



GA daily blog
Wayne Largent

Saturday, June 16, 2018

Yesterday afternoon, I flew from Sarasota to St. Louis by way of Atlanta. I was concerned that I might not get into the convention center in time to register. When I got to the hotel, they told me they didn't have any more rooms and would I mind if they upgraded me to a queen suite. I told them if that was all they could do it was ok.

I was in Atlanta, waiting to board my next flight, I got a text from a phone number but without a name and it wanted to know if I had arrived. I responded that I was still in Atlanta. I got a note back that said to let them know when I got in so they could help me through registration. I texted back that I didn't know who I was texting, but I was guessing it was Randy Moody. He texted back that it was indeed him. So, when I got checked in, I sent him a text that I was headed to register. I found the place and Randy appeared at my side. He showed me around the general area and then we went to the opening reception. There we met up with Charmaine Ponkratz and Jeff DeYoe. At this time, I was pretty tired so I left them and went back to my hotel.

I didn't sleep well last night but that is not unusual because I often don't sleep well the first night in a hotel. I tossed and turned until the clock said 5:30, the usual time I get up at home. As I was drinking my first cup of coffee, I looked at the time on my phone and it was 4:40! The bedroom clock was wrong. So, here I am waiting to start my day, but am excited about what the week will be.

Stay tuned.

Sunday, June 17, 2018.

Good night's sleep after a long day. It started with a breakfast put on by the South Atlantic Synod. After not having much to eat the day before, I was ready. Had a chance to talk with Graham Hart, Randy, Charmaine and Bill Teng. We also met two of the candidates for co-moderator. I was impressed.



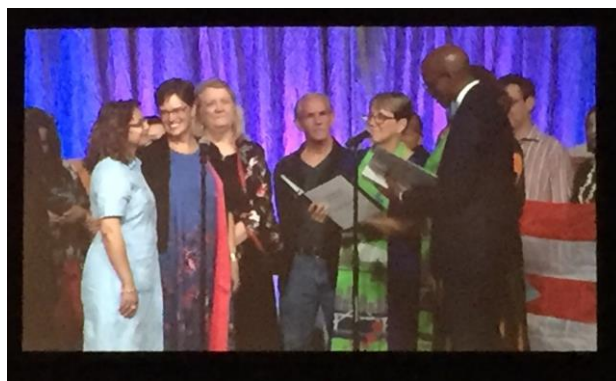
Co-Moderators

There was a pre-assembly meeting led by Liz Theoharis, the author of “Always with Us? What Jesus Really Said about the Poor”. She is very involved with the new poor people’s march for justice. In fact, she is recently out of jail for protesting, peacefully, in front to the Supreme Court. She is very impressive and I bought the book.

Opening worship has been the highlight so far. It had everything from classical music to contemporary music to a Native American flute, brass, timpani, 200+voice choir, gospel, dance, and a powerful sermon. The emphasis was around water and the anthem was “Shall we gather by the river”. Appropriate, since we are on the banks of the Mississippi River.

The afternoon session was on procedure for doing the business of the week and on introducing the various agencies of PCUSA. Not very exciting.

The evening session was the election of new Moderators for the denomination. There was one person who was running for Moderator with a partner who was running for Vice-Moderator. Then there were two groups running for Co-Moderators. It took 4 or 5 ballots for a majority vote. All the candidates were impressive. The ones we met at breakfast were elected.



This morning, I am going to worship with the Presbyterian Church of Ferguson. I will have lunch with them and then back to General Assembly. After dinner tonight will be the first committee meetings.

Monday, June 18, 2018

Sunday morning, I went with about 50 other Commissioners to worship at the First Presbyterian Church of Ferguson. The Pastor met us at the convention center and rode the bus with us. He gave a running commentary on the way to the church. Ferguson is a small town on the outskirts of St. Louis. It had a good reputation. However, there was some dark history that the town ignored. There used to be a fence that separated the white and blacks. When the courts ordered the fence to be taken down, Ferguson did nothing. It was the black side that had to do it. I am not sure how many years ago that happened, but it is still in the heart of the blacks. Ferguson also changed from a mostly white town to a mostly black town. Even though it is a small town, it had it's own town council, police and fire department, etc. It raised much of its revenue through traffic fines and those fell mostly on the blacks.



