

Reflections from Presbytery of East Iowa

GA227 Delegates

YAAD Elizabeth Bryce

Hi! I'm Elizabeth Bryce, I recently served at the PC(USA)'s 227th GA representing the Presbytery of East Iowa as a YAAD (Young Adult Advisory Delegate), currently I am a student at the University of Iowa. At 19, I didn't know what to expect my first time at GA, however by the time the week was done I had learned so much. I participated in Committee (Financial Stewardship and Witness) and Plenary. While this role meant I didn't have proper vote in plenary, Advisory Delegates were polled prior to every vote to help inform the Commissioners meaning that my voice was still important and helpful. Not only did I feel important at GA as a representative of the Presbytery of East Iowa, but I felt the work I was both participating in and witnessing was incredibly important to the church. The scope of what we covered ranged from pensions to worldwide initiatives. Over the two weeks I participated in GA I gained a new understanding of the PC(USA) and so much more appreciation for the larger church. It wasn't all business though, I met many other YAADs from across the country and was able to explore Milwaukee between the long meetings! All in all, I can't wait to see how this experience shapes my life!

RE Rosemary Schwartz

I attended my first General Assembly this year. It was a very busy and hectic couple of weeks but well worth the effort. I served on the General Assembly Relationships committee and spent time reviewing parts of the Unification Committee's work as well as other important items. During the week of preparation and then at the Assembly our group connected and left with a new perspective and friends.

Aside from the technical problems that plagued the center that first day, the Assembly seemed to not have any major hiccups. After the wifi was boosted the rest of the Assembly had few wifi issues. I was touched by a gentleman from Palestine whose family was uprooted from their property in 1948 when Israel was formed. He shared with us the struggles his family have gone through moving from place to place until eventually settling in the US where he became a citizen. He specifically spoke to the events at the Gaza Strip. The presentation helped to cement the General Assembly recognition and condemnation of the genocide still happening in Gaza. It was very powerful but uplifting to hear his story.

Anyone interested in learning the in and outs of PCUSA should think about attending. There is something for everyone from the tedium of budget work, to the insightful presentations of the work that PCUSA is doing around the world, and the heartfelt stories that validates our work.

RE Marjorie Thirkettle

Serving as a Presbytery of East Iowa (PEIA) Commissioner to the 227th General Assembly in Milwaukee was truly a wonderful experience. And we were told we are still Commissioners until the 228th General Assembly, which will convene in Puerto Rico in 2028. The journey began in late June with access to the General Assembly database, where we were instructed to begin the mandatory training and optional training. In addition, I was invited to attend trainings by our own Presbytery and the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. These experiences not only provided the necessary information for having a successful experience as a Commissioner, but they also provided invaluable opportunities to meet and get to know other Presbyterians from across our country. By the time we completed our online committee work, traveled to Milwaukee, entered the hotel and then the convention center, I was running into people I knew from online meetings, and we were excited to finally meet!

Prior to the 227 General Assembly online committee work, we received our committee assignment. I was assigned to the General Assembly

Operations Committee (GAO). I plunged into the work of reading not only the GAO overtures, but also other committee overtures, knowing that all overtures that weren't placed on the Consent Agenda I would be voting on, and I needed to know how to vote. Sometimes the sheer amount of information felt daunting!

Prior to the start of our online committee work, we were assigned to small groups to review Synod and Agency reports using a checklist for the review. I was assigned to Synod of the Lakes and Prairies minutes for 2024 and 2025. Our committee reviewed thousands of pages of reports, using the checklist results, and then presented them to the General Assembly.

Our committee struggled with several overtures, such as the recommended location for the 228th General Assembly in Puerto Rico and in-person-only assemblies. What I learned from these very difficult discussions is that Presbyterians can come together, have major disagreements, and still be willing to prayerfully discern a path forward. God's grace, the recognition that we are all sinners and we can all be forgiven, helped us find common ground and the ability to move forward. The General Assembly voted to assemble in Puerto Rico for the 228 GA and to have another in-person and by Zoom assembly due to logistical issues that will be resolved for future gatherings.

After the committees concluded their work, we traveled to Milwaukee. I needed to fly. Nerves were calmed while walking alone in the Milwaukee airport when I spotted two people, smiling faces, wearing the aprons we were told to watch for and standing next to a sign welcoming us to GA. The bus was waiting and took us to the hotel. I already knew many people, having just spent many hours online working through our committee assignments.

The PEIA Commissioners sat together as a group towards the back. Large monitors were ideally placed so we could watch presentations for a larger view of the happenings. The first business meetings were a challenge because the convention center wasn't equipped to handle such a large gathering, but technicians worked through the night to resolve connectivity issues.

