and the role of the moderator during the time we spent in committee and in plenary work. Following the rules, I learned how to perfect a motion to an overture, (hopefully I'll never have to endure that again). During our time together in committee and in plenary the Advisory delegates proved, for me, to be very helpful. Whether to gain a better understanding of an overture or in helping formulate a change motion, their input was of a great benefit.

I came away from my experience at General Assembly hopeful for the future of the church. After engaging in discussion with folks from all across the spectrum of the PC (U.S.A.), I noticed the passion, intelligence, and commitment shared by each of us on matters of the church that concern us all. We shared many more positive moments than negative. Of course there were disagreements among us over some of the business that was acted upon. But, it only reminds us that there is still work for us to do as we become the church that Christ is calling us to be. Let us all be prayerful and let us all remain faithful.

One of the added benefits for me was to reconnect with old friends and to make new acquaintances and to recall that we are truly a connectional church. All in all it was a privilege to have represented the Presbytery of Transylvania as a commissioner to the 2018 PC (U.S.A.) General Assembly.

Nathan Dent

## GA Commissioner Report

My experience at the 2018 General Assembly was truly a memorable one. As a Young Adult Advisory Delegate (YAAD) I think it was a unique experience that I wish I would be able to have again. I met a lot of different people who came from so many different backgrounds but we all had one thing in common and that was our love of God. The best way I could describe the experience was that it was a week and 2 days long church service as we sang many hymns and worshiped daily but of course there was plenty of time for fellowship with my peers. However, the entire week was not just an extended vacation bible school, there was business to be done too; while some of it may have caused heated discussions, all of it was important to the church and our mission to God.

One such piece of business and most likely the one that caused the greatest discussion and took the most time on the plenary floor was the proposal to divest from fossil fuel companies. There were excellent points from both sides and many questions that were asked. It certainly felt that after much of the discussion that I was in a college level finance class. Eventually the vote was called to question and while it may have not turned out the way I wanted it to at the time, I believe that the correct decision for the church was made. There were many other things that went through that plenary floor but none lived up to the debate that was had over divestment.

Plenary wasn't the only place where debates were had, I was also assigned to committee 14 – Theological and Church Growth issues and Institutions. I admit that when I was assigned to this committee I had absolutely no idea what that meant or what I was about to get into. As my first committee meeting commenced I felt a little out of place as I felt like I hadn't known enough about theology to be in there as I was seated by many teaching elders who are of course professionals in theology. Then as the meeting commenced I began to feel more confident in myself and began to speak my mind to the others at my table and that's when I fully realized that I wasn't as out of place as I originally thought, and that my opinions I spoke were shared by the commissioners at the table. I really give a lot of credit to my moderator and vice-moderator of the committee. When committee meetings were over and plenary began I began to miss the committee and the discussions had in the committee.

I also learned a lot about Presbyterianism and it made me proud to be a Presbyterian. In my opinion, Christians have not had exactly the most positive media image recently in the way that some can be very hypocritical. They pretend to follow the words and actions of Jesus but if you were to analyze their actions, they don't seem to actually follow what they preach. Presbyterians are very different in that regard. We are very accepting of others with differences to us and I believe that if Jesus were to walk this world today as he did 2000 years ago he would consider himself Presbyterian. I honestly came out of general assembly more proud of being a Presbyterian and a Christian than I had been in a long time.

All in all this was truly a once in a lifetime experience that I wish I could relive again. It has actually even inspired me to possibly join my church's session and become ordained as a ruling elder so that I may return to another general assembly in the future.

General Assembly Report to Transylvania Presbytery  
Rev. Wanda B. Olive

I am so grateful to have represented Transylvania Presbytery at the 223rd General Assembly (GA). Former Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons, spoke to us at the Board of Pensions dinner about the connectional nature of the PC(USA). We gather as a response to God's grace and go out with gratitude to serve God in the world. Gatherings like the GA and Presbyterian Youth Triennium even our local Presbytery meetings remind me of the connectional nature of Presbyterians.

Indeed we began with Commissioner training by the Synod at the end of April in Tennessee. We also had an opportunity before GA to become familiar with those who would be serving on our committees. Zoom technology allowed us to meet and converse electronically with our Middle East Committee Moderators and other Commissioners.

Sunday worship was arranged with local churches. I opted to attend the Westminster Presbyterian Church. Westminster is located on what is known as the "Delmar Divide; a long-standing divide between races, classes, and socio-economic standing. Their 30,000 square foot church building now has a 56-member diverse congregation that includes people of different cultures, races, classes, and ages.

GA began with an opening reception by the Committee on Local Arrangements (COLA). They served us local food specialties like barbecue and custard. Opening worship at GA is on a scale that is larger than any worship I have ever experienced except for the Billy Graham crusades that I attended as a teenager. All of those voices singing praise to God!

Worship at GA follows the Reformed traditions of "freedom within order" just on a larger scale. Worship was held on five of the eight days. There was a variety of hymns from various traditions, a variety of preachers, as well as prayers and confessions. Communion was served by intinction. Bible Study was held on two mornings.

Another way in which I witnessed the connectional nature of the PC(USA) was choosing to have a roommate. GA matched me with Kris, a clerk of session from Iowa. We sat up late one night talking about many shared life experiences. Though I was concerned initially about rooming with someone I did not know, I am glad that I did it.

Presbyterians committed to action for the St. Louis community with its Hands & Feet initiative. We marched from the America's Center through the downtown streets to the City Justice Center with donations of \$47,200 from the opening worship offering and from Presbyteries around the country to bail out people incarcerated for minor offenses.

Committee meetings began on Saturday afternoon and continued through Tuesday afternoon. The Middle East Issues Committee that I served on had thirteen items of business for consideration. It was interesting to witness the collective nature of discernment with people from around the country and throughout the world. Of the thirteen items those with majority committee approval were placed on the Plenary Consent Agenda. Five other items were sent as recommendations to the Plenary floor for further discussion and debate.

One of the overwhelming memories of my experience on the Middle East Committee was a vote that went to the Plenary floor. We had agonized in Committee over the content of the Item and of our vote on the issue. When the Item came to the Plenary floor late on Friday evening, other Commissioners began the process of re-wording and changing the Committee's recommendation. It was so frustrating to have our recommendation, that we had spent so much time preparing, being parsed out word by word, line by line, changing the content and context of our recommendation. Listening to the passion of those who sought to make the changes knowing that they had not done the background studies that those of us on the committee had done.

A second, third, and fourth motion to change the wording of the resolution was the last straw for me. I rose and went to the person in charge of allowing speakers to speak to the resolutions. As I was giving my information, a person in the back of the Plenary called for the original motion and for all subsequent motions to be abolished. I was so grateful because the subsequent motions had taken us so far from the Committee's original motion. It was a welcome relief.

After the Plenary ended, I happened to walk into a group of friends which included a minister I had known at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. We greeted each other and then I recognized the guy's voice who had stopped the subsequent motions. I said to him, "Oh, you're the guy!" We all laughed and recognized a larger PC(USA) connectional moment.

I recognize that this may have been my only GA experience as a Commissioner. And I'm okay with that. I think that every Teaching and Ruling Elder should experience the way in which the General Assembly of the PC(USA) "reviews the work of Synods, resolves controversies, protects our church from errors in faith and practice, ensures that our theology remains true to the biblical standards in our historic confessions, presents a witness for truth and justice in our community and in the world community, and sets priorities for the church and establishes relationships with other churches or ecumenical bodies" (G-3.05). It is important work that unites us to one another through grace and gratitude.