

# Highlights of actions of the 223rd General Assembly (2018)

*in 1,500 words or less* by Jerry Van Marter | *Office of the General Assembly Communications - June 29, 2018*



**Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri & Cindy Kohlmann,**  
Co-Moderators of the 223rd General Assembly  
- Photo by Michael Whitman

## **Church Leadership:**

In one of the closest elections in years, Ruling Elder **Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri** (Presbytery of Tropical Florida) and the Reverend **Cindy Kohlmann** (Presbyteries of Boston and Northern New England) were elected Co-Moderators of the 223rd General Assembly (2018) on Saturday evening, June 16. On a fourth ballot vote of 266-253, they prevailed over another Co-Moderator team—the Reverend Eliana Maxim (Presbytery of Seattle) and the Reverend Bertram Johnson (Presbytery of New York City). A Moderator/Vice-Moderator pair—Ruling Elder Chantal D. Atnip (Presbytery of Carlisle), and the Reverend Ken Hockenberry (Presbytery of Chicago)—trailed.

In other actions involving Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) leadership, the assembly:

- Confirmed the election of the Reverend Diane Moffett as president and executive director of the Presbyterian Mission Agency.
- Confirmed the reelection of the Reverend Tom Taylor as president of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Foundation.
- Confirmed the election of Alton B. Pollard III as president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

## **Fossil Fuel Divestment:**

By a vote of 332-178, the assembly voted in favor of a minority report that called for the PC(USA) to continue its corporate engagement with fossil fuel companies—through its Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee—rather than divest from those companies. The Assembly Committee on Environmental Issues had voted 35-20 for the divestment proposal offered by the Presbytery of Hudson River. After the minority report became the main motion, it was approved by the assembly 409-106.

## **Israel-Palestine/Middle East:**

After spirited debate in the Assembly Committee on Middle East Issues that spilled out into the hallways of America's Center (St. Louis' convention center), the assembly raced through the committee's report in just thirty-five minutes on June 22. Among its actions, the assembly:

- Asked RE/MAX, LLC, to end its sale and rental of property on occupied, disputed land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. The vote was 393-55.
- Voiced support for all efforts to bring Palestinians and Israelis together peacefully.
- Asked the state of Israel to fully comply with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in order to stop discriminatory practices and called on the U.S. government to rejoin the United Nations Human Rights Council.
- Condemned the recent violence along the border between Israel and Gaza.

For the official record of the 223rd General Assembly (2018), visit: <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/>.

For General Assembly News reports, visit: <https://ga-pcusa.org/general-assembly-news/>.

**Per Capita:**

The assembly approved a 2019 General Assembly per capita apportionment of \$8.95 per member—an increase of \$1.25 (or 15.8 percent) per member over 2018. The Committee on the Office of the General Assembly had originally proposed a 39 percent increase in 2019 to \$10.71 per member. At the assembly, General Assembly Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II, revised that request down to a 10 percent increase in 2019 (to \$8.50) and 2020. The Assembly Committee on General Assembly Procedures approve the 2019 request, but not the 2020 increase. The assembly added \$643,000 (or 45 cents per member) to the per capita budget by the actions it took, raising the final per capita apportionment to \$8.95. In other per capita-related actions, the assembly:

- Approved, in a slightly amended form, an overture from the Presbytery of Newton to establish a team of twelve to fifteen persons to “review the current per capita-based system of funding the ministry of councils higher than the session, for financial sustainability into the next ten years.”
- Asked the Committee on the Office of the General Assembly and the Office of the General Assembly to explore ways of reducing the cost of future General Assemblies.