As we drove into town, it looked like almost any small town you would see in the Midwest of our country. After the Michael Brown shooting, not much has changed. The pastor said there was more awareness and discussion of issues at first, but that has leveled off. The Ministerial group is still basically segregated. The Presbyterian Church is very supportive of mission outreach within the community. They provide food vouchers (not food) to people in specific high poverty zip codes. The vouchers are for the local Save-A-Lot. This supports the local store and gives the people who get them some choice and freedom to select what they buy. The church shares it's worship space with an African Immigrant church, with worship at 11:30, after the Presbyterian service at 10:15. I noted that the 50 of us outnumbered the local worshippers.

On the ride back to town, I asked the pastor what is different now. He said that there were now three African Americans on the town council. There is also a black police chief and more open dialog. I also asked the pastor about outsider agitators after the Michael Brown killing. He said most of the outsiders were non-violent and there were a few trouble makers and they got all attention. The last thing the Pastor said to us was that many people had asked him how they could help. His answer was to have the conversations in our own town before tragedy happens instead of after.

The lunch was a "build your own taco salad", which gives me an idea for a meal that is easy to serve to a larger group.

The afternoon plenary session was mostly reports to the General Assembly from various groups and then a dinner put on by the Board of Pensions.



Our seats were at the very back

After dinner we had our first meeting of the assigned committees. This is where the real work of the GA happens. Our first session was to get to know each other and to learn how the committee will work. We will not be deciding on the outcome of items that have been assigned to us, but we must agree on a recommendation to the whole Assembly later in the week. We will be in committee meetings for the next two days. We will have open hearings on the items and then we will have discussion and decisions.

Our day will start with Bible Study and then the committee will meet for a morning, afternoon and evening session.

Tuesday, June 19, 2018

Well, yesterday we started the real work in committee. Our committee has twelve things to approve, but most of them should be easy, like approving a list of people to be appointed to the Board of Trustees to the seminaries. Our schedule called for us to act on 6 of them before lunch. The process is to have open hearings on each, so that advocates can tell us the “what and the why”. Then we go into business session when we discuss and come up with our recommendation to General Assembly. We are limited in our options. We can recommend approval. We can recommend approval with comments. We can recommend disapproval. We can recommend disapproval with comments. Or, we can recommend referral. Now this is after we have discussed, revised and perfected the memo. Well, our first item was the approval of the trustees. Since none of us knew any of them, I thought this would be a slam-dunk. Well, the material included a chart of all of the existing Trustees and someone noted that there were no Native Americans serving on any of the teams. Then someone noted that there were only two Hispanics serving across the country. So, the amendments started. Then the amendments to the amendments. Someone suggested the word “underserved” be used. Someone else objected and said the word should be “underrepresented”. And so it went. By half an hour after we were supposed to break for lunch, we finally passed it and agreed to take up the other five after lunch and before we started the afternoon agenda. I thought we would never get done.

Well, after lunch we all realized that something had to change and, with the will of God, it did. As the afternoon went on, we began to work better together and by late afternoon we were ahead of schedule and broke for dinner early. However, the evening session was to deal with the most controversial item on our docket, the adoption of MLK's letter from the Birmingham Jail as a contemporary statement of faith, without constitutional authority. Our Book of Order does not recognize that category. So, it began. Someone moved that the letter be submitted to become an official statement of faith to be included in the Book of Confessions. Then someone said that process would take four years and we needed to get it out now for congregations to study. We broke into small groups to discuss. We then came back together, but the discussion continued as the hour grew later. Finally, someone offered a motion to recommend that both be done. Send it out for study and start the process of including it in the Book of Confessions. After prayer, that was adopted. And we finished that one item in only a little over two and half-hours. I wonder what tomorrow holds.