Just as with the online committees, we worked quickly through the agenda. Elissa and Bobby graciously kept in contact with us to make sure we had enough protein and drinks to keep us going. They had fidget items available for just that time when it was needed to help get us through some of the long debates or intense periods of discernment, preparing how to vote. It was reassuring to know they were behind us, watching for when we needed their encouragement with a text message, a cookie, a drink, a funny joke, or asking if I/we needed anything. I truly felt supported throughout the General Assembly, not only from Bobby and Elissa, but by the many volunteers offering a warm welcome, directing us to where we needed to be, and generally just asking if we needed help. Presbyterians know how to work and get things done while providing a very supportive environment.

The overtures the GA voted on are published in the Presbyterian's Outlook publication. I feel so blessed to have had this wonderful experience. It was truly a humbling experience to work with Presbyterians, covenanting and discerning together issues that will impact the direction of our denomination going forward.

Our last task before closing the 227 GA was to elect our 228 GA Co-Moderators. The General Assembly elected our Rev. Dr. Kris Schondelmeyer and Rev. Marta Pumroy Cordero on the first ballot. I believe Kris and Marta answered a call for this special service for such a time as this. Please pray for them as they serve our denomination for the next several years.

TE John Allen Bankson

I was privileged to be a commissioner, representing the Presbytery of East Iowa, at the 227th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), which met at the Baird Center in Milwaukee, WI. East Iowa Presbytery sent two Teaching Elder Commissioners (the other being Kris Schondelmeyer of FPC Davenport, who was elected to be co-moderator of the 228th General Assembly, which will meet in 2028 in Puerto Rico), two Ruling Elder

Commissioners (Marjorie Thirkettle and Rosemary Schwartz), and one Young Adult Advisory Delegate (Elizabeth Bryce). In total, there were 254 Ruling Elder Commissioners and 254 Teaching Elder Commissioners, for a total of 508 Voting Commissioners. (The Young Adult Advisory Delegates, Theological Student Advisory Delegates, and Partner Advisory Delegates from the denominations with whom we are in full communion have voice on the floor of General Assembly but not vote.)

In addition to the Commissioners and Advisory Delegates, the Stated Clerks and Executive Presbyters (some presbyteries call them General Presbyters) from the 164 presbyteries in the PC(USA) were in attendance (including our EP for the Presbytery of East Iowa, Bobby Outterson-Murphy, and our Stated Clerk, Elissa Bailey), as well as the Synod Executives from the 16 synods (including Deb DeMeester from our synod, the Synod of Lakes and Prairies. Past moderators of the General Assembly also attend, as well as representatives of the various agencies of the Church, including the Board of Pensions, the Presbyterian Foundation, and Presbyterian Life & Witness (the new, unified agency that was formed from the merger of the Office of the General Assembly with the Presbyterian Mission Agency). There were also a number of people who attended as observers. All told, there were around 1,340 people in attendance.

The first week of General Assembly was committee week, which I did from here at the office. I was assigned to the Climate and Environmental Justice committee, and subsequently was also asked to be on the Bills and Overtures Committee. Bills and Overtures assists the Stated Clerk of the PC(USA) in preparing the docket and also approves the minutes of each day of the Assembly. One person from each of the other committees serves on Bills and Overtures, and we met every evening of committee week after the last committee had adjourned for the day to talk about what went on in our committees, to note which items took the most time, etc., so we could plan the docket for the plenary meetings accordingly.

Plenary was the second week of GA. Commissioners and Advisory Delegates arrived on Friday evening. Saturday was “Community Day,” which began with a rally to support an end to gun violence, followed by a

march to city hall, where we surrounded the building and prayed. Saturday evening was a “town hall,” which featured many different Presbyterian ministries, seminaries, colleges and universities, and other organizations. Each group had a table with information, and some had “swag” like buttons, stickers, pens, etc. The Synod of Lakes and Prairies’ Synod School had a table. I helped to work the Presbyterian Association of Musicians (PAM) table for that event.

Sunday morning we all got on buses to attend various churches in the Milwaukee area (we had chosen which church we wanted to attend during the registration process). I attended Southminster Presbyterian Church in Waukesha, where my friend Christian Boyd is the pastor. Christian’s church follows the Service for the Lord’s Day from the *Book of Common Worship* as we do at Union, so it was nice to worship with different people, in a different place, but using the same historic, ecumenical liturgy. It gave me a sense of the unity of the body of Christ around the world in a profound way. The co-moderators, CeCe Armstrong and Tony Larson, preached at Southminster that morning, and the church provided lunch for us in their parish hall following worship.

Sunday afternoon was the first plenary session of GA. Technical issues prevented us from doing much business at that meeting, but the opening of plenary was beautiful to behold, with a bagpipe-and-drums ensemble marching in playing “Scotland the Brave.” We were able to pass the consent agenda, which is all of the items from the committees that were passed with a 75% or greater majority. As it happens, all of the items of business that came before my committee (Climate and Environmental Justice) were on the consent agenda.

