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GA Daily Dispatch

July 2, 2010

Today people streamed in to the Minneapolis Convention Center to register for the 219th General Assembly, relieved to find shelter from 87 degree heat, and delighted to renew old friendships and begin forming new ones. The Pittsburgh Presbytery GA 2012 display booth opened for business at noon, with various ones of us taking turns hosting the steady stream of visitors. We will continue through next Wednesday to invite booth visitors to come to the PCUSA's next General Assembly in Pittsburgh in 2012. A number of family members accompanying those here in official capacities are helping to staff our welcome booth – deep thanks to each of them!

A number of Burghers here represent our Committee on Local Arrangements (COLA) for GA 2012. They were all invited to meet this afternoon for a briefing session with the Minneapolis COLA, to help give us an idea of what we will be facing in hosting GA in a couple of years. Our COLA team will continue to shadow the Minneapolis COLA team throughout this Assembly.

Today included orientation sessions for our Young Adult and Theological Student Advisory Delegates. Otherwise, there was little official business today. Following morning pre-assembly workshops for commissioners and delegates, the first business session of GA convenes tomorrow after lunch. It will be a general orientation to the week ahead, and will include a number of mission celebrations. The second business session, tomorrow evening, includes the first significant vote of the Assembly - the election of the Moderator. Normally three or four people are nominated for Moderator, but this year we have six candidates, so the election should be especially interesting.

When you pray for GA in general, and for our commissioners in particular, pray that the mind of Christ will be heard in the election of a Moderator. The Moderator sets the tone not only for the Assembly itself, but also for the whole PCUSA for the next two years, as he/she serves as public ambassador for the church. My next report will include news of who was elected Moderator of the General Assembly.

Looking forward to what lies ahead,

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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GA Daily Dispatch

July 3, 2010

The 219th General Assembly opened for business today, with the morning given to orientation for commissioners, followed by afternoon and evening plenary business sessions. The main business of the day was to elect our moderator for this General Assembly. The Assembly elected as moderator elder Cynthia Bolbach from First Presbyterian Church of Alexandria, Virginia. She will lead our plenary sessions at GA this year, then will be an ambassador for the PCUSA across the USA and around the world for the next two years until GA convenes in Pittsburgh in 2012. You can learn more about her at her [website](#).

In this afternoon's opening session, Pittsburgh Presbytery was recognized for being among the top ten presbyteries in 2009 Mission Giving for Special Offerings (\$185,697) and for donations for other appeals, such as disaster relief (\$146,160). When the General Assembly Mission Council shared its report on how the PCUSA is committed to "growing God's church deep and wide," they showed the whole assembly a video profiling our own Rev. Eugene and Dina Blackwell, and their work with our newest church development, House of Manna. The video elicited an ovation from the entire Assembly, as together we all celebrated the work of the Holy Spirit among and through us.

In today's plenary session, The General Assembly Nominating Committee announced its nominations for new terms of service on national church committees. Pittsburgh is particularly well represented in their slate of nominees. We have three nominees for a second term of service on their respective committees, and two for new committee service.

Renewal of terms has been nominated for:

Johnnie Monroe, Presbyterian Committee on the Self-Development of People
Valire Carr Copeland, Presbyterian Publishing Corporation Board of Directors
Stewart Pollock, Advisory Committee on the Constitution

New service nominations are for:

Jay Lewis, General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission
Kears Pollock, General Assembly Mission Council

Proud of our presbytery,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sheldon".

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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GA Daily Dispatch

July 4, 2010

Today at GA began for us like most Sundays – we gathered with the congregation to worship. Okay, this congregation was just a bit bigger than we are accustomed to, some 7,000 strong. And at more than 2 hours, it went just a bit longer than most of our worship services – but where would we need to be going, anyway? Many of the worshipers were from local congregations that decided to cancel Sunday services in order to join the General Assembly. Some of our congregations in Pittsburgh may do the same when we host GA in 2012.