Committee work

Wednesday, June 20, 2018

Yesterday we finished up with the committee work. As we began, I was not sure that we would finish. As in any group, there are people who love to hear themselves talk, even if they don't have much to say. But as the meetings went on, we found our pace and got our work done by the appointed hour. We had 12 items to deal with, which we had a chance to read and think about before we got to St. Louis. However, there is something called a "Commissioners Initiative" that lets commissioners write up new items. We got one of those. It was troublesome to me. It wanted the general assembly to endorse a movement called "Reclaiming Jesus". They have a web site, www.reclaimingjesus.org. When I read it, although I agreed with almost all of the content and although it had an impressive list of religious leaders listed, it was a new organization, was raising money (I am not sure for what) and no other denominations had endorsed it. It was so political that I was sure it would take up a lot of time and it was the last thing on our agenda. Well, when we got to it, a commissioner had a motion ready to refer it to the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbytery Mission Agency. It just happened that the director of that office was in the room and spoke to the motion. He said that he would welcome it to study and decide what the appropriate response should be. Motion passed. One of the most impressive parts of the committee meetings was the opening and closing each session with worship. We prayed, we confessed our sins and need for forgiveness and we sang. The only thing we didn't do was take up a collection!

At 3:00 about a thousand people gathered to stage a march to City Hall. It seems that this area (and maybe ours as well) have poor people locked up after they have been charged with a minor offense if they can't pay the bail. By being locked up, they often lose their jobs. It is a modern debtors prison. It was announced before the assembly that the offering from the opening worship service would be used to pay bail on many of those poor people. With what was raised before the assembly and what was collected at the worship service, \$47,000 was raised. I don't know how many people were bailed out. I hope to find out today. (On the last day, I had the chance to ask the Stated Clerk of PC/USA if we had the number and was told it was not yet available but would be made public when it was received.) (I learned on Saturday, June 30 that almost three dozen poor people were bailed out and are back with their families.)



At 5:30, the Peace River delegation met for dinner. It gave us a chance to share and compare our week so far. It was a good evening, but it started to rain during the meal. Everyone but me had hotel rooms across one street or another, but I was 10 blocks away. So, I asked the welcome station to call me a cab. She said she would call me an Uber. I had never done that before, but it got me back to my hotel nice and dry.



Peace River Presbytery Dinner

Thursday June 21, 2018

Yesterday we started the plenary sessions where we, as a whole, will decide on everything that the committees discussed in the past two days. It is not clear how we will get all of that done within the remaining days. But before we got started, there was a wonderful ecumenical worship service. We sang in different languages, we prayed in different languages, we listened (as best as we could) in different languages. But the most meaningful was when we prayed the Lord's Prayer in different languages. The room was filled with noise and it was difficult to have my own prayer, but there was an uplifting spirit of everyone in the world praying to the same God. Very inspiring.

Then we got down to business. We started dealing with a consent agenda where items that committees had approved by wide margins were presented to be adopted without further discussion. But first, commissioners were given the chance to have anything removed from the consent agenda and discussed by the entire group. It seemed like a lot of items were pulled, but when we were done, the Stated Clerk told us we had just approved 80 items. Wow! That took until lunchtime. There was a luncheon for Ruling Elders. The guest speaker was Joan Gray who wrote *Sailboat Church*. I had met her before when she spoke at our Presbytery meeting and Pastor Dawn had us as session members read that book. There really wasn't much new, but I did get to meet and share with elders from around the country. Rubber chicken.

The afternoon session began with taking up the items from various committees. My committee was the second one discussed. The initiative on Reclaiming Jesus had been removed from the consent agenda and was extensively discussed but then finally approved. I don't remember all the committees that we dealt with in the morning session. There was a dinner for all the commissioners before the evening session. Rubber chicken again. I could eat very little. I think I will have lost weight by the end of the week.

