

# EDITOR'S OUTLOOK

## “... with those who rejoice”

“**R**ejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” So the Apostle Paul exhorted the church in Rome. That command may be difficult to apply in the days after the adjournment of the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). But I urge you to try. In the next issue of the *Outlook* I will speak directly to those weeping in these days. In this moment I want to speak to those pleased, more or less, with the decisions made at the assembly.

For some among us, the eight-day sojourn in Detroit Lions' country will be remembered as a modern triumph on the level of Daniel's sojourn in the lions' den. Those hoping for major change of one kind or the other needed to make their case and sometimes gave some ground, but in the end prevailed almost every time.

What a contrast from the 221st GA two years ago in Pittsburgh! That assembly “steeled” itself against change, rejecting proposal after proposal in committee, and then in the case of committee-approved changes, rejecting many of them in plenary.

A do-nothing GA this one was not.

Now that's not to say that a singular party line got all it sought. Those recommending social justice and peacemaking actions — including reviving efforts to adopt the Belhar Confession — mostly prevailed. But the proposal to divest from fossil fuel companies was referred for study. The proposal to promote Young Adult Advisory Delegates to commissioners without requiring ordination was turned back, too.

Those who voted in the minority often were not rejecting all things new. Less politicized matters were approved: trimming 16 synods down to between 10 and 12; adjusting allocations of two of the four annual special offerings (Peacemaking is now Peacemaking and Global Witness; the Joy Offering's portion for racial-ethnic schools will incorporate other forms of leadership development for racial ethnic Presbyterians); dissolving the Hanmi Presbytery in California; studying a proposed replacement for the Directory for Worship.

While one of the two biggest issues, the votes for marriage equality, reflected the concerted efforts of those self-described as left-of-center, that other biggest proposal, to divest from corporations supporting Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, the pro-con sides crossed standard party lines. Nevertheless, change was in the air.

If you are reveling in such changes, by all means, rejoice. For the church to break out of the status quo, to find its prophetic voice, to throw caution to the wind — aligns it with leaders ranging from Moses to Mary B. Anthony, from Martin Luther to Martin Luther King.

But this is also a time to weep with those who are disappointed. Fissures are multiplying in this fragile fellowship, and you can either multiply or minimize them. If only for that reason, please moderate not only your celebrating but also your capitalizing on the actions taken at the assembly. Don't vanquish the opposition. Don't pile on.

In fact, the biggest reason your proposals took flight in 2014 was that self-described conservatives largely stayed away from this GA. The number of behind-the-scenes supporters of evangelical causes has shrunk by nearly 90 percent from where those were just a few years ago, some having moved to other denominations, others just having lost hope in a system that seems to them to favor the relentless efforts of the change agents.

In other words, a plurality vote in a General Assembly does not mean a plurality enthusiasm back home. And the feelings of alienation will only be exacerbated by victors' triumphalism.

Instead, please befriend those whose votes came up short. Reach out, invite a conversation, take the time to listen deeply, to empathize, to comfort.

Those in disagreement are not your dread enemies. They are your sisters and brothers in Christ. They may not be the folks you would have chosen to be your friends, but they are your family members, called to share fellowship with you by a sovereign God. It's time for us to rediscover how to be family together again.

—JHH



# EDITOR'S OUTLOOK

## “... with those who weep”

“**R**ejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” So the Apostle Paul exhorted the church in Rome. In the previous issue of the *Outlook* I spoke directly to those rejoicing over actions taken at the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Now I turn my attention to those weeping.

For some among us, the eight-day sojourn in Detroit Lions' country will be remembered as a failure on the level of children of Israel building a golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Those hoping to see the denomination's highest governing body “steel” itself against proposed policy changes, as they did at the 2012 assembly in Pittsburgh, felt like a lion in a den of Daniels.

How shall we respond?

First, those self-defining as conservative evangelicals need to own their part of those actions. When two teams agree to play a game and one doesn't show, what happens? It loses by forfeit. Well, in every GA meeting through the recent decades, scores of evangelicals volunteered their time to support like-minded commissioners, to testify on behalf of causes held dear and to give a witness to all who would listen to them. This year, the sum total of volunteers serving on the Renewal Network Team — representing Presbyterians for Renewal, The Fellowship of Presbyterians, Presbyterian Coalition, Presbyterian Elders in Prayer, Presbyterian Renewal Ministries International and other groups — was six. Yes, six volunteers total.

While advocates and commissioner resources for every change effort were ubiquitous, the evangelicals were invisible. Some have transferred to other denominations. But most just stayed home. Like 10 of the 12 spies sent to survey the Promised Land, they have decided, “We are not able to go up against this people for they are stronger than we.” They have forgotten the words of the other two spies, Caleb and Joshua, “Let us go up at once and occupy it [the land], for we are well able to overcome it.”

As the Letter of Jude says, “Beloved, while eagerly preparing to write to you about the salvation we share, I find it necessary to write and appeal to you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (1:3). Perhaps evangelicals need to acknowledge how going AWOL not only fails Jude's command but even denies in practice the resurrection power they so boldly proclaim.

Second, while grieving the changes enacted in Detroit, it is important to resist the temptation to exaggerate. In particular, while it is true that the denomination-wide prohibition against performing same-sex marriage has been lifted, it has given way to a policy of permission, not of prescription. Yes, the pessimists can predict that a mandate will follow, as happened after women were permitted to ordained — but to that I refer to the story of the 12 spies. And I add that over the past 50-plus years, apart from the God-inspired decision to prescribe women's equality, virtually no actions of the denomination have been binding on local churches apart from increases in Board of Pensions dues.

Third, let us acknowledge that the impetus behind most policy changes

enacted at this GA — neighbor love and justice for all — is profoundly biblical. While one can contend that a specific action may have been misguided, the overall tenor was, “Do unto others what you would have done to you.” Instead of rejecting such actions — especially those dismissed as “party politics” — on closer study we may discover that they reflect a genuine effort to express the heart of Jesus.

Finally, let us all learn from that other era of Israel's story, the one marked not by conquest in exodus but by perseverance in exile. When outnumbered by the enemy secularists and pagans, and when undermined by allies accommodating the enemy, a remnant of the people found not just the serenity to accept what they could not change and the courage to change what they could but also the wisdom to know the difference. May God grant us all the same — and in the process to enable us to be family with brothers and sisters with whom we may have a disagreement or two.

—JHH

