



224th General Assembly (2020) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) June 19 - 27, Online with Baltimore, Maryland A Brief Summary

The 224th General Assembly was a most unique experience for everyone involved. It reflected the two pandemics that were happening around it - the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests and demonstrations for racial justice. Intended to be held in Baltimore, the need for social distancing and loss of meeting facilities necessitated a new approach and so the meeting was held exclusively online. Baltimore was still honored as the host city.

The online Assembly necessitated a number of changes to the usual process and operations of the Assembly. There were none of the usual committees to review business items before they reached the floor in plenary. Instead, all business was done in plenary. To accommodate that structure, the business was initially limited to critical and necessary items, which initially totalled about 30 items. A few late items were accepted, two related items were approved to be pulled from the referral to the 225th GA, and two items responding to the current situation were included. All other business, including special committee and working group reports, as well as almost all overtures - including those proposing Book of Order changes - were referred to the next Assembly. About 140 items in total. So don't go looking for any descending overtures for your presbytery to approve.

All of this was scheduled for one evening meeting on Friday, June 19 and two all-day sessions on Friday, June 26 and Saturday, June 27. The first meeting went long with the business so another session on Saturday, June 20 was held specifically for the Co-Moderator election. Here are some of the items the 224th General Assembly dealt with.

Election of the Co-Moderators: Ruling Elder Elona Street-Stewart and Teaching Elder Gregory Bentley were elected Co-Moderators on the first ballot on Saturday evening. Ms Street-Stewart is the executive for the Synod of Lakes and Prairies and is the first Native American to be elected Moderator. Mr Bentley is the pastor of Fellowship Presbyterian Church of Huntsville, Alabama and a member of the Presbytery of North Alabama. While all three teams standing for Co-Moderators mentioned the PC(USA) Matthew 25 Initiative, they placed a special emphasis on it. Their logo, which was in their moderatorial material and on the wall behind them as they moderated, was the sankofa bird standing in the Mississippi River. The sankofa bird, a tribal symbol from Ghana, represents taking the best of the past to enhance the future. The Mississippi River connects Elona's home in the Twin Cities with Gregory's home in the south. The waters are a symbol in both her Native American culture and his African American heritage.

Election of the State Clerk: J. Herbert Nelson was approved by the Assembly for a second four-year term as Stated Clerk. He was put forward by the nominating committee and there were no other candidates.

Social Justice Programs: There were additional live streamed programs throughout the week including the Poor People's Campaign Digital March on Washington and the Youth Rising Coalition event highlighting work with the youth of Baltimore. The Assembly theme was "From Lament to Hope", taken from Lamentations 5: 21-22 and the Assembly Bible study took a closer look at the passage and the theme in light of current events.

Racial Justice: This was a topic that permeated the GA while also being a point of frustration. The two items removed from the referral list and approved by the Assembly are actions to help the Native American Coordinating Council and their ministry across the country. One of the added items is "On the Church in This Moment in History – Responding to the Sin of Racism and a Call to Action" which affirms black lives matter and calls the church to repentance and action to remove systematic racism. The second item was "On responding to the COVID-19 pandemic" which calls for a pastoral response in this crisis and advocacy and care for the marginalized who are hit hardest by the pandemic. There was also great frustration among many, especially the Young Adult Advisory Delegates, that more was not done. Two attempts to incorporate concerns for black women and girls in different statements fell short of votes to get them on the floor even though the actions had strong support from the YAADs.

Budget and Per Capita: The COVID-19 crisis is impacting the church and the projection is a 25% income decline this year over earlier projections. In light of that the Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Mission Agency, and Administrative Services Group proposed a unified budget and asked for the ability to amend the budget in the weeks ahead. The Assembly approved but restricted the budget flexibility a bit. In light of many congregations and presbyteries also struggling at this time the OGA, which had earlier proposed a per capita increase, brought an unchanged per capita request to the Assembly, which after GA financial implications will be \$8.98 for 2021 and 2022.