The evening session got started with us breaking down into small groups to share our thoughts and experiences on the march yesterday. It is a good way to share with others. Then we went back to work. The most moving thing in the evening session came during a discussion of a recommendation from one of the committees. The recommendation was to have the PCUSA form an advocacy group for LGBTQIA+. I didn't know what the "I" and the "A" were for. As I understand it, "I" means intersex, which is biological for having aspects of both sexes. "A" stands for Asexual, meaning none of the above and the + stands for all people. One YAAD, Young Adult Advisory Delegate, came forward to speak in favor of the recommendation. He started by saying how he felt the love on Presbyterians, both at home and here. Then he said "Dad, I don't know if you are watching this on streaming or not, but I am Bisexual and this is the first time I have said it out loud." The response from the entire assembly was moving. YAADs from around the hall ran to his side and surrounded him in hugs. The majority of the assembly rose to their feet in support. The moderator was in tears. It almost brings me to tears to type this, just remembering. Never have I ever felt such love in such a large group.

The session went until after 10:00 local time and I was exhausted. Two and a half more days.

Friday, June 22, 2018

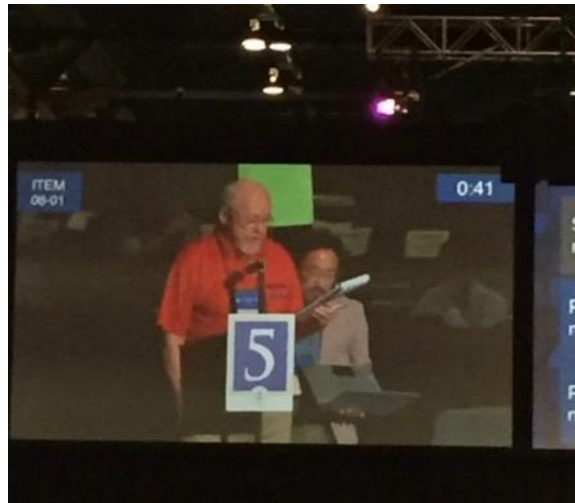
Yesterday was a day full of assembly business. Every overture that comes to the assembly must be acted upon. The 14 committees that met all day Monday and Tuesday divided up the items and made recommendations for the general assembly. Starting on Wednesday, we, as the assembly are taking them up, except for the 80 that were included in the omnibus motion. I had said to several people that I was out of my comfort zone coming to a meeting without a 3-ring binder. But now, I don't know how any previous assembly get anything done in the era of just paper. On my computer, every item being discussed comes up on my screen. Every offered amendment (and there are plenty) comes up on the screen before we discuss it. When we are ready to vote, the advisory delegates vote electronically and the results are shown on big screens. Then we are told that we have been advised and then we vote on our own machines. The results are shown in both numbers and percentage. Throughout the hall there are nine different microphones. If you want to speak, you go to the floor manager for that mike. They get your delegate number and an idea of what you want to say, which is sent to the podium electronically. They you are given a color-coded paddle to hold up. Blue if you want to make a motion or an amendment. Yellow if you have a question. Green if you wish to speak in favor of the item. Red if you want to speak against it and a paddle with a star if you have a point of order. Then the moderator knows why you are wishing to speak and usually takes questions first, then motions, then for and against. As she (the moderators are both women) calls which microphone she is recognizing, it is turned on, the big screens show the person at the mike along with your name and status (advisory or commissioner, etc.) At one point, when things were getting confusing, and an amendment to the amendment was appearing on the big screen, the moderator commented on the wonderful job the people behind the scenes were doing, keeping up! The big screen then said "Thank You" and we all broke up laughing.

In the morning we dealt mostly with the issues of the world and what stand (if any) our denomination should take. We talked about peacemaking, immigration, international and social justice issues. Then we paused and had a rousing worship service with Communion. The preacher was an African American woman who had the place rocking. The choir was the male chorus from an African American Presbyterian church from here in St. Louis. It was wonderful and inspiring. However, the afternoon meeting changed the flavor of the day. The last general assembly appointed a "Way Forward Commission" and we were to hear their report and their recommendations. Mostly it was about the internal operations of the national church. There are some real tensions among certain factions and that became apparent as the afternoon wore on. I didn't know what all the issues were and the motions and the amendments to the motions didn't make things clearer. As things came up, I usually voted with the recommendations coming out of the committee and against amendments, unless they made sense to me. My feeling was that the committee had spent more time, knew more than I did and had given this thoughtful, prayerful consideration. Now, don't get me wrong. The discussions were all very civil and respectful. At one point, a commissioner held up a star paddle and asked that we pause and have the moderator to lead us in prayer. That helped. This was an excellent example of us Presbyterians doing things "decently and in order".

