

## The General Assembly Under a Microscope

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) met in June in San Jose, CA for its 218<sup>th</sup> meeting. This bi-annual event was 9 days long and dealt with many pressing issues of the denomination all from a national perspective. Here are some facts about the General Assembly that will be helpful as the proposed actions of this national body of Presbyterians come to the forefront.

1. The General Assembly is made up of 752 voting commissioners. These are ministers and elders in equal numbers who were elected by their individual presbyteries to attend the meeting. (There are 98 churches in the Presbytery of Arkansas and 173 Presbyteries nationwide. We sent 4 adult commissioners and 1 youth commissioner to the 218<sup>th</sup> GA.) Besides there being a balance between clergy and laity, the GA is balanced based on age, gender, race, and disability according to the makeup of the denomination.

2. Issues reach the General Assembly starting from any level in the church: Session, Presbytery, Synod, or General Assembly. Typically, motions are made and passed by a local congregation that certain actions be taken by the national church. These are typically debated and endorsed or rejected by a Presbytery and are called overtures.

3. Several months before an overture makes its way to the General Assembly an information packet is sent to all commissioners that provides the background for the overture. (When I was a Theological Advisory Delegate to the GA we got a packet that was 6 inches thick to study before the GA.)

4. Before an overture makes it to the floor of the General Assembly for its decision, it is debated and discussed in large committees (some as large as 50+ members) over the 9 days. Expert witnesses are brought in to address the overture. All sides of the issues are discussed. Any commissioner can petition the Committee that is dealing with a particular issue and offer insight or opinions. All commissioners are welcome to sit in on the discussions. After a period of prayer and discernment the committee votes on the overture and makes a recommendation to be sent to the floor of the GA for its action.

5. Once on the floor of the GA, the GA can pass, decline, modify, or refer for further study, the overture. In order to make its decision, the floor is open for debate on a particular overture. 752 commissioners hear the recommendations of the Committees and their rationales and then open the floor for debate. Since each commissioner is called to vote his or her conscience based on what they have discerned as the will of God for the larger church, the vote is taken electronically.

6. The process is not over with yet. The next step if the overture passes, is to send the overture and a recommendation to each of the 173 Presbyteries for their further study, debate, and decision.

7. Typically before the Presbytery meeting where the vote occurs, a packet of information is given to each Presbytery Commissioner. The Bull Shoals church has one Session-elected Commissioner. This can be an active or inactive elder. The minister, who is a member of the Presbytery and not the local congregation, is automatically a Presbytery Commissioner.

8. Often Presbyteries have time set aside at a Presbytery Meeting or at other times to help commissioners to know about the GA recommendations and proposed actions.

9. The Proposed actions of the GA are then brought to the floor of the Presbytery where they are further discussed and debated. A positive or negative vote is taken.

This process is still not over. 50% of the 173 Presbyteries have to agree to the proposed action before it is placed in the rule book of the church called the Book of Order.

As you can tell the process of making an amendment to the Book of Order or making a decision that comes from a recommendation of the national church is long and cumbersome. It does however provide many opportunities for God to work in and through dedicated clergy and laity as they discern the Will of God for what is best for the greater church. The process is intended so all voices can be heard and all sides of an issue are discussed. It provides many opportunities to listen to God's voice.

**There are three points that have to be emphasized. First, each elder, whether clergy or laity, is ordained to vote his or her conscience. Second, we believe that when people of faith gather to discuss and debate issues, they are to keep an open mind and listen discerningly for God's Will as the various opinions and perspectives are offered. And third we "see through a glass dimly" and must fall on the grace and mercy of God as we try to discern the Will of God.**

**As we enter a period of discernment, please pray for those elders who are elected to vote their consciences and listen for what God is telling them. I anticipate that the Presbytery meeting for voting on the actions of the 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly will probably be in February of 2009. More to follow. Rev. Mark**