
A Word of Hope- Reflections on the 221st General Assembly
Sam Marshall, General Presbyter

Long before the words of our faith were written down in the Holy Bible, the people of Israel and Paul's congregations "sang" the faith in song. Long before strife and disagreement over doctrine and rules emerged, faith was simply chanted, sung with joyful hearts in thanksgiving to the God who created us and loves us all.

Sometimes when disagreements over rules and polity and theology emerge, only a song will do. When the United Methodists often gather, a frequent hymn is by Charles Wesley's "And Are We Yet Alive?" In the midst of our own struggles over how members and congregations respond to the controversial actions of the 221st General Assembly, Wesley's words seem appropriate and hopeful for all of us:

*What troubles have we seen,
what mighty conflicts past,
fightings without, and fears within,
since we assembled last!*

*Yet out of all the Lord
hath brought us by his love;
and still he doth his help afford,
and hides our life above. – Charles Wesley*

In spite of all the challenges we face, and the grief and anguish for those on all sides of the issues that divide us, there is still our faith and hope to celebrate that the Church belongs to Jesus Christ. Our journey now may be confusing or disorienting, but we must not lose touch with the songs that lift our hearts to the "sure and certain" hope that "Jesus is Lord! He has been Lord from the beginning. He will be Lord at the end. Even now he is Lord" Perhaps we would all benefit from singing more and talking less.

As one of the Teaching Elder GA Commissioners from Charlotte Presbytery wrote, "...There are contentious issues, strong and conflicting opinions, painful decisions, and places of division. But that is not the heart of my experience in Detroit. It is the unity and the expansiveness of our mission and message that is so striking. The news reports fail to capture even a fraction of the grace and love that exists in this gathering of Presbyterians. The divisions that separate us are miniscule compared to the Spirit that unites us, and the Spirit is alive in the PCUSA. Issues big and small are only part of the story. There is also a larger narrative of hope and love that I hope we will open our eyes to see in our churches, communities, and world." (Matt Baker)

Page two

There were many actions of the General Assembly we should celebrate: over 250 new worshipping communities, the adoption of the Educate a Child-Change the World program, offered to one million children in the world, an Interreligious statement on affirming our engagement with people of other faith traditions; a new commitment to “missional living” in the world – going beyond the walls of congregations to increase our engagement in service to communities and the world, and much, much more of a positive nature.

It will be important for us in Salem Presbytery to discuss and share our concerns and hopes for what has taken place. May we take “hope” in living our days from the words of 90 year old Presbyterian pastor Jim Reese who reminded the General Assembly that in 90 years, the General Assembly had done plenty of things he disagreed with, but that he had “never left the Table.” I pray that we will abide by the words of our prayer spoken over the Lord’s Supper,

“We praise you, most holy God, for sending your only Son to live among us, sharing our joy and sorrow. He told your story, healed the sick, and was a friend of sinners. Obeying you he took up his cross and died that we might live. We praise you that he overcame death and is risen to rule the world. He is still the friend of sinners. We trust him to overcome every power that can hurt or divide us, and believe that when he comes in glory, we will celebrate victory with him.

I’ll look forward to seeing you “at the Table” of our Lord at the August Presbytery meeting.

Gracefully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam P. Marshall" with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sam Marshall, General Presbyter