**The Way Forward:**

By a vote of 474-47, the assembly overwhelmingly approved the report of The Way Forward Commission, which was created by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) “to discern the vision for structure and function of our denomination.” The Way Forward Commission was joined by the All-Agency Review Committee in many of its recommendations. The assembly also created a Moving Forward Implementation Team to ensure follow-through of the actions taken and to make “mid-course corrections” between now and the 224th General Assembly (2020). Among its actions on The Way Forward, the assembly:

- Restructured PC(USA) A Corp to be representative of five of the six agencies of the PC(USA)—previously the A Corp board was identical to the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board. The new A Corp board is composed of eleven members, representing each agency, with the exception of the Board of Pensions, plus at-large members.
- Strengthened the role of the General Assembly Stated Clerk, reaffirming that person as the “continuing ecclesial officer and Head of Communion,” naming the Stated Clerk as “constitutional and spiritual leader” for the life and witness of the church, giving the Stated Clerk ex officio membership on all agencies of the church, and giving the Stated Clerk consultative authority prior to the consideration for election of any candidate for chief executive of any of the PC(USA)’s six agencies.
- Authorized a “financial sustainability review.”
- Beefed up the denomination’s translation services and efforts toward greater inclusion, equity, and reconciliation between all constituencies of the church.
- Endorsed an “administrative action issued by the commission on June 12 calling for greater transparency, particularly in the Presbyterian Mission Agency, and freedom for national staff employees to speak their minds in addressing the prevailing culture without retribution or retaliation.

**Congregational Leadership:**

The assembly rejected, by margin of 425-57, an overture from the Presbytery of Monmouth that would have allowed congregations to elect and ordain ruling elders without requiring them to serve on session. The proposal was designed to provide more lay leadership in a church that is changing—leadership, for instance, for new worshipping communities, immigrant fellowships, and other nontraditional faith communities.

### **Racism/Poverty/Violence:**

The assembly engaged in various acts of public witness that sought to engage issues of racism, poverty, and violence in St. Louis under the umbrella of Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II's, Hands and Feet initiative. In addition to a number of groups who came to St. Louis to engage in Hands and Feet service/learning projects during the assembly, several "mission trips" for assembly-goers engaged with various faith-based community groups to address poverty and racism in the city. The offering from the opening worship service raised more than \$54,000, which after a dramatic march by nearly 1,000 assembly-goers from America's Center to the City Justice Center on Tuesday afternoon, was given to ArchDefenders, a faith-based group that bails low-level offenders out of jail. Nearly three dozen people, victims of St. Louis' draconian cash bail system, were released from custody with the money. In its actions, the assembly:

- Approved "The Gospel from St. Louis," prepared by the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy.
- Initiated the arduous process of possibly including Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in the *Book of Confessions*.
- Strongly condemned "the unjust, racist disparagement of people and entire nations" and committed the PC(USA) to "a collective effort to solve the real problems facing our nation and the world."
- Changed the church's nomenclature from "racial ethnic people" to "people of color" and the name of the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns to the Racial Equity Advocacy Committee.
- Called for an immediate moratorium on the imposition of the death penalty and for the commutation of all death sentences to sentences of life imprisonment.
- Authorized a five-member task group with a black women majority to raise awareness of issues adversely affecting black girls and women in society and the church, and to develop action plans to address those issues.
- Affirmed and celebrated the "full dignity and humanity" and gifts of people of all gender identities and sexual orientations.

### **Immigration:**

Following on statements issued by General Assembly Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II, the assembly called upon the federal government to end family separations at the U.S.-Mexico border, to immediately reunite parents with their children, to inform every parent where their children are being held and their condition, to stop using separation of children from their parents as a tactic to force criminal confessions; and called upon Presbyterians to support immigrant families, particularly parents and their separated children in any ways they can. The assembly also addressed war, violence, and human rights in Central America (particularly Nicaragua), South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Madagascar, and the Korean Peninsula.

### **Gun Violence:**

The assembly reaffirmed previous General Assembly policies designed to reduce gun violence, called all Presbyterians to pray for a movement of the Spirit to engage Presbyterians in nationwide actions to prevent gun violence, and urged them to create opportunities to study the issue of gun violence, with an emphasis on resources produced by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.

### **Paid Family Leave:**

After long debate in both committee and plenary, the assembly referred to a task force to report back to the 224th General Assembly (2020) proposed actions to develop denomination-wide standards and financial support mechanisms for paid family leave for church workers.