

Clark's Corner – General Assembly Mission Council Highlights

The General Assembly Mission Council meeting was held in Louisville February 24-26. Here are some of the things that happened there:

Linda Valentine was unanimously elected to a second four year term as the Executive Director of the GAMC. This will need to be confirmed by the General Assembly (GA) this summer. Mike Kruse, an elder from Kansas City, was elected as the new chairperson of the council, and Carolyn McClarnan, an elder from Hattiesburg, Mississippi, was elected to be the new vice-chair. I was elected to be the new chairperson of the Vocation subcommittee. This will also make me a member of the Executive Committee/Personnel Committee. These new positions will be effective immediately following GA.

I gave the presentation and led some discussion of the Joint Committee on Leadership Needs' paper "Raising Up Leaders for the Mission of God". This paper is posted on our presbytery website at www.presbyterysd.org, on the GAMC Vocation website at www.pcusa.org/vocation, as well as on a new Facebook page called "Presbyterian Leadership Needs". We had some good discussion and we are getting some requests from around the country for more information. This discussion followed three other presentations. One was by Jay Hudson, President of the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program, on our changing cultural context. The second was by Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons on the book "The Great Emergence", about new emerging trends in society. And the third was by Barbara Wheeler, President of the Auburn Center, presenting her research on the state of Commissioned Lay Pastors.

A couple of issues generated some lively debate. The Council voted to forward on to GA two new study papers on Christianity and Judaism and Christianity and Islam. If you were on the web last week, you may have seen a statement posted by the Simon Weisenthal Center, upset with some proposed new positions on Israel. However, their remarks were not directed at the papers we discussed. Their comments were directed towards a paper being written by the special Middle East Task Force that reports directly to GA and does not report through the GAMC. The Task Force report is due to be published on March 5. I cannot comment on it, because it hasn't been released yet and I have not seen it yet. I'm not sure if the Weisenthal Center somehow got an advance copy, or if they are just reacting to what they think the paper will say. Anyway, the papers that we discussed are theologically orthodox. They were both recommended by former Princeton president Tom Gillespie, who is the chair of the Discipleship subcommittee, who notes that they both state our differences center around the person of Jesus Christ. These are being recommended to GA not as position papers, but as study papers.

We also had some lively debate around a recommendation from the Mission Responsibility Through Investment group. They are denouncing Caterpillar because their equipment is used by Israel against the Palestinians. After vigorous disagreement, the Council ended up deciding to send this on to GA for a vote as well.

We voted to increase the salaries of the GAMC staff in Louisville by 3% in 2011, 2012, and 2013, since they have gone the last three years with their salaries frozen. We voted to adopt some Guiding Principles to give direction to the staff for how to make future budget cuts, which will begin again in the next couple of months. These include prioritizing ministries that focus on congregations and leaders, discerning what can only be done at the national level, what can best be done at the national level, and what should be done at the local level. They include a sunset clause to stop ministries or to transfer them to others who can do them better.

We learned that fewer and fewer students from all denominations in the U.S. are seeking the traditional Master of Divinity degree. We also learned the number of lay people who are pursuing theological education for their own benefit and interest is increasing significantly. We learned that in a time when congregational positions for pastors are declining, that our military continues to hire new chaplains. We learned that they love to hire Presbyterian pastors, because our preparation standards are higher than most denominations, and they have had such a good experience with Presbyterian chaplains.

Our World Mission personnel have recently launched a new website called Mission Crossroads. This is a place to learn more about missions, as well as a place for people all across the church to share what they are learning about missions. On the 15th of each month, they post a new podcast that you can listen to about some aspect of missions. You can find it at www.pcusa.org/missioncrossroads.

Our Vocations Subcommittee secured a grant from an anonymous foundation to launch a new Pastoral Residency Program. This is a program that will match up small congregations, who have not been able to find or afford pastors, with pastors for a two year designated call. Since half of our congregations now have less than 100 members, there has been great interest and response from churches. The program will start small this summer, and then begin to grow over time.

When I look around me, I see both joys and concerns. I see both encouraging things and discouraging things. I see us taking steps forward as well as taking steps back. As Presbyterians, we don't know where God is leading us, but we do know that God is leading us. We are a people who need to be active in prayer and active in moving back into our neighborhoods. We want to be a part of the exciting, everyday work that Jesus Christ is doing in our ordinary neighborhoods, in ordinary people, everyday. Let's keep learning together what the Holy Spirit wants to teach us.

May God bless you!

Clark Cowden