BELHAR ADDED TO PC(USA)’S BOOK OF CONFESSIONS

PASSAGE SPURS SPONTANEOUS CHORUS OF ‘WE SHALL OVERCOME’

By Gregg Brekke
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Fifty years after it was birthed in South Africa by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church during its battle against apartheid, the Confession of Belhar has been included in the Book of Confessions of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a majority-white mainline American denomination.

After a four-year-long process of study and periodic votes, the 222nd General Assembly (2016) voted overwhelmingly Wednesday to make Belhar the denomination’s 12th recognized confession, the first originating in the global south.

The historic moment was greeted with tears of joy by many in the Oregon Convention Center, including Allan Boesak, a co-author of Belhar who was moderator of the DRMC when it was adopted.

“What a night, what a night,” Boesak exulted. “I thank God for your affirmation of this confession tonight. I praise God tonight for the things we did not know [when the confession was adopted in 1986], but are blessed to see.”

This is the denomination’s second-go-round with Belhar, which originally was proposed for adoption in 2008 by the Task Force on Reparations. The previous effort failed in 2010 when the confession was approved by a majority of the presbyteries, but failed to reach the required two-thirds threshold.

The second process began at the 220th General Assembly (2012), then was sent to presbyteries again after the 221st General Assembly (2014), receiving 84 percent approval.

The final recommendation for approval came to the assembly from the Ecumenical and Interfaith Committee.

A visibly emotional Co-Moderator Jan Edmiston called for commissioners to vote, and when the 540-33 vote flashed on the screen, commissioners erupted in a standing ovation as the worship team led the assembly in the song, “Oh Freedom.”

Holding back tears, Godfrey Betha of the United Reformed Church in Southern Africa was invited to speak after the vote and said: “It is important to seek solidarity with South Africa. We’ve come a long way with the PC(USA). We are grateful to have you as partners in service to the Lord. Today we offer gratitude, we salute you as the PC(USA) for your historic decision to adopt the Belhar Confession as a standard of faith for your church. I bow in humility to God and thankfulness to you … I’ll never forget this date.”

He added: “Your decision affirms that, like those other historic standards of faith, the Belhar Confession transcends its historic circumstances as a standard for faith in all places and times. Your decision affirms that Belhar does speak against ideological and theological attempts to justify specific historical forms of injustice. Your decision affirms to your church, [and] to all, when you come looking for the demon of racism, don’t come to us.”

Boesak then stepped to the podium.

“I thank God for what happened here tonight,” he said. “I thank God for your faithfulness. I thank God for your acknowledgement of our common humanity in doing this … I thank God, and I thank you, and because of Jesus and because of God’s faithfulness, we shall overcome.”

At that point the commissioners linked hands throughout the plenary hall and spontaneously broke into “We Shall Overcome,” led by Co-Moderator Denise Anderson.

Other assembly actions on recommendations from the committee are available on PC-Biz at https://www.pc-biz.org/#/committee/565/business.
ALLAN BOESAK COMMENDS BELHAR CONFESSION

CO-AUTHOR CALLS CONFESSION A ‘UNIFYING DOCUMENT’

By Gregg Brekke
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – As a principal author of the Confession of Belhar, Allan Boesak brings a truly unique perspective to the 222nd General Assembly (2016), which voted Wednesday to include the document in the denomination’s Book of Confessions.

Belhar “is a confession that stirs us, humbles us, and inspires us … It’s a unifying document,” Boesak said Wednesday at the General Assembly Ecumenical Breakfast.

“We cannot yet foresee the consequences of the Confession,” he said. “No other Confession has been so clear in its intentions: not only unity, but its foundationality; not just reconciliation, but its inescapability; not only justice, but its indivisibility.”

Noting that the church’s Confession of 1967 was adopted the last time the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) met in Portland, he said, “What this Portland assembly will be known for is the adoption of [Belhar].”

