

Doing Time at General Assembly

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Trinity Sunday, June 10, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 4:32-40; Psalm 33:1-12; 2 Corinthians 13:5-14; Matthew 28:16-20.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a dark and stormy night. Hours before, I had arrived in Salt Lake City and placed my suitcase in the back of a van that would take me to the University of Utah where I was staying. Moments later some other commissioners came and placed their suitcases in the back of the van. The van driver asked them where they were going.

"To the hotels."

"You need to take a bus. The van goes only the University. Take your suitcases out and put them in the bus."

When I got to the University my suitcase was missing. I headed to the Salt Palace where I hoped to intercept my suitcase. It wasn't there. After the evening communion service I continued to look for it. As a result I missed my van ride back to the University which was about 7 miles away. I spent the night in Byl Levering's room where there was an extra bed. The next morning I walked through the rain to breakfast. My rain-coat was in my suit-case. I hadn't shaved, I hadn't changed my clothes for over a day, I was soaking wet and I badly needed a shower. Nobody wanted to sit next to me. All because I was staying at the University. I stayed there because I wanted to save the General Assembly money - it was half as much as the hotels - and to bear witness against luxury but by Wednesday afternoon I was feeling very sorry for myself. Nobody was noticing the great sacrifice I was making. I got my suitcase on Wednesday afternoon. After that everything went much better.

Now for the General Assembly. I want you to imagine a Session

meeting that lasts for 12 hours, it goes on for nine days straight with breaks only for meals and to sleep. This Session has over 600 Elders who, for the most part, have never attended a Session meeting before. Instead of 7 committees there are over 30 committees to hear from. If you can imagine all that, that's what the General Assembly was like.

During one of the more lively debates I thought of a painting by Norman Rockwell entitled, "Freedom of Speech". Rockwell wanted to illustrate grass-roots democracy at work in a small town. A young man wearing a blue flannel shirt and a battered work jacket stands up to state his views on some matter that's clearly of great importance to him. The townsfolk who surround him listen to him with respect. That's the picture that came to my mind at the General Assembly.

Over 600 commissioners came from every Presbytery in the United States and its territories. We came from every walk of life, from every political persuasion, and from every race. We were there because God had called us to serve him through the church. I think of a carpenter from North Dakota who took ^{1 1/2} weeks vacation without pay to be at the Assembly. I think of a mother from Kreutz Creek in Donegal Presbytery who came with her two year old daughter strapped to her back. Her grandfather and her father were earlier commissioners to the General Assembly. She expects one of her two children to be a commissioner someday in the future.

I was a member of the Justice and the Rights of Persons committee. We dealt with racism, human sexuality, and gun violence. One afternoon we listened for two hours as pro-life and pro-choice advocates exercised their freedom of speech within the church in the light of their Christian faith. I was really impressed by the sincere attempt to allow all points of

view to be heard and how the commissioners sought the guidance of the spirit in prayer and Holy Scripture.

When we were trying to draw up a resolution on gun-violence a cowboy from Wyoming stood up to say that where he lived everybody owned guns and he'd never known anyone in his lifetime being a victim of gun violence. He was an active member of the National Rifle Association and the owner of a gun collection. Random selection had placed him on the committee dealing with gun violence. After he spoke a young man from West Virginia said he'd witnessed a gun shot murder just a few months before. A woman from Georgia said how her best friend's son had committed suicide with a hand gun. All three were placed on a subcommittee to write up a report. They came back with a paper that was unanimously received supporting gun control at federal, state, and local levels. It emphasized that we should not disparage legitimate ownership and use of firearms for hunting, target-shooting, collecting, and other recreational sports, but rather we should address the misuse of guns and the violence that results from that misuse.

Now [I want to share just four highlights of the Assembly for me.]

[1. The first highlight was the election of our moderator, Price Gwynn.]

of Charlotte, North Carolina. He's a retired president of a company and a college instructor in marketing. He pointed out that while differences among Presbyterians are real we must all agree on two great truths, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and his Resurrection. Speaking out of his marketing background he said that Presbyterians have the opportunity to become a five-million-member denomination by the year 2000 if we believe it, pray for it, and work at it.

[I heard our moderator preach] last Sunday morning [at the First

Presbyterian church of Salt Lake City. His first point was that Jesus loves us and the whole world. His love is not academic... it's not conditional... it's not something that we earn... not something that we deserve. Rather it's free... it's for all people everywhere including those whom we consider to be the greatest sinners. His second point was that we know this because the Bible tells us so. It was a very simple but powerful message.

