



Assembly in Brief is a partnership of the Presbyterian News Service and the **Office of the General Assembly**

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“The Hope in Our Calling”

Some General Assemblies make their mark. Others make history. The 222nd General Assembly (2016) made so much history that it will long be remembered as one of the most significant in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).



J Herbert Nelson elected Stated Clerk-Michael Whitman

Newly elected General Assembly Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson—who made history by becoming the first African American elected to the denomination’s top ecclesiastical post—perfectly reflected the assembly’s theme, “The Hope in Our Calling”: “The Presbyterian Church is not dying, but I believe we are reforming. To think only of the survival of the church means our aim is too low.”

This assembly, in addition to electing Nelson, produced almost too many Kairos moments to mention: electing the first Co-Moderators in history and a two-woman moderatorial team for the first time; added the Confession of Belhar to the denomination’s *Book of Confessions*; approved a new Directory for Worship; took steps to

protect from harm the children and youth in our midst; and created an administrative commission to tend to structural issues in the church and a “vision team” to establish and reclaim the church’s identity.

And the assembly accomplished its work in a spirit of collaboration and trust not seen in recent, far more contentious assemblies. Less than a handful of assembly committee recommendations were overturned in plenary session and debates, while passionate, didn’t exhibit the rancor of previous assemblies.

At the end of the day, commissioners and advisory delegates seemed determined to heed the parting advice of retiring General Assembly Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons: “Just don’t give up on this church—DON’T!!!”



Jan Edmiston and Denise Anderson-Michael Whitman

History2: Two women elected Co-Moderators

History was made in at least two ways Saturday night when the 222nd General Assembly (2016) elected its first Co-Moderators and its first all-women moderatorial ticket. The Reverend Denise Anderson, a pastor from the Presbytery

of National Capital, and the Reverend Jan Edmiston, associate executive presbyter for the Presbytery of Chicago, won a first ballot victory over Ruling Elder David Parker of the Presbytery of Salem and the Reverend Adan Mairena, a pastor in the Presbytery of Philadelphia. The margin was 76 percent to 24 percent.

Anderson and Edmiston are the first Co-Moderators elected since the 221st General Assembly (2014) approved a standing rules change to allow that arrangement. They are also the first two-woman ticket to moderate a General Assembly.

“We want you to remember this number: 104,” Anderson told the assembly. “That is the number of weeks between now and the next General Assembly. We pledge to show respect and compassion—listening is more than waiting to talk.”



J. Herbert Nelson addresses plenary-Danny Bolin

J. Herbert Nelson is first African American elected Stated Clerk

J. Herbert Nelson was overwhelmingly elected General Assembly Stated Clerk in an historic vote, becoming the first black man selected as the top ecclesial officer of the nation’s largest Reformed body, a largely white denomination.

Commissioners selected Nelson over



Gradye Parsons congratulates J. Herbert Nelson-Danny Bolin

David M. Baker, stated clerk and communications director of the Presbytery of Tampa Bay, by a 447-112 margin. Nelson, director of the PC(USA)’s Office of Public Witness, succeeds Gradye Parsons, who is retiring after eight years as Stated Clerk.

He was installed immediately after his election and will begin his duties August 1.

“This is a powerful day, a powerful day in my life and for many people of color who did not envision the possibility of this ever happening,” Nelson told the assembly, adding he asked only one thing of commissioners: “Pray for me and work with me—and not on me—and we’ll get some things done in the name of the Lord.”

Belhar added to Book of Confessions

Fifty years after it was birthed in South Africa by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) during its battle against apartheid, the Confession of Belhar has been included in the *Book of Confessions* of the PC(USA).

After a four-year-long process of study and votes by the 221st General Assembly (2014) and then the 171 presbyteries, the assembly voted overwhelmingly (540-33)

Bill Somplatsky-Jarman, the denomination’s associate for Mission Responsibility Through Investment, told commissioners that divestment could well reduce Presbyterians’ ability to persuade energy companies to act in environmentally responsible ways—one of the purposes of MRTI. “In the real world of corporate engagement, the more stock you own the more power you have,” Somplatsky-Jarman said. “You are treated much more seriously by companies that are skeptical of what you are asking for.”

By a 31-25 vote, the Assembly Committee on Immigration and Environmental Issues had recommended divestment. Commissioners wound up voting for a substitute to maintain investments and corporate engagement, 460-91.