“Today is a defining moment for the PC(USA), as it was for the Dutch Reformed Mission Church(DRMC) 30 years ago as we finally adopted the Belhar Confession,” Boesak said.

But the defining moment was not just the adoption of the confession, as stunning as it was,” he added. “In the years between 1982 and 1986, my friend and colleague and co-author Jaap Durand offered crucial prophetic insights that inspired and haunted the church in ways we couldn’t imagine in 1982, saying, ‘A confession does not and cannot engage in mere trivialities. It

AME BISHOP REGINALD JACKSON URGES PC(USA) TO BE ‘PROPHETIC, NOT PATHETIC’

By Gregg Brekke
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – Drawing on the biblical story of Micaiah and his unpopular advice to King Ahab, Bishop Reginald Jackson of the African Methodist Episcopal Church on Wednesday urged Presbyterians – and other people of faith – not to be dismayed by the volume of dissenting voices.

“Micaiah didn’t tell Ahab what he wanted to hear,” Jackson said in his sermon at the ecumenical worship service during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) meeting in Portland. “He was encouraged to ‘Let your voice be like one of them, and encourage the king.’ But he replied, ‘As the Lord lives, whatever the Lord says, that I will speak.’”

Jackson’s text was 1 Kings 22:1-18, the story of the prophet Micaiah delivering an unpopular message from God, advising the king not to fight the army of Aram to take back the land of Ramoth-gilead.

“As it is in this text, so it is in our nation today,” Jackson said. “We live in a crisis of conflicting voices. In this text you have 400 prophets – and then one prophet – both speaking in the name of the same God, with two different messages on the same subject.”

“In our nation today we have clergy and churches in the name of the same God giving two different messages on the same subject,” he said, citing divisions on issues such as gun control, immigration and Christian/Muslim relations. “All around the country there is a crisis of conflicting voices, not because of political leadership, but faith leadership.”

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PORTLAND – For two hours Wednesday morning, the candidates nominated to be the next Stated Clerk of the General Assembly stood and delivered to special constituents – the commissioners who will choose one of them Friday morning at the 222nd General Assembly 2016 of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

J. Herbert Nelson, director of the PC(USA.) Office of Public Witness, the choice of the 10-member Stated Clerk Nomination Committee, and Dave Baker, stated clerk and director of communications for the 18,000-member Presbytery of Tampa Bay, who was nominated from the floor on Sunday, shook hands with well-wishers, chatted and posed for photos with people eager to meet and learn more about their next ecclesial leader.

Some commissioners had clear preferences.

Amy Pospichal, a teaching elder in the Presbytery of Sierra Blanca, said she’s “enthused about the prospect of having another person of color in the highest level of leadership,” should Nelson prevail during Friday’s election. She said she wanted to learn “how his experience in the field of public witness will be an influencing factor in his work as Stated Clerk.”

Dan Johnson, a ruling elder from the Presbytery of Tampa Bay who placed Baker’s name in nomination, said Baker “isn’t afraid to try new things. He also has a mastery of technology that will help us do more with less.”

Paul Lucia, a ruling elder from Lehigh Presbytery, said he planned to wait in line to meet both candidates. He’d already heard from one earlier in the week.

“J. Herbert Nelson came into our Social Justice Issues Committee meeting and spoke one grand sermon in about four minutes,” he said. “I think he’ll help us look to the future,” including “the greening of the place.”

Baker said he looked upon his two-hour slot with commissioners and others as a listening exercise.

“We’ve got to do a better job listening, and I want to hear people's concerns,” he said, adding that former Moderator Heath Rada “has already done a great job listening to people's concerns, and I’m hearing today some of what he heard.”

Baker said his expertise using technology to deliver services to congregations and mid-councils church-wide will not only save money but attract more young people to the church. “Companies and churches are already doing that,” he said. “It’s where our younger folks already are.”

As for Nelson, he said Wednesday’s event was for him more than a meet and greet.

“We have to go about the business of transformation,” he said. As for upcoming divisive issues, such as the possible merger of the Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency, “we are going to have to spend some time preparing ourselves” for upcoming assemblies in St. Louis and then Baltimore.