2. A second highlight was the Sunday evening ecumenical Pentecost service. More than 300 people gathered in front of the First Presbyterian Church for an ecumenical procession to the Salt Palace. Two red banners emblazoned with white doves, symbols of the Holy Spirit, headed the procession. Close behind came a group of children from the local Japanese Church of Christ. They were followed by banners carried by representatives of synods, presbyteries and local churches. The Salt Lake Scots Bagpipe Band provided the music. They were followed by a group of robed clergy from Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox churches. Commissioners and other Presbyterians brought up the rear.

Milan Opocensky, a Czechoslovakian Reformed pastor, preached the sermon. He spoke of the remarkable changes that have taken place in his nation in the past year. The miracle of Pentecost, he said, is that the crucified and risen Lord gives us the Holy Spirit and sends us into the world.

3. A third highlight was the Monday morning worship service when the Assembly commissioned 179 new missionaries, the most our church has sent out at one time for 85 years. The Rev. Syngman Rhee spoke of how missionaries came to Korea over a hundred years ago with the Gospel. His parents believed the Gospel and his father became a Presbyterian minister. He recalled finding his father's dead body after he'd been killed by communists in North Korea. There he knelt and pledged to take up the

cross and follow his father's footsteps as a Minister of the Gospel.

The commissioning service made me think of how Presbyterian churches have so often been divided between those who want to decrease mission giving and those who want to increase it. Nearly two hundred years ago the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland considered a resolution *not* to send missions overseas. A doctor Erskine rose to his feet and called to the Moderator, "Give me that Bible." He opened it and read aloud the Great Commission - make disciples of all nations, baptize them, teach them. "Those are your marching orders!" he thundered. Those are our marching orders today. As I remember that commissioning service last Monday I hope that we don't lose sight of the global mission of our church as we rebuild our own church.

4. The fourth highlight of the Assembly was the endorsement of the Brief Statement of Faith. The committee that wrote it decided at the outset to use, as the basis of the statement, the Apostolic Benediction which we heard in our epistle lesson this morning. The Brief Statement of Faith begins with Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God because it is only through Jesus Christ that we know God at all. I'm excited about this new statement of faith. In years to come I'll be able to tell my children and grandchildren, "I was at the General Assembly that sent the Brief Statement of Faith back to the Presbyteries for their approval."

I'm excited about the Brief Statement because I have a deep concern that we know what we believe as a Church. What we believe shapes our lives. Many leaders in our denomination have expressed a fear that Presbyterians have become theologically illiterate. We don't know what we believe and we don't know how to share our faith.

Tom Long also of Princeton Seminary once spoke of his experience as a

small boy meeting with his Sunday School teacher to go over the Children's Catechism. His teacher, he said, looked as though she were as old as Methusaleh. She looked into Tom's eyes without smiling and asked the first question in the Children's Catechism, "Who made you?". Tom squeaked, "God?" Correct. His teacher reached for a little sticker which she licked with her lizard-like tongue and stuck in his booklet indicating he knew the answer. She went on to the second question, "Why did God make you?"

Dr. Long wasn't argueing for going back in time to the good old days when we had to learn the Shorter Catechism. Rather he said, "I learned from my teacher a Christian vocabulary. Long before I could understand what I was repeating I was learning the great words of the faith and when I grew up and personally accepted Christ as my Savior I had a vocabulary that could help me to express my faith to others." I hope our new confession will help us to learn a Christian vocabulary for the 21st century so that we'll know what we believe and be able to share our faith.

Let me just close by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to go to the General Assembly. I love our church, the Presbyterian Church (USA). It isn't necessarily the most faithful church and it certainly isn't the largest denomination but I believe we have a contribution to make to the wider church. The General Assembly reminded me that we're members of something vastly bigger than a local church. We join hands across the world with a great company of Christians to fulfill the great commission of our Risen Lord, to go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

One of the great temptations for committed Christians in North America is to believe in Jesus but to live without any sense of sharing his mission. The temptation is especially real because so many people in our

society live without a commitment to a cause that's beyond their own private, personal goals. Christians have a higher calling. To believe in Jesus is also to be sent- sent with the good news of the gospel to those who are near and to those who are far away.

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