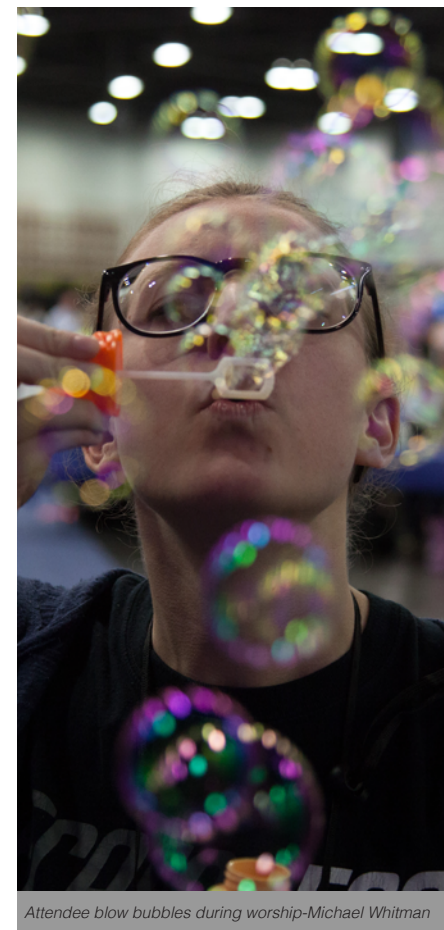
Commissioners discuss a motion-Danny Bolin

Two-state solution for Israel-Palestine reaffirmed

The assembly approved a lengthy report from its Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy containing a re-evaluation of the denomination’s historic support for a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine. The document, “Israel-Palestine: For

Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace,” says the PC(USA) “should advance those efforts that best accord with its values ... including, but not limited to, that of two sovereign states—Israel and Palestine.”

Approval of the report came with a comment affirming the PC(USA)’s preference for a two-state solution and a desire to stay in conversation with partners in Israel who are working for peace.



Attendee blow bubbles during worship-Michael Whitman

223rd General Assembly (2018): St. Louis, Missouri—June 16–23, 2018
224th General Assembly (2020): Baltimore, Maryland—June 20–27, 2020
225th General Assembly (2022): Columbus, Ohio—June 25–July 2, 2022



Todd Stavrakos addresses a committee—Michael Whitman

With an apology, assembly vows to keep children safe

With tears and prayer—and a remarkable apology from Stated Clerk Grady Parsons—the assembly unanimously approved a comprehensive policy to protect children, youth, and vulnerable adults.

Kris Schondelmeyer, a Presbyterian pastor from Toledo, Ohio, who has become the face of abuse victims in the church, had told his horrific story of being sexually assaulted by a chaperone at a national Presbyterian youth conference, and the ensuing cover up.

Immediately after the new policy was approved, Parsons stepped to the podium and said, “As Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, I want to offer to Kris a public apology for what happened to him. I know how hard it was to find justice. I offer our commitment that his child and my grandchild will be safe.”



Commission created to deal with PC(USA) structural issues

Several recommendations that would have changed the structure and operation of the PC(USA) were rejected and commissioners instead created a vision team and a separate administrative commission to address those matters.

By a vote of 480-86, commissioners authorized the creation of a twelve-member Way Forward Commission, which would have sweeping powers “to study and identify a vision for the structure and function of the General Assembly agencies of the PC(USA).”

The assembly also created, by a vote of 547-27, a fifteen-member 2020 Vision Team to “develop a guiding statement for the denomination and make a plan for its implementation.” The hope, the Assembly Committee on “The Way Forward” said, “is that the team will help us establish and reclaim our identity as the PC(USA).”



Commissioners prepare to vote—Danny Bolin

Move to divest from fossil fuel companies defeated

The PC(USA) will continue its investment in fossil-fuel companies after overwhelmingly turning back an overture Friday to begin divestment immediately. Instead, it will continue the process of selective, phased, divestment that begins with full corporate engagement.

to make Belhar the denomination’s 12th recognized confession and the first originating in the global south.

It focuses on the themes of justice, unity, and reconciliation, which are just as important today in the U.S. as they were thirty years ago, when Belhar was approved by the DRMC in the midst of South Africa’s apartheid regime.



Alan Boesak celebrates the passage of Belhar—Michael Whitman

A new Directory for Worship

A slimmer, less restrictive Directory for Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was overwhelming approved June 22. The directory, which is part of the *Book of Order*, now goes to the denomination’s 171 presbyteries, a majority of which must ratify it to be adopted.

The new directory has been ten years in development. Kristin Saldine, a consultant to the writing team, likened the directory to a compass. “It is not a book of rules and regulations,” she told the assembly, “but gives us bearings and direction, pointing to the primary purpose of worship—to give glory to God—and navigating between form and freedom and encouraging a variety of styles.”

READ MORE: pcusa.org/ga222

‘Regret’ expressed for harm to LGBTQ/Q members

Declining a proposal to admit to and apologize for harming the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning community, commissioners instead opted to express deep regret for ways that those minorities of “God’s beloved children” have been led to feel that they stand outside the grace of God and are unwelcome in the denomination.

At the same time, the resolution expressed the deep sorrow of all in the PC(USA) who have left the fellowship of the church, and expressed appreciation to those who have maintained relationships despite profound disagreement.

