

The General Assembly is like Groundhog Day

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The General Assembly meeting that happens every other year is like Groundhog Day. Attendees start to feel like Bill Murray in the movie: You “wake up” to the exact same issues, and the exact same conflicts, at the exact same meeting we’ve had many times before. It’s easy to feel like the church is not moving forward (when it actually is), because we allow the same old polarization, the same old disagreements, and the same old overtures to set the agenda. We can do better. We can break out of our dysfunction. We can learn a new way.

Do congregations allow members to make the exact same motions every year at the congregational meeting, when a decision has already been made? No. Do sessions allow elders to re-introduce the same business each meeting after a policy has already been established? No. Do presbyteries give the microphone to people who keep bringing up the same issue meeting after meeting, after a conclusion has been reached? No. So why do we allow this at the General Assembly level?

Maybe we are afraid of our shadow.

Commissioners may feel stuck in a recurring nightmare like Bill Murray. They may feel trapped. Maybe they feel the debilitating repetition is out of their control and is some kind of deserved punishment for past sins. They are wrong. There actually is something they can do about it.

Commissioners can say, “We’ve been debating ordination and sexuality standards for thirty years, and we don’t have to debate it again this year because the church has already voted on it.” Commissioners can say, “We choose not to remain locked in the same vicious circle that every General Assembly gets trapped into.” Commissioners can refuse to dive into that quicksand this year. Commissioners can receive all the overtures with thanks. Commissioners can answer these overtures with the wisdom of previous church decisions, and move on.

This seems to be traditionally hard for people to do since most of them have never been a GA commissioner before, or at least not for the last ten years. They may be session or presbytery veterans, but they are GA rookies. It’s easy for rookies to succumb to the temptation that they can succeed where others have failed. But in a world where top-down decisions are normally rejected, some of the best decisions are ones that simply reaffirm historical statements, or ones that ask sessions and presbyteries to make a discernment from the bottom up.

Commissioners can say that decisions by the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission (GAPJC) are sufficient for the church (particularly when the GAPJC reaches a unanimous decision), and we don’t need to re-hash their conclusions just because some people don’t like them. Commissioners can say that it is time for us to break out of our unhealthy rut. Commissioners can choose to stop the downward spiral. Instead of trying to live in the straitjacket of all the old issues, this year we can go through a metamorphosis. We can be the caterpillar that becomes the butterfly. We can dwell in the Word together, we can pray together, and we can listen to the stories of what each other’s congregations are doing in ministry. We can learn from each other what God is doing in our communities.

Commissioners can choose to say that the previous decisions for these overtures are still valid today. Commissioners can be humble enough to say that our predecessors got it right, and we have nothing new to add. Commissioners can say that we don't have to spend all of our time hearing all the same old people articulate all the same old arguments about all the same old hot-button issues. Commissioners can say we've been there and done that. Commissioners can say this year will be different. Commissioners can say this year we will focus our time and energy on emerging and missional questions that will bring more life to the church than the same, tired old overtures. We don't have to open the same can of worms every assembly. There are plenty of new cans that need our attention.

The good news is that a committee or two at this GA will be looking creatively at vision, at the future, and dreaming where we need to go. This is a positive experiment to break out of our traditional rut and create a new conversation. We can stimulate one another to love and good deeds. We can develop a new missional imagination. We can be creative. We can be generative. We can develop ministry experiments. We don't have to be defined and controlled by all the old conflicts any longer. They have proven they can't move the church forward into a better place.

The time has come to set aside the old agendas and engage in new life-giving conversations. We can choose to be a healthier, more productive assembly. We can choose to be proactive rather than reactive. We can choose to deal with new challenges.

We can choose not to be Bill Murray anymore. We don't have to rehash all of the problems of the past. We can move on. We can live into a new paradigm for a new millennium. We can move out of the shadows and into the marvelous light. We don't have to experience Groundhog Day again this year. We are Presbyterians. We can do better.

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