The Stated Clerk election is set for Friday’s first plenary session, which begins at 8:30 a.m. Pacific Standard Time.
RULING ELDERS GATHER IN FELLOWSHIP, HEAR FROM PEERS

By Bob Sloan
General Assembly News

PORTLAND — A key element of Reformed theology is that all believers are ministers, and that faith informs every aspect of life, not just “church life,” — whether it’s preaching on Sunday mornings, driving a delivery truck or waiting tables.

As Therese Howell, stated clerk in Presbytery of Middle Tennessee, said Wednesday, “My role in the world impacts my faith, and my faith impacts my role in the world.”

It was put another way by Vincent A. Thomas, a member of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota: “The vow we took as elders does not just apply on Sundays or when we are at church, but at all times. We are elders 24/7, at work, at home or at church.”

Howell, Thomas and Destini Hodges of Capital Presbyterian Church in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, discussed “Spiritual Leadership in Work and World,” during the Ruling Elder Luncheon at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which brought together ruling elders from across the nation to celebrate their calling and hear from their peers on how their faith work interacts with their secular work.

Wednesday’s event was the second time the General Assembly has convened an event specifically for ruling elders.

Therese Howell, Vince Thomas, and Destini Hodges (seated) are introduced at the Ruling Elder Luncheon. Photo: Michael Whitman

Hodges has distinguished herself through her dedication and service work in the City of Harrisburg. She is an avid community activist who serves as vice president of Harrisburg Hope, a grassroots community group dedicated to civil discourse and dialogue. She also serves as the coordinator for the Presbyterian Women of Carlisle and for Capital Youth Connections.

At 21, Hodges was elected as the youngest member of the Harrisburg School District Board. Earlier this year she was sworn in as the youngest member of the Harrisburg City Council.

In addition to being stated clerk of the presbytery, Howell, a member of First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee, is an elected member of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution and a member of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution.

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GA PAUSES TO HONOR GRADYE PARSONS
RETIRING STATED CLERK’S ‘HEART RUNS DEEP AND ARMS OPEN WIDE,’ SPEAKER SAYS

By Jerry Van Marter
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – A crowd of nearly 1,000 Presbyterians paused during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) Wednesday night to pay tribute to Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons, who is retiring at the end of the assembly after 37 years of ordained ministry, including the last dozen as the denomination’s chief ecclesiastical officer.

While countless colleagues expressed sorrow at his departure – live and on video – his family shared their delight that he is returning in retirement to his beloved east Tennessee.

“Gradye has always been a man who is about the future and what this church is going to be in the future,” said Tom Hay, his longtime friend and colleague in the Office of the General Assembly (OGA).

Although Parsons is an avid historian, Hay said, “His heart is never in the past, but in what this church will be in the hearts of the people who seek to know the Lord.”

Sharon Youngs, a former OGA colleague who now pastors a church near where Parsons and his wife, Kathy, will retire in east Tennessee, recounted a refrain that Parsons has frequently used to illustrate his favorite New Testament story: Jesus in the boat calming the storm.

“Get in the boat. Go across the lake. There will be a storm. You will not die,” Youngs recited.

Gradye Parsons and grandson Dylan thank those gathered at the group dinner. Photo: Danny Bolin

“Gradye could fill volumes with the thrills and spills of ministry,” she said, “but he has always stood at the helm in a gentle and secure way, his life built on relationships. God put an additional dash of pastor in Gradye’s DNA. His heart runs deep and his arms

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DEPENDENT-CARE POLICY MAKES GA MORE FAMILY-FRIENDLY

By Eva Stimson
General News Assembly

PORTLAND – General Assembly is a family affair for Greg and Heidi Bolt, pastors from Nebraska who came to Portland with their children, 6-year-old Sophia and 4-year-old Thaddeus.