Calling for deeper conversations about theological differences, the resolution, passed by a 463-51 vote, calls upon Presbyterians to seek reconciliation and to reach out to those who have been marginalized across the spectrum of theological understanding.

‘Teaching Elder’ out, ‘Minister of Word and Sacrament’ back in

After several hours of debate, commissioners voted to send to presbyteries a proposed amendment to the *Book of Order* that would restore the previous nomenclature for ordered ministry. If approved by a majority of the



Grady Parsons apologizes to Schondelmeyer—Michael Whitman

denomination's 171 presbyteries, those now called teaching elders would become ministers of Word and Sacrament; ruling elders would be elders; and commissioned ruling elders would be commissioned lay pastors. The vote was 320- 218 to return to language in use prior to 2012, when the new Form of Government was adopted.



Steve Robertson, Sue Rutford, Lawrence Peebles, Kimberly Chun pose in mission tee shirts-Danny Bolin



Musicians perform during worship-Michael Whitman

Decision to reduce number of synods reversed

A decision two years ago that would have reconfigured and reduced the number of synods in the PC(USA) was rescinded by a 421-158 vote. The assembly directed synods and presbyteries to work together on a new configuration of synod boundaries that would reduce their number to between 10 and 12.

By a 380-196 vote, commissioners rejected a minority report calling for the appointment of a special committee to move the synod-reconfiguration process.



Commissioners voting in committee-Danny Bolin

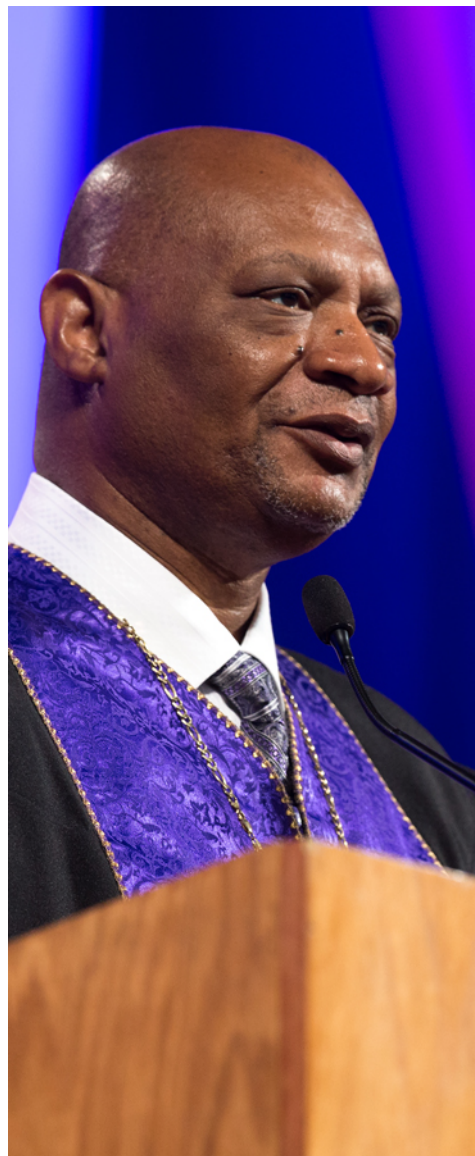
Commitment to peacemaking reaffirmed

After a six-year churchwide discernment process, the assembly approved a lengthy report underscoring the centrality of peacemaking to Christian faith and promising to “practice boldly the things that make for peace.”

“Risking Peace in a Violent World: Affirmations for Presbytery Consideration” was ordered by the 219th General Assembly (2010) to “seek clarity as to God’s call to the church to embrace nonviolence as its fundamental response to the challenges of violence, terror, and war.”

The report calls for Presbyterians at all

levels of the church to employ its insights to respond to and prevent violence on the local, national, and international levels through prayer, direct action, and advocacy.



“Too many of us get alarmed by the numbers—how many are on our side, how many are on the other side. We capitulate: go along to get along. The Lord has not called us to be popular; he’s called us to be faithful. Just be faithful to what God has said to you.”—Ecumenical worship preacher, Bishop Reginald Jackson of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

Gradye Parsons honored

A crowd of nearly 1,000 Presbyterians paused mid-assembly to pay tribute to Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons, who is retiring at the end of the assembly after thirty-seven years of ordained ministry, including the last eight as the denomination’s chief ecclesiastical officer.



Hundreds attend group dinner for Gradye Parsons-Danny Bolin

“Gradye could fill volumes with the thrills and spills of ministry,” said longtime colleague Sharon Youngs, “but he has always stood at the helm in a gentle and secure way, his life built on relationships. God put an additional dash of pastor in Gradye’s DNA. His heart runs deep and his arms open wide.”

Parsons responded with characteristic humility. “It’s been a privilege to do this and to have you share your stories and be able to share those stories with the rest of the church,” he said. “Just don’t give up on this church—DON’T!”