After lunch, the 19 GA committees met for the first time, with a major item of “business” being for each committee to do some group building. This way, by the time it begins to discuss matters on which it will be voting, members of each committee have already come to know and respect one another as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Late in the afternoon, the Assembly shuttled out to Nicollet Island, which had been rented out for our Assembly’s exclusive use. (I didn’t know you could rent commercial islands like that!) There we enjoyed a grand picnic together with lots of live music entertainment, Moderator Cindy Bolbach was given a festive reception, and the capstone of the evening was enjoying one of the best vistas in Minneapolis for the Fourth of July fireworks extravaganza.

All told, it was a long day, but a great way to begin life together as a General Assembly. Tomorrow the Assembly gets down to business in earnest, with three long business sessions for each committee – first in the morning, then a second session that lasts the afternoon, with a final meeting going well into the night. Our commissioners are already feeling the stretch of long and full days – pray for their stamina and good cheer in the days to come, and especially for their being able to sense the direction of the Holy Spirit in matters that arise before them.

In Christ’s strength,

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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GA Daily Dispatch

July 5, 2010

Mondays at GA are given to protracted committee work. As I was coming to my room at around 9:00 PM, one of the commissioners walking alongside me displayed utter exhaustion after having spent all day and the evening in intensive committee deliberations. Committees will resume their work tomorrow, which once again is set aside in its entirety for committee deliberations. Slowly the committees are putting together their lists of recommendations to the full General Assembly. On Wednesday, the scene of action will shift to the plenary gathering of the Assembly, where each item of business sent in by the 19 committees will be acted upon. Until then, the Assembly has decided nothing.

You may see news reports about committee recommendations as though they were GA decisions. Please remember that committee recommendations will be debated by the entire GA, whereupon they will be adopted, amended, or defeated. So until the whole GA acts, there is really no news to report.

While committee sessions are “merely” preliminary proceedings, they are perhaps the most intensely demanding segment of GA for commissioners. Please continue to keep our commissioners in your prayers.

Yesterday and today I was privileged to join other presbytery leaders in two major sessions with Phyllis Tickle, a prolific author and expert on church trends. She particularly addressed the themes in her book, *The Great Emergence*, which I recommend heartily to anyone interested in engaging a compelling account of contemporary church challenges in light of broad historical church patterns.

The GA 2012 booth has kept buzzing as people come by to talk about coming to Pittsburgh for the next General Assembly. We have giveaways to help remind them of their welcome to Pittsburgh. For reasons I can't fully fathom, the pickle and ketchup pins are especially popular – I see them being impishly worn all over the convention. Enthusiasm for coming to Pittsburgh for the next GA is perceptibly building. We owe great thanks to our COLA team (Committee on Local Arrangements) for stoking people's interest in GA 2012.

As we face the days ahead, it is with the confident assurance that the Lord is with us,

leading us forward into the future for which we have been appointed. Let us not lose hope or good cheer, even when the sledding gets tough.

Leaning forward,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheldon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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GA Daily Dispatch

July 6, 2010

Tuesday is another full day of preliminary committee work at General Assembly. Most of the committees wrap up their business on Tuesday, though there is yet one more committee session allotted on Wednesday morning's docket, for those that need it. From Wednesday afternoon through Saturday morning, GA meets as a plenary body to vote on recommendations received from the 19 committees.

This morning I was privileged to host a breakfast for friends and members of Pittsburgh Presbytery, which drew a number of people with Pittsburgh Presbytery roots. I was privileged to share with those gathered some of the stories of good things God is doing in Pittsburgh. This evening the entire contingent of people from Pittsburgh here at GA was invited to gather for a meal at a local restaurant, and we enjoyed a wonderful evening together. Table fellowship is an important way to be renewed when we are stretched thin by long, full days of work.