Heidi, a commissioner from Homestead Presbytery, said the new Dependent Care Reimbursement Policy implemented for the first time this year by the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly made it possible for her to be accompanied by her husband and children.

“We are a General Assembly kind of family,” said Greg, who began attending assemblies with his parents when he was 10 years old. He has continued attending as an adult, he says, because it has “helped my ministry.”

“We plan to be here, and we like to have some family time in the midst of the chaos of the meeting.”

Under the new dependent-care policy, commissioners and advisory delegates may be reimbursed for the costs of a variety of caregiving arrangements, as long as the expenses don’t exceed $800 for the first dependent, or $400 per additional dependent.

Commissioners can apply for financial assistance with such things as hiring part-time sitters, at home or at the assembly; transporting a dependent to the assembly; or sending dependents to a camp or conference.

Heidi applied for financial assistance and used it to pay the plane fare for Sophia and Thaddeus. “I like that the policy is flexible, because everyone has a different situation,” she said.

The Bolt children spent a few days in Portland with their parents, then went to stay with grandparents in Corvallis, Oregon. A highlight of their time at the assembly was attending Saturday’s opening worship with several thousand Presbyterians, Heidi said.

“I had someone come up to me after worship who saw my kids and said, ‘I’d love for my kids to be able to experience General Assembly.’”

Lindsay James, a teaching elder commissioner from the Presbytery of John Knox, also has benefited from the dependent-care policy. She and her husband, Christopher, a professor at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, brought their children, 6-year-old Ginny and 3-year-old Luke, to Portland with them. The children are staying with Lindsay’s parents, who live about a half-hour’s drive from the Oregon Convention Center.

“I’d never participated in a General Assembly before,” Lindsay said. “Being away from my family for a week has been a major barrier.”

Her son has a sensory disorder, so she worried that issues might arise because of his unique needs. But she was able to borrow a car from her parents and use her dependent-care assistance to pay for parking at her hotel and convention center.

“If there are any issues, I can get in the car and go,” she said. “Just to have that flexibility puts me at ease and enables me to be more present at the assembly.”

Also new at this assembly is a family room (C-126) provided by the Office of the General Assembly and the Committee on Local Arrangements. The room is equipped with a rocking chair, refrigerator, microwave, and pages for children to color. There is a private space for nursing mothers, and a TV screen to follow assembly business.

“There was free apple juice the day we visited,” Heidi Bolt said.

The dependent-care policy is particularly significant for the Bolts, because Greg was involved in making it happen. As a commissioner to the 221st General Assembly (2014) he co-wrote, with commissioner Joseph Murrow, a commissioner’s resolution calling for child care to be provided at all General Assemblies.

The assembly referred the resolution to COGA, which appointed a sub-committee to work on a plan that would best meet the needs of commissioners and advisory delegates. The resulting policy broadens the focus from “child care” to “dependent care.” Caregivers may use the financial assistance to arrange for care at home or to bring their dependents to the assembly.

“The dependent-care policy is different from the idea we had,” Greg said, “but it’s better.”

Dependent care is back on the docket of this year’s assembly. The Mid Councils Committee voted not to approve an overture calling for all church councils to develop dependent-care policies. Instead, the committee is recommending that commissioners answer the overture by directing the Presbyterian Mission Agency “to develop resources for councils at all levels to provide for dependent-care policies.”
ALLAN BOESAK COMMENDS BELHAR CONFESSION

Continued from page 2

can only be an extension of the ancient confession that Christ is Lord… I’m convinced that the Confession of Belhar will outlive apartheid and the heresy that formed it.”

The assembly voted Wednesday on a recommendation from its committee on Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations to include Belhar in the Book of Confessions.

Recalling the struggles of black South Africans to remain faithful and pursue unity in light of terrible oppression, mass detention and cruel policies, Bosack said: “The church became directly involved in the efforts of freedom and justice in South Africa. The Jesus we worship and confess as Lord in the sanctuary is the Jesus we take into the street. Our people were slaughtered. Everyone was touched in one way or another.”

