



REPORTS ON THE 217TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY JUNE 15 - 22, 2006 BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Reflections on Standing for Moderator of the 217th General Assembly

My first thought is one of **gratitude** to members of Peace River Presbytery, especially to Graham and Bob, who were so very supportive in the process. Special thanks, as well, to Gary and Carole Miller for hosting a reception for Martha and me prior to our journey to Birmingham.

When people ask “what was it like to stand for Moderator?”, I tell them that it is like driving a car all your life without any particular concern for how the car ‘works’ and then, suddenly, taking a crash-course in auto-mechanics trying to learn as quickly as possible everything there is to know about an automobile. As a pastor I was ignorant of many of the workings of our national church. I came to realize the complexity of our system (Board of Pensions, General Assembly Council, Office of the Stated Clerk, the vast web of mission agencies and missionaries, etc.).

Some specific thoughts:

· **great respect for our national staff.**

Before they were “the people in Louisville”, but over the past several months they became acquaintances and even friends. I am impressed by their love for the church and their high level of competence.

· **concern about our direction.**

When I specifically asked pastors and national staff members “what is the direction of the PCUSA?”, there was often a pause, followed by the recognition that we do not have a clear vision. We are a great church with great people and a great tradition – but we have entered the 21st Century without a clear direction of where God is calling the PCUSA.

· **concern about all the groups!** If the General Assembly is a family reunion, we are unique as we are not so much a family as we are a cluster of groupings. For almost every issue there is a group - active, funded, and seeking more influence in the life of the PCUSA. I am not the first to ask, “What if all this money, energy and talent were directed away from the affinity groups and into the life of local presbyteries?” There is a real temptation not to deal with the “problem” (we are a church in numerical decline facing record membership losses to the point where in time we may cease to be a ‘national’ church) and instead become preoccupied with various aspects of this problem. Remodeling the kitchen or upgrading the landscaping is fine – but if the foundation to the house is crumbling, shouldn’t that be the first priority?

· **need for grace.** How else can I say this but that I find too many people too strident, too angry, too insistent on ‘winning’. While I do not believe that unity is a realistic goal (our local church is homogeneous yet has great diversity of thought) we need solidarity – we are family, we need to stay together, we need to give and receive grace.

· **move to the center.** While there is debate and confusion as to the meaning and/or impact of the Report on Peace, Unity and Purity (PUP), I would argue that on almost every significant issue before the 217th General Assembly (divestment, abortion, the Trinity paper) we took positions that excluded neither the left nor the right. As a pastor I am always leery when GA meets as to what the fallout in the congregation may be – this year, I am pleased to report the decisions of the Assembly.

Standing for Moderator was a great experience. In hindsight, I don’t think that I could have been as effective as I would have wanted to be. Rick Ufford-Chase was able to give his undivided

attention to being moderator; Joan Grey has indicated the same – she will not have any other employment for the next two years. Now that we have moved to a two-year model, I believe it will be extremely difficult for a pastor to serve both the local and national church.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to represent Peace River Presbytery!

In faith,
Tim Halverson
Clergy Commissioner from Faith, Cape Coral

**Reflections by Kathi Wiggins,
Clergy Commissioner from
Siesta Key Chapel, Sarasota**

Peace River Presbytery's Commissioners to the 217th General Assembly are indebted to the Presbytery for the opportunity to experience a General Assembly from the 'in-side out'. Wow. What an experience. Thank you.

Each of the 324 commissioners was randomly assigned a specific committee. I was assigned to the *Health Issues* committee. The committee dealt with a plethora of issues related to:

- people with disabilities,
- teen suicide and self-injury,
- a study on end-of-life issues,
- pharmaceutical companies who have not granted patent licenses on life-saving medications,
- a last minute commissioner's resolution to support the *Citizens for a Strong New Orleans East* in their efforts to close a landfill,
- abortion.

As you might imagine, the most vigorous discussions surrounded abortion, especially the first overture that read, "We affirm that the lives of viable unborn babies—those well-developed enough to survive outside the womb if delivered—ought to be preserved and cared for and not aborted." The committee voted 30/24 in support of the overture. The Assembly added some opening words then adopted it by a vote of 381/117/6. This is a substantive change in PCUSA policy and was supported by people on both sides of the pro-choice and pro-life debate.

The strength of the committee was its process – constant prayer, open forums on the opening day, and a system of discussing the issue at hand *before* accepting a motion for action. This simple step helped us to be more open and thorough than might otherwise have been possible.

**Reflections by Ray Angle, Elder Commissioner
from Church of the Palms, Sarasota**

My arrival in Birmingham, Alabama, on June 15, 2006, was with anticipation and enthusiasm to be attending, as a Commissioner, the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. This Celebration marking the 300th anniversary of American Presbyterianism was exciting and educational, and I was inspired and humbled knowing "So Great a Cloud of Witnesses" have gone before us, serving as disciples in the work and witness of the Presbyterian church.

Working with my fellow Commissioners and meeting new friends in Christ, long 12-hour days in a very air-conditioned environment, and eating at odd hours or not eating at all was routine.

The days began and ended with worship, and in between, there were overtures presented, unending debate, motions made, amendments voted for or against, and votes being recorded on a key pad instantaneously with a yes, no or abstention available.

All of this was controlled by a Moderator and Stated Clerk who not only kept things moving along but also kept order within Robert's Rules.

I never dreamed I would be honored and privileged to be a representative of Church of the Palms and Peace River Presbytery at a General Assembly joining 534 Commissioners from 173 Presbyteries, 163 Youth Advisory Delegates, 25 Theological Student Advisory Delegates, 8 Missionary Delegates, and 12 Ecumenical Advisory Delegates, all responsible for so many actions which would guide our denomination for the next two years.