There was no business scheduled for the evening. There was a Christian Concert but I had decided before I got here that I would take the night off. That was a wise decision. I really hit the wall. I now know what the saying "bone tired" means. I ate by myself in the hotel and was in bed by 8:30. I slept well and now believe I can make it through this day and make it home tomorrow. It has been a wonderful experience.

Saturday, June 23, 2018

Well I made it until the last day. Yesterday was a full day! We spent the whole day in the plenary sessions, trying to finish up all of the committee reports. The major item on the agenda was the overture to divest all funds from companies that deal with fossil fuel. This was an overture that was submitted by one Presbytery and endorsed by many, many more. A group in support had walked the 200 miles from Louisville to St. Louis in support of this. The discussion went back and forth with a number of amendments and amendments to the amendments. The basic argument was between "let us make a statement" to "as investors we have a seat in the board room where we can make our presence known. One speaker, who was for keeping the investments, summed it up this way: "Do you want to make headlines or do you want to make progress?" That was countered with "We have been in the board rooms and it has not made a difference. Maybe we can make a difference by making a headline." Back and forth it went. A motion to suspend debate for morning worship was defeated! On and on it went. At one point, I got up to a mike to ask a question but was ruled out of order. Oh well, my question was answered later.



The question was Out of Order. I was not.

Finally, the motion to suspend was reconsidered and passed and we started worship later and then broke for lunch. After lunch, we continued for a total of more than 4 hours on this single topic. After that, other items were discussed until it was time for the evening dinner break.

Graham got a table at the dinner for the four commissioners from Peace River. Mariah Martin, our young adult advisory delegate had a meeting with the other YAADs. Graham and Randy have been here every day and have been very supportive. They asked last night how we all were doing and what our reaction to the week had been. We also talked about how we were going to report on the general assembly back to our Presbytery.

Then we went into the evening session. We still had 3 committee reports to cover and were told that we would finish, no matter what the time. One of the committees was the General Assembly Procedures Committee who had 23 motions to deal with. None of them had been in the omnibus motion even when they had been approved by all the committee members. That was because they had constitutional implications that had to be decided by the entire assembly. After three and a half hours, I had had all I could deal with. At about 10:30, I left my fellow commissioners and went back to the hotel. This morning I found a text message that the assembly finished the Procedures Committee work at 1:30 this morning. (I found out later that it ended about 12:30. Not as bad, but still no way I could have made it.) Since that was not the last thing on the agenda, I don't know yet what time they adjourned. But it was important for all items to be decided last night, so that we can adopt the budget this morning.

My flight schedule was changed shortly before the assembly, so I will not be staying until the end. I will leave the assembly around 10:30.

Sunday, June 23, 2018

The morning started with the final plenary session. There was not much left to do after the session last night lasted until 12:30 am. We prayed and we began the discussion of how to

finance all that we had directed the PCUSA to do over the next two years. It totaled over \$14,000,000 with continuing the staff, programs and starting the new initiatives and taskforces that were created. The result is that the per-capita will be a little under \$9.00 per member each of the next two years. That is a significant increase over the current amount. This is the figure that the Presbyteries should pay to the national office. Churches are to pay their share to the Presbyteries and members should pay their share to their churches. Of course not all do but that is primarily the basis of support for our denomination. I had to leave by 10:00 to get to the airport, so did not experience the final worship service.

Anita met me at the Sarasota airport about 8:00 last night and I was home a little after 9:00.

Over all, it was an inspiring and exhausting experience. I am honored to have been chosen to represent our church and Presbytery. I have a much better appreciation as to how we fit into the greater church.