“By 1986 we saw no sense in, and had no desire for, unity with the white church, or with white people in general,” he said of the general despair that afflicted the Dutch Reformed Missionary Church. “But we had Belhar, and Belhar understood Calvin as he spoke of Holy Communion. ‘Christ has only one body of which he makes us all partakers.’”

Calling the unity of the church both a gift and command, Boesak said it was difficult to find points of unity or reconciliation with those who were actively opposing the rights of black South Africans.

“Belhar understood from Isaiah that God is not only a God of justice, but that God is a God of indivisible justice,” he said. “So against our self-absorbed instinct for self-absorbed victimhood, the black church confessed God as a God who wants to bring forth peace and justice in the world, and that God calls the church to follow in this, that the church must stand next to people in any form of need or injustice.”

Recalling the challenge the DRMC experienced in affirming the rights of LGBTQI people, Boesak asked if his denomination was “ready to face the consequences, not only with the white Dutch Reformed Church, but within itself?”

“In following Christ, the church must fight against those who use their privilege to oppress and put down any people,” he said.

In asking the PC(USA) to “witness against any form of injustice,” Boesak turned his attention to Palestine, asking the denomination to support the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement – similar to those used to end apartheid – to place economic pressure on Israel to end the occupation and expansion of territories.

“Kairos Palestine is a cry from the heart of suffering,” he said. “Unless it rolls down for Palestinians, it will not roll down for others. Indivisible. Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.”

In conclusion, Boesak said of Belhar and its broader implications: “It is a confession that stirs us, humbles us, and inspires us … It’s a unifying document.”
AME BISHOP REGINALD JACKSON URGES PC(USA) TO BE ‘PROPHETIC, NOT PATHETIC’

Continued from page 2

“Our nation today is polarized and divided,” he said. “Two groups [are] speaking in the name of the same God, but with a different message. On one side are those who call themselves conservative Christians, evangelical Christians. Every time I hear that it bothers me, because I guess they’re saying if you aren’t evangelical you aren’t Christian.”

“On the other hand are those who call themselves progressive,” Jackson said, noting that that label is attached to many members of the PC(USA), “and their position on many issues is just the opposite of those who call themselves conservative.”

Jackson offered three suggestions for resolving this crisis of conflicting voices.

First, he said, “Each of us must remain faithful. Too many of us in the faith community have stopped doing the things to remain faithful in the first place. It is not enough to know that we’ve been called. What’s more important is to know who called you.”

His second point: Don’t be “fooled by the numbers.”

“Too many of us get alarmed by the numbers – how many are on our side, how many are on the other side,” he said. “We capitulate: go along to get along. The Lord has not called us to be popular; he’s called us to be faithful. Just be faithful to what God has said to you.”

Thirdly, Jackson said, “Live like you know God.”

“We are alarmed and rattled by a whole bunch of stuff,” he said. “I go to bed with the assurance that God still has the last word in his world. In the end, what God has said is going to happen.”

“Let’s be faithful,” he concluded. “Let’s speak truth to power. Let’s stand on God’s word and what God says to us. Let us live with the confidence that God still has the last word in his world. We can’t prove God, but God proves himself.”

Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons invited Jackson to preach at the assembly’s ecumenical service a year ago, after the shootings at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Recalling the pain felt after the shootings in the church known as “Mother Emanuel,” Parsons said: “When one part of the body hurts, all of the body hurts. It was a pain that is beyond the imagination. Those of you who’ve been pastors and have Wednesday night Bible study know those who came to that study were the heart of the church.”

“When I heard of the tragedy, I emailed Reginald immediately to offer condolences,” Parsons said. “And so when it came time to invite an ecumenical representative to preach as this service, there was only one choice: Reginald Jackson.”