By the next day they had most of the technical issues fixed, and then by Tuesday it was even better, so that the voting process went much more smoothly. For plenary, the rest of the committees, in turn, presented their items of business along with their recommendations. In cases where the vote in committee had been a close one, there was a minority report as well as the majority recommendation from committee, leaving the assembly to decide which one to accept as the main motion.

Notable items of business included twenty-six proposed changes to the Book of Order. One of these is a statement against white Christian nationalism: “The church rejects any ideology that seeks to establish Christianity as a privileged or dominant force through the power of the state, or that conflates religious identity with national, racial, or ethnic supremacy. Such ideologies, in all their forms, are incompatible with the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, constitute a theological error, undermine the church’s faithful witness, and are contrary to the church.” Since this was approved by GA, it now goes to the presbyteries for ratification. If it is approved by a majority of the presbyteries by mid-2027, it will be added to the opening section of the *Book of Order*.

There was an overture from one of the presbyteries that actually came from a group called “Presbyterians for the Kingdom,” a fundamentalist group that has as a part of their goals, as stated on their website, something they call “Operation *Reconquista* (‘Re-conquer’)” in which they want to “infiltrate” PC(USA) churches, wait for the current members to “die off,” and then “take over.” They put forward an overture regarding polyamory in hopes of causing controversy, but the overture was so poorly crafted that it was not viable, no matter its content. And as it was, the Committee on Gender and Sexuality Justice had already put forward this overture: “[To] fund and develop a comprehensive theological framework document and study guide that addresses human sexuality and gender, which would reflect and support the denomination’s commitment to full inclusion of all people, and which would help the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) live into that commitment more fully.” So the potentially-inflammatory overture on polyamory was simply “answered” by the action the assembly had already taken regarding the creation of this study committee.

Perhaps most significantly, the Assembly approved the creation of a commission to investigate the actions of the Interim Unified Agency (now called Presbyterian Life & Witness) in effectively shutting down World Mission on the part of the denomination last year and laying off all of our Mission Co-Workers (missionaries). This item was of great interest to the whole Assembly, and it took a significant amount of time to create the final form of the action, with many amendments, substitute motions, etc.

All told, GA was a long two weeks, and we were all quite busy the entire time. But I believe we did do good, faithful work. Everything was done with much prayer: at every point we sought the guidance of the Spirit for wisdom and discernment. It was also exciting to see someone from the Presbytery of East Iowa elected as co-moderator of the next General Assembly. The other new co-moderator, Marta Pumroy, is also from Iowa, and is well-known to our presbytery. I was grateful for the opportunity to go to GA and grateful to UPC for their prayerful support of me while I undertook this important work on behalf of the wider Church.

TE Kris Schondelmeyer, Be the Leaves

The 227th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was, in many ways, a mirror held up to the life of the church. As a commissioner from the Presbytery of East Iowa, I had the privilege of participating in days filled with prayer, worship, discernment, and faithful debate. We wrestled with significant issues facing both the church and the world...from the rise of Christian nationalism, to the pain experienced through the restructuring of our national agencies, to the ethical use of artificial intelligence in a rapidly changing world. These were not simply policy discussions. They were conversations about what it means to follow Jesus faithfully in this moment of history.

Again and again, one truth became clear: there are places where the church is hurting, including the grief surrounding the significant shifts in World Mission and the elimination of mission co-worker positions. These are wounds that cannot be ignored, trust that must be rebuilt, and relationships that need healing. Yet there was also a profound commitment among commissioners to believe that the Holy Spirit is still at work, leading us toward hope rather than despair.

As our final act of business, the Assembly elected new Co-Moderators from among four gifted teams of candidates. I remain deeply humbled...and, if I am honest, still somewhat surprised...that in a single ballot the commissioners elected our colleague and dear friend, the Rev. Marta

Pumroy-Cordero, and me to serve as Co-Moderators of the 227th General Assembly.

Over the next two years, Marta and I will share this constitutional ministry, representing the General Assembly across the church, listening to congregations and mid councils, and bearing witness to the work of Christ throughout the PC(USA). We will then moderate the 228th General Assembly in San Juan, Puerto Rico, in the summer of 2028.

Since the election, a number of commissioners have shared that they entrusted us with this ministry because they saw in our partnership a witness to the possibility of healing. Marta is a survivor of domestic violence who found safety, hope, and a renewed sense of calling within the church. I am a survivor of clergy abuse within the church as a young person, and much of my ministry has been dedicated to accountability, truth-telling, and creating safe and sacred space for others. Neither of us would choose the wounds we have carried. Yet we have experienced the grace of God meeting us in those places, and we have seen the church at its best when it chooses honesty, compassion, and hope.

Our shared vision for our service to the church is rooted in Revelation 22, where the leaves of the tree of life are “;for the healing of the nations “We believe Christ continues to call each one of us to Be the Leaves...to be a healing and hope-filled presence in God’s beautiful world.