

As some of you may know, I spent 9 days last week serving as a commissioner to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This is the highest governing body of our denomination. This morning I will share briefly about my experience at General Assembly and what I learned by being in the middle of the most controversial topic to come before the Assembly this year.

I will also reflect on how I think my experience connects to a baker who refused to bake a cake for a same gender wedding and a restaurant owner in Virginia who refused to serve Sarah Sanders, the White House Press Secretary. My belief is that the following text of Scripture speaks to all three of these events.

Read Romans 12:9-21

We here at Allison Creek are part of the Presbyterian Church USA or PCUSA. In the PCUSA, we are governed by a session in the local church made up of men and women elected as elders by church members. We are part of a presbytery, Providence Presbytery, which covers our area of South Carolina. We are part of a Synod, Synod of South Atlantic, which covers 3 states.

And we are part of the highest governing body in the PCUSA called the General Assembly. The General Assembly