The service of word and sacrament included an invocation by the Rev. Kamal Youssef Yacoub of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Egypt; a call to worship by the Rev. Robina Winbush, the PC(USA)’s director of ecumenical relations; music by the Gresham High School Overtones choir; and intercessory prayers from the Rev. Lee Hong Jung, general secretary of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, who prayed, in part: “Give us the peace that the world cannot give. Give us faith to follow you. Let us go into the world with hope, realizing God’s presence anywhere. Let us go in the world with love, reaching the marginalized.”
The special Spirit of GA video series being shown in plenary at the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) also is available online. The five videos, airing June 18, 19, 22, 23, and 24, can be viewed at vimeo.com/pcusaoga. The videos take up the themes of leadership, eco-justice, discernment, social justice and identity. They are being produced by Randy Hobson and Brelin Tilford through the General Assembly Communications Center.

**BURKE, VA., PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HONORED**

By General Assembly News Staff

PORTLAND – Burke (Virginia) Presbyterian Church was awarded the Nancy Jennings Award from the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns during the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The award recognizes exemplary efforts of affirmation, support and advocacy for the gifts, rights, and responsibilities of persons with disabilities in the life of the church.

The church, in the small city of Burke, Virginia, was recognized for its TreeHouse ministry, a program created to provide “a safe and friendly place for people living with long-term and life-altering conditions such as depression, lingering grief, traumatic injuries, chronic or degenerative diseases.”

The award was presented Tuesday evening during the Compassion, Peace and Justice dinner.

Jill Bolander-Cohen accepts her Peacemaker Award at the Peace Breakfast. Photo: Danny Bolin

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Jill Bolander-Cohen accepts her Peacemaker Award at the Peace Breakfast. Photo: Danny Bolin

**RULING ELDERS GATHER IN FELLOWSHIP, HEAR FROM PEERS**  
**Continued from page 4**

of both the Tennessee and national associations of parliamentarians. She is a member of Team Stokes with Presbyterian CREDO.

Thomas is an elder and the clerk of session at Westminster Presbyterian. He began serving as a ruling elder in 1976, at age 15. He has served as clerk since 1993. He was elected to serve on the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly, which he has served as moderator.

In secular life, he works at Minneapolis Community and Technical College, managing several projects intended to create pathways to a two-year degree and entry-level employment in “living wage” positions. He also has served as a trustee for McCormick Theological Seminary for three terms, from 2003-09. He is a youth-group leader, confirmation mentor and pastor nominating committee member at Westminster.

Asked to give an example of a situation they encountered where they needed to put their faith to work, Hodges said that as a city council member, “sometimes you have to stand up for something that may not be popular, but you know it is the right thing to do.”

Thomas pointed to helping resolve personal conflicts and serving as a mediator of disagreements. “You must be patient, listen and empathize,” he said.

Panelists also were asked to tell how they respond when confronted with their own prejudices.

“You have to be honest with yourself, and understand that you too have faults,” Howell said.

Thomas said one must always hold yourself accountable.

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“You have to be honest with yourself, and understand that you too have faults,” Howell said.

Thomas said one must always hold yourself accountable.
Continued from page 5

open wide.”

The keynote speaker at the fete was Paul Raushenbush, who after praising Parsons’ “unique contribution to the religious, spiritual and moral life of our nation and world,” outlined his vision of the future.

“The church will not look the same in the decades to come,” he said, with technological changes “we are just beginning to understand.” Raushenbush said he is less focused on the changing world than he is “on investigating the core mission of the church in this time and how it will lead us into the future.”

He recalled the experience of preaching in New York the morning after the nightclub massacre in Orlando 10 days ago. “The people in that church needed to be there that morning. They were seeking community and healing as a way to respond to the tragedy,” he said. “Because there is a colossal sickness that looms just below our communal life – the twin evils of hate and fear.”

“We have a love crisis in our country, our national heart is not beating right, we have forgotten that we belong to each other and are beloved by God. People are literally dying for lack of love – who will offer it to them?”

This is the core mission of the church, Raushenbush said.