My assignment was to the Mission/Budget Committee and during the first three days we discussed the 18 overtures assigned to it, amending and finalizing each for presentation to the whole body beginning on Monday.

Each of the 15 assembly committees had similar procedures, discussing and finalizing over 130 overtures which would then be presented, amended and voted on between Monday and Wednesday evening by the assembly—these decisions becoming the guidelines/rules for our denomination for the next two years.

We had many highs and lows as the voting continued, but in the end the Assembly joined hands, prayed, sang and came away united in Christ.

Thank you to Church of the Palms and Peace River Presbytery for honoring me with the opportunity to serve our Lord in this way and to serve as a Commissioner to the 217th General Assembly meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, from June 15 – 22, 2006.

In the days ahead, I will be available at your pleasure to discuss the procedures and events of the General Assembly.

**Reflections by Gail Thornton,
Elder Commissioner from First, Punta Gorda**

I want to thank everyone for the opportunity to be a part of the 217th GA. It was an awesome experience, and I feel blessed to have been a part of it. I was excited by some things that happened but saddened by others.

The highlight for me was the privilege of serving on the Peacemaking International Committee. We dealt with the divestment, Palestinian, Israeli issues. There were 62 of us from various backgrounds and ages, who were all having our own thoughts of how the divestment issue from the 216th assembly should be worked out. Each session was started with a time of worship and prayer. We also prayed before the final vote on the recommendation. It was amazing how during the sessions everyone listened to each other, no one got angry or obnoxious and we began to work out a plan. At one of our supper breaks, 11 people from the committee were chosen to write a recommendation that would answer as many of the 26 overtures on this issue as possible using what we had discussed during our sessions. They said that after much prayer and giving and taking they came up with the recommendation that was

given to the assembly for approval. The whole committee only made a few changes to the original document. As we all worked and prayed together, we all felt the power of the Holy Spirit moving among us, and we all believe that this recommendation was written through the inspiration of the Spirit. This was affirmed when it went to the plenary for a vote and passed with no amendments. The Unity in the Spirit in our committee was awesome.

I have come away with a much better understanding of the greater church called PCUSA and am most thankful for the experience.

**Reflections on 217th General Assembly
From An Observer
By Margaret E. Towner, HR**

I have attended many General Assemblies. It seemed to me that there was a more concerted effort to engage in reflection and prayer during the Plenary and committee meetings, which from my observation helped to diffuse disappointments some may have felt.

I arrived on Wednesday, having driven through Alberto, to assist the Moderatorial Campaign of Dr. Deborah Block, pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Milwaukee, WI. I ordained and installed her when I was Moderator of Milwaukee Presbytery. Her booth was next door to Tim Halverson's, and we had some fun sneaking campaign stickers on each other's backs.

The voting for moderator was a great disappointment to both Block and Halverson camps. Rev. Joan Gray was elected. My observation during the Plenary sessions was that she moderated quite well but depended much more on the Stated Clerk than I had remembered other moderators doing.

Upon arrival I bumped into Insik Kim and Singman Rhee, who had been my guides in Korea when I was representing the 193rd UPCUSA G.A. in 1981.

I sat in on several committee deliberations but spent most time in Ecclesiology Committee discussion of the "Peace, Unity, and Purity" paper. I was impressed with the patience of both the commissioners and the observers and advocates, even in the midst of great disagreement, and the

helpfulness of the Task Force itself. Some committees were more skillfully moderated than others.

Some of my time was spent in giving interviews, talking with young clergywomen and celebrating the ordination of women deacons, elders and clergy. I delivered the main talk at the National Association of Presbyterian Clergywomen luncheon, to a room filled with deacons, elders and clergy, and was honored with the gift of a new stole commemorating the 50th anniversary of my ordination. I now have some 4,750 plus daughters in ministry.

I spent some time in the exhibition area at the Women's Ministry and NAPC booths visiting with visitors and commissioners. Observed Gail Thornton and Ray Angle hard at work as were Graham, Bob and Craig.

After some of the glitches were worked out with LES - the laptop computer system that replaced the huge paper trail that characterized previous assemblies - the system seemed to work well.

The process of commissioners, and other delegates, for speaking on the floor and in committees seemed to work quite well and appeared to this observer to make for smooth mechanics.

The Birmingham hosts were everywhere and always had an answer.

On Sunday we worshipped in historic First Presbyterian Church, a few blocks from the convention center. The outgoing moderator Rick Ufford-Chase preached about the need for the church to ride the wave of change rather than allowing the waves to roll over us.

I have many more observations but will report one last one. Upon returning home on Tuesday I tuned into the Web and watched the G.A. in session debating the committee reports. The closing worship with a young adult woman under care of her presbytery was impressive.

Finally, Moderator Gray gave a pastoral charge to all those present in the plenary hall on Thursday morning before adjournment which we all need to heed. Among the charges were:

1. Seek out someone with whom you may have strongly confronted and pray with them
2. Be careful what you say and be careful what you believe in the media
3. Refrain from gossip.



Joan S. Gray, of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta, assumes her duties as the moderator of the 217th General Assembly (2006). Photo by Danny Bolin. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



The Rev. Joan S. Gray nominates Elder Robert Wilson of North Alabama Presbytery for vice moderator of the 217th General Assembly. Photo by Danny Bolin. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



The Rev. Margaret Towner, the first woman to be ordained as a minister of the Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, accepts a stole from the Rev. Kathy Keener-Han, moderator of the National Association of Presbyterian Clergywomen at the NAPC luncheon on Monday. Photo by Danny Bolin. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)