



From lament to action

by Leslie Scanlon, *Outlook* national reporter

From lamentation to action — the 2020 General Assembly called the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to do the hard work of justice, working to respond to what some referred to as the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice.

Worship. The **worship service June 26** used the power of the digital platform to weave together music, art and voices from around the PC(USA) — including a Zoom choir for one of the closing hymns.

Wearing stoles that were a gift from the Committee on Local Arrangements in Baltimore, made by Jeff Wunrow Designs and featuring a Black fist raised in a symbol of power, Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri and Cindy Kohlmann, the co-moderators of the 2018 General Assembly, called the commissioners to journey in faith from lamentation to confession to hope to action.

“Surrounded as we are by the sounds of respirators and the cries of the grieving and the raised voices of protesters, help us, oh Lord, to hear your voice, and give us the courage to hear that voice,” Kohlmann said.

God provides abundantly “far more than we could have asked for or imagined,” Cintrón-Olivieri said, drawing on a passage from Ephesians. And she recited a poem from Antonio Machado, **“Caminante, no hay camino”** — telling the commissioners “you make the path by walking” and giving them responsibility to find the way forward as they walk in faith.

Virtual GA. Because of COVID-19, this became the PC(USA)’s first virtual General Assembly, meeting via Zoom — with technology that had more hiccups than hard bumps (“Can you hear me?” was the first thing many commissioners said). That format also meant the assembly considered “core and critical” business — referring many other reports to the next assembly in 2022. Some business that did make it through: offering the church’s presence and advocacy for **those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic** and support for the **work of the Native American Coordinating Council and for repairing Native American church properties.**

Co-moderators. Because the opening plenary on June 19 ran late – in part with commissioners **debating what business to defer to 2022,** and in a **dispute over whether San Francisco Theological Seminary remains as a PC(USA) seminary** – the assembly added an extra plenary session June 20 in order to elect co-moderators.

The decision didn’t take long, as the **assembly elected Elona Street-Stewart, an Indigenous ruling elder, and Gregory Bentley, a Black minister,** on the first ballot – with 304 commissioners voting for them, three times as many votes as for the next-closest team. Street-Stewart is synod executive of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies and, as a member of the Delaware Nanticoke tribe, an assembly’s first Native American co-moderator. Bentley is pastor of Fellowship Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.

Their election was emotional, as Oscar J. McCloud prayed during their installation that their paths had been watered with the tears and blood of their ancestors. Bentley pronounced himself to be “hippopotamus happy and dinosaur delighted.”

Bentley and Street-Stewart have **chosen as their symbol the Sankofa bird**: standing in the Mississippi River, representing flying forward while looking backward, a hope, Bentley said, of bringing “the best of our cultures to make the church better.”

Racism. On June 26 the assembly **approved a resolution** called “Responding to the Sin of Racism and a Call to Action” — declaring that Black lives matter; confessing that the church has been complicit in perpetuating injustice; and pledging to “confront and dismantle systemic racism” in the church and in society. That resolution was a substitute for another option that commissioners determined was not strong enough — as Milo Browne, a young adult advisory delegate from the Presbytery of Scioto Valley put it: “It is inexcusable for us to stand in silence as people are being killed.”

Stated clerk. The assembly re-elected J. Herbert Nelson, 61, to a **second four-year term** as the PC(USA)’s stated clerk — the denomination’s chief ecclesial officer and its voice in the public square. Nelson was the only candidate — no one else applied — and was installed with a prayer from his wife, Gail Porter Nelson, also a PC(USA) pastor.

Nelson expressed thanks, saying “I’m still a pastor” at heart — and said “there is a Savior who reminds us you can go to the poor, to the broken, to the widows, and make a difference,” to get out of the church building. “I don’t ever remember Jesus having a church house. Every one he went into, he got thrown out of.”

San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Bentley and Street-Stewart avoided a floor fight

on this dispute by announcing June 27 that they would bring representatives from the seminary and the Committee on the Office of Theological Education together shortly after the assembly concludes to **try to resolve the issue**, using a mediator if necessary.

Budget. The assembly approved a **unified PC(USA) budget** of \$80.1 million for 2021 and \$83.4 million for 2022 built on the assumption that COVID-19 will cause income to decline by roughly 25% this year and next. The assembly also approved a **General Assembly per capita rate of \$8.98 per member** for 2021 and 2022 — three cents higher than the \$8.95 per member rate for 2019 and 2020.

Repentance and action. The assembly concluded **with controversy and repentance**. The controversy: a failed attempt to introduce a statement on the ways “that Black women and girls are disproportionately affected by the systems of white supremacy and misogynoir in communities, the church and society at large.” A vote to suspend the rules to allow that motion to be heard needed 326 votes (2/3 of the enrolled commissioners), but got only 306, with 144 voting against, despite a social media push for the PC(USA) to #TrustBlackWomen.

Asked to address these concerns with prayer, Nelson started with silence, then prayed for Black girls whose “bodies and their minds and their spirits would be broken down in so many ways,” and for their mothers who “fall on their knees and pray for their daughters and cry for them.”

The assembly then spent 8 minutes and 46 seconds in silent corporate lament — the time that Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin knelt pressing on the neck of George Floyd.

“Guide our feet,” Street-Stewart prayed, asking God to lead Presbyterians as they find their paths, to “live out the church’s Great Ends into the street.”