“Jesus said: ‘A new command I give you, that you love one another. By this people will know that you are my disciples – if you love,’” he said. “Jesus embodied the love that extends to all humanity, and this is the call of today: The church as emergency room, reviving and extending love. What if people could truly tell that we are Christians by our love?”

The church, Raushenbush said, “is called to live up to Jesus’ mandate to love both inside and outside the church doors.”

Decrying the church’s penchant to count – money, members – he said (to thundering applause): “Without love, our numbers add up to less than zero. There are numerous examples in this room of ministries that proclaim love in action. Love has redemptive power that will transform the world. The future of this church is this one love that is beyond understanding, but which transforms.”

Parsons responded with characteristic humility.

“It’s been a privilege to do this and to have you share your stories and be able to share those stories with the rest of the church,” he said. “Just don’t give up on this church – DON’T!”

Recalling the post-resurrection account in Acts, Parsons said, “While the men were hiding behind closed doors, afraid, the women said, ‘We’re going out to do some ministry – and they saw the resurrection!’”
ASSEMBLY APPROVES NEW DIRECTORY FOR WORSHIP
REVISION NOW GOES TO PRESbyteries FOR RATIFICATION

Mindy Douglas speaks during plenary. Photo: Danny Bolin

By Jerry Van Marter
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – A slimmer, less restrictive Directory for Worship for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was overwhelming approved Wednesday by the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

The directory, which is part of The Book of Order, now goes to the denomination's 171 presbyteries, a majority of which must ratify it to be adopted.

The new directory has been 10 years in development. Kristin Saldine, a consultant to the writing team, likened the directory to a compass. This is not a book of rules and regulations," she told the assembly, "but gives us bearings and direction, pointing to the primary purpose of worship – to give glory to God – and navigating between form and freedom and encouraging a variety of styles.”

David Gambrell, associate for worship for the Presbyterian Mission Agency, earlier told the Theological Issues and Institutions Committee, which recommended approval, that seven principles guided the directory's development:

• Uphold essentials of Reformed faith, life and worship.
• Respond to changing contexts and congregations.
• Provide for more flexibility and more diverse expressions.
• Use "we" vs. "they" language for the people of God.
• Streamline contents and make organization more user-friendly.
• Simplify language and make style more accessible.
• Eliminate redundancy and reduce length.
• Enhance the directory's usefulness as a teaching document.

The Directory for Worship was last revised in 1989, after Presbyterian reunion. Saldine said it was too long, organized in too complicated a fashion – for instance, sections on the theology and practice of Reformed worship appeared in two different parts – and needed more flexibility, in keeping with the new Form of Government. Gambrell noted that the new directory has just 25 mandatory directions, as opposed to more than 120.

Moreover, Saldine said, the new directory encourages a variety of styles of worship – a reflection of the explosion of new worshipping communities, immigrant fellowships and racial-ethnic congregations in recent years. In addition, the new directory reflects “ecumenical convergence” that has taken place since the last revision.

The new directory contains five chapters, versus seven, and comes in at 18,000 words – one-third shorter than the old directory.

Other assembly actions on the committee's recommendations are available on PC-Biz at https://www.pc-biz.org/#/committee/579/business

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PORTLAND – General Assemblies can be tough, even for folks who have experienced many. Some of the issues challenge your faith; some of the people challenge your patience; some of the locations challenge your body.

It all can challenge your psyche, especially since it is all on top of the normal course of one’s life. The General Assembly prayer room offers some quiet and solace, and it is staffed by spiritual directors.

“Sometimes people just need to decompress,” said Jill Holseth, one of the three spiritual directors on hand during the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)’s Portland assembly. “We have had quite a few conversations,” she said, noting that people have come with “a full-range of issues related to grief, loss, processing some of the GA business items.”

Others say they want to use “a different part of my brain,” said Holseth, a graduate of San Francisco Theological Seminary.

The prayer rooms, located at B111-112 in the Oregon Convention Center, are designed to bring in the natural element of the region.

