

“How was GA?”—GA Reflections

How was GA?Usually, this the opening question that I receive upon my return from the biennial adventure that we call the General Assembly council. Yet, the story is not in the words of the inquiry, but rather portrayed in the “tone” of the questioner. As you might imagine, while there may be various nuances, often the question reflects the “ends” of the continuum.

Some will ask with more than a “touch” of either skepticism or suspicion. Others inquire as if I have been to the “mountaintop” or participated in a spiritual pilgrimage. For the first group, “GA”(as we call it) represents all that is “wrong” with the church. For the latter, “GA” reflects our highest ideals and what is “right” with the church.

My answer to those two “ends” and others in-between.....It was and is the church. Every other year a group of sinners redeemed by grace gather on a large scale. Commissioned by presbyteries, they come together in the name of Christ sanctified by the Holy Spirit together to talk, to pray, to debate, and to pursue faithfulness together. And, when they gather there is both a fellowship of like-mindedness in Christ AND a stirring one another up to love and good works. ***It is the church.***

Think of your congregation or session or the presbytery, but think bigger. People agree and disagree with each other. Usually, they are gracious, but not always. In general, each one desires what is best for the church in following Christ, but each one may also be subject to the seduction of rationalization of a personal agenda. It appears to be much like every congregation I have ever served, every session I have moderated and every presbytery I have participated.

Yet, think bigger. With the size and scope of this meeting of the church, the comfort and homogeneity of our particular “place” is no longer present. By definition, the meeting brings together the diversity of the church. Whether reflected in geography, types of congregations, ethnicity or theological perspective, it is there.....***And, it is the church.***

As a national church, we are discovering that God is leading us through some transitions. Some of our congregations have been dismissed to “places” where they feel comfortable with where the theological boundaries are drawn. Yet, who we are, in those similarities and in differences in Christ remains, for ***we are the church.***

In this Assembly, the historic “fights” over sexuality with each side jockeying for either change or tradition were absent for the most part. Overall, there was a calm spirit within the Assembly. Not that there were not disagreements or strongly-held convictions on display, but there appeared to be an anticipation concerning what is next for we are the church.

Transitions were reflected in leadership choices, in wrestling with vision and structure, and what would be “The Way Forward.” Celebration took place with the addition of a new confession seeking to break down further barriers in which the church has permitted (and sometimes rationalized) division. Issues of social justice, Middle East conflict and peacemaking were debated with each resulting in measured responses that noted our own failures of the past and our desire to engage with others in transformation not only for us as individuals, but for our world. ***It was the church.***

Signs of vitality were present in tangible ways. Whether it was the investment of the Young Adult Advisory Delegates or in the report on 1001 Worshiping Communities, God was present. Whether it was the way in which opposing “sides” treated each other in debate about proposed actions concerning divestment, the report of Presbyterian World Missions, or a moving moment of reconciliation with the affirmation of a new confession, the Lord was there exercising grace in, through and sometimes, in spite of us.

How was GA?.....It was the church.