You may follow the GA plenary sessions live on the GA 219 [website](#), beginning at 2:00 PM tomorrow. Some of the items that are being closely watched because they are most controversial:

- On changing the definition of marriage in the Book of Order
- On replacing the current Book of Order with a much smaller version that grants more latitude for local application of church standards
- On eliminating language in the Book of Order that excludes people in committed same gender relationships from ordination
- On adding the Belhar Confession to the Book of Confessions
- On calling upon Israel to change its policies toward Palestinians, and calling upon the U.S. government to exert pressure on Israel toward that end
- On empowering a commission from GA to establish and dissolve synod and presbytery bounds
- On discontinuing synods altogether

Most of these items cannot be decided unilaterally by GA. Rather, GA makes recommendations to the church, which then must be voted upon by presbyteries for ratification.

Finally, our own Young Adult Advisory Delegate, Rachel Rothenberg, has been chosen

as a delegate blogger by the Office of the General Assembly. Please take the time to read her terrific first [blog entry](#).

Praying that the Spirit of God may guide the Assembly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sheldon". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial 'S'.

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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GA Daily Dispatch

July 7, 2010

Wednesday is the great hinge of General Assembly, as GA moves from committee meetings to plenary sessions. Looking back on the committee meeting portion of GA, our young adult advisory delegate, Rachel Rothenberg, reflects, "I really saw in my committee meetings a vision of what the church could be; a place of mutual respect and love and understanding, where we all work together to do the business of the church in a Spirit-filled way." (Click [here](#) to read her full blog entry.)

It is vitally important that we, like Rachel, be attentive to the movement of the Spirit of God amid the rather prosaic proceedings of the church's business meetings. To help us toward that end, especially as GA prepares to vote on a matter on which there has been substantial debate, the Moderator frequently asks everyone to stop for a season of prayer. We count likewise on the prayers of people across the church to keep the Assembly attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Two of the recommendations being most closely watched at this Assembly were acted upon today. In the first, the Assembly voted to send the *Belhar Confession* to the presbyteries to consider for addition to our *Book of Confessions*. While it takes a yes-vote by a simple majority of presbyteries to amend our *Book of Order*, a two-thirds super-majority is needed to change the *Book of Confessions*. *Belhar* is a three-page document adopted by Reformed churches in South Africa in 1986 as a theological rationale for ending apartheid.

Second, the Assembly voted to send the new "Form of Government" (Part One of the *Book of Order*) to the presbyteries for consideration as a replacement of the current edition. If a majority of presbyteries concurs, the "Form of Government" section of our *Book of Order* will be vastly reduced in size. This revision has been prepared by a team, including our own Carol Hunley, that has been working hard on this project for over four years. The intention of the "nFOG" (as they dub it here) is to strip away a lot of the minutiae of rules in our current FOG, in order to allow local bodies more freedom in their governance. For instance, the current FOG strictly prohibits a congregation's interim pastor from being called as its permanent pastor, but the nFOG allows presbyteries to decide for themselves whether or not a particular interim pastor might be a good permanent pastor for a congregation. Presbyteries will vote on nFOG "as is" – it is not subject to revision by presbyteries.

Our church's 173 presbyteries will vote in the coming year on whether to affirm these recommendations. The work of church governance is not a unilateral responsibility of GA, but ultimately something in which all of us share. Just as we expect those who vote at GA to do their homework, so all of us must prepare well as we consider whether to ratify the proposals sent to us by GA. Let us pray that in all this the entire church will be attentive to the leadership of God's Spirit, that together we will bear clear and faithful witness to the good news of God's transforming love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Come, Holy Spirit!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sheldon".

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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News

GA Daily Dispatch

July 8, 2010

The General Assembly made several significant decisions and recommendations today. The morning began with GA making way for creation of a special commission empowered to act upon requests for establishing, dissolving or realigning the bounds of synods and presbyteries. The commission may act only when requested to do so by a majority of those who would be affected by such action. The intent of this action is to create more flexibility for the church in determining its organizational patterns.

In the first GA action relating to the PCUSA's relationship to the Jewish community, the Assembly referred the study paper "Christians and Jews: People of God" back to the committee that prepared it, with instruction that the committee include Palestinian Christians in its deliberations, and send the next GA an amended version of this study.

Once again, this time by a 373-323 margin, the GA voted to send to presbyteries a recommendation to change ordination standards, by replacing the current G-6.0106b with the following:

"Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates."

A majority of presbyteries must approve this change for it to become part of the *Book of Order*.

A task force on Marriage and Civil Union, established by the 2008 General Assembly, brought to the Assembly two reports – one from the majority and one from the minority, one affirming traditional views of marriage and the other proposing expanded views. The Assembly took the rare action of commending both reports to the church for study. Finally, the Assembly voted to answer all other items relating to marriage with this action.

The most significant effect of this was to reject the proposal to change *the Book of Order* description of marriage from “a man and a woman” to “two persons.”

The Assembly has yet to address several other items over which there are differences of opinion. But at least in today’s voting, it demonstrated that our differences are not so great as to drive us apart. Indeed, it is in our differences that we are most able to teach one another the way of our Lord.

Keeping the faith,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sheldon".

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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News

GA Daily Dispatch

July 9, 2010

On this last full day of GA, several closely watched matters came up before the body. One of the most high-profile matters at this GA is the report "Breaking Down the Walls," brought by the Middle East Study Committee. The GA committee responsible for this item made extensive changes to the report, in response to widespread concerns about its balance between Jewish and Palestinian concerns. The revised version was adopted by an 82% Assembly vote. The details of the revision are too extensive to report here, but I will send you a link to the revised version once it is published. In a related matter, the Assembly approved language denouncing corporations that profit from sales of products used for non-peaceful purposes in the Middle East, but voted not to recommend divestment, and encouraged investment in corporations doing business with peaceful concerns.

Another item that generated much debate today was the proposal to extend Board of Pensions benefits to same-sex spouses or partners (and their children) of participants in the Board Plan. After lengthy discussion, the Assembly voted to extend such benefits to spouses and to committed life partners in states where same sex marriage is not available. To cover costs, the Assembly gave the Board of Pensions permission to increase dues for all Plan members up to 1% of effective salary, with provision for relief of conscience for churches that object to their contribution being used in this way.

The afternoon session was interrupted by a demonstration by Souforce, an interdenominational group protesting the Assembly's refusal to consider proposals to change our *Book of Order* definition of marriage and to permit ministers to perform same-sex marriages. Eighteen people quietly processed to the front of the assembly hall during a business session, carrying signs and softly singing "O Lord, Hear our Prayer." They refused to leave until arrested by police – it was apparently their objective to be arrested, because the police were there at the ready. Local television stations were called in to cover the event, and it was the lead story on their evening news. As they made their way toward the dais, Moderator Bolbach quickly called a recess of the Assembly. Who says General Assembly is dull and predictable? In truth, it all happened so quietly while everyone was milling about in recess that most of us saw little of what was going on.

And so we come to Saturday, the final day of the Assembly. The final thing on the

Assembly's business docket is the welcome by Pittsburgh Presbytery to the next GA – I will reprise from our last presbytery meeting my Fred Rogers act as an introduction to our superb "Welcome to Pittsburgh" video, produced by Dennis Molnar for the COLA. The video ends with Mr. Rogers' beloved postman Mr. McFeely handing toward the camera an envelope that I will "receive" and hand to our GA Moderator, inviting the church to Pittsburgh in summer 2012.

This is my final installment in this series. It has been a delight to include you in some of the events of the Assembly "as it happens." Our commissioners will give you a full report at the presbytery meeting at Crestfield on September 2. I want to say a great big thank you to our wonderful team of commissioners – each has worked very hard, and together they have become a wonderful community of faith in action. They have prayerfully voted their conscience and stayed on task through a grueling week. Bless them, Lord! I also am grateful to all our 2012 GA Committee on Local Arrangements (COLA) leaders that have been soaking up everything they can from the Minneapolis COLA. And last, but far from least, I am grateful to Doug Portz for coordinating the COLA conversations on behalf of the presbytery office. We have truly had Pittsburgh's "A-Team" here! Thanks be to God for the opportunity and strength to serve the Lord together this week in Minneapolis. To God be all the glory!

For Christ's sake,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sheldon".

The Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Sorge, Pastor to Presbytery

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