As described in the assembly program, “As individuals enter, they are welcomed into rooms that reflect the Pacific Northwest with a woodland setting, native plants, and Pendleton fabrics. They are encouraged to explore various prayer resources which include prayer prompts and examples of various types of prayer, poetry, and the opportunity to ‘pray with color.’”

The small wood logs have a special story. They come from a recent lumber harvest on land on the lower west slopes of the Cascade Mountains owned and cared for by the Shibley family since 1864.

The family were founding members in 1889 of the Springwater Presbyterian Church in Estacado, and various family members have been ruling elders for six generations. Everett Shibley was a commissioner to the 1953 assembly, also held in Portland.

There also are labyrinths in the prayer room, one large one on the floor and several small “finger labyrinths.”

“People have been coming and going every day … and the labyrinths have been very popular,” said Victoria Brown, one of the spiritual directors and pastor of First Presbyterian in Roseburg.

Another part of the area is devoted to “private space where people can be to themselves,” Brown said.

But there’s more than just the two rooms.

“One of the things we were asked to do is to walk the whole convention center and pray for what’s happening in the different rooms and spaces,” Holseth said. She said they often begin each morning walking around the cavernous center “praying into spaces before business gets started.”

Brown added: “We’re praying for people’s conversations.”

An unseen part of the ministry began weeks ago, Holseth said. “Each commissioner was assigned prayer partners, someone praying for them up to two weeks in advance,” she said.

The benefit has been two-fold: it has allowed many people in the presbytery who could not attend the assembly itself to become involved, and helped them connect with Presbyterians from around the world.

And, when commissioners have discovered they have been the subject of these prayers, Holseth said, “That has been very profound.”

The prayer room will be open Thursday from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. and on Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
WITH REPENTANCE AND RESOLVE, ASSEMBLY VOWS TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE

PARSONS OFFERS HEARTFELT APOLOGY FOR FAILURES OF THE PAST

By Erin Cox-Holmes
General Assembly News

PORTLAND – With tears and prayer – and a remarkable apology from Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons – the 222nd General Assembly (2016) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on Wednesday unanimously passed a comprehensive policy to protect children, youth and vulnerable adults.

Kris Schondelmeyer, a Presbyterian pastor from Toledo, Ohio, who has become the face of abuse victims in the church, had told his horrific story of being sexually assaulted by a chaperone at a national Presbyterian youth conference, and the ensuing cover up, to the General Assembly Procedures Committee as it considered the policy.

Immediately after it was adopted, Parsons left his seat on the dais, stepped to the podium and said, "As Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, I want to offer to Kris a public apology for what happened to him."

Parsons said he had made Schondelmeyer’s acquaintance several years ago and witnessed his uphill battle to find justice and come to healing.

"I offer a public apology for how hard it was to find justice," he said. "I offer our commitment that his child and my grandchild will be safe."

Mary Lou Cox, chair of the General Assembly Procedures Committee, was in tears as she introduced the policy for the assembly’s vote.

"This place we gather is sacred, in part because it is where we can express in safety the brokenness and pain of the human condition," she said. "We act in destructive ways, even to the most vulnerable among us."

Cox explained that the policy is a manifestation of our need to confess our sin.

"We were broken open as a committee because of Kris’ testimony," said Lisa Miller, a Ruling Elder Commissioner from National Capital Presbytery.

The policy passed by a unanimous voice vote.

Olivia Campbell, a Young Adult Advisory Delegate from the Presbytery of Donegal, offered a concluding prayer:

"We look at the cross and see a big mess. Redemption is not always pretty. Give us courage to use words like rape and sexual assault in our churches, so that we will not make light of it anymore and acknowledge [that] repentance is not just words, but a choice to change our lives."

The Child/Youth/Vulnerable Adult Protection Policy and Procedures was developed in response to the mandate that all councils must adopt a child protection policy. It was developed by a Task Force for Safe and Sacred Space in consultation with legal and insurance experts. While it is now policy for the General Assembly, it is also available as a comprehensive model for congregations as they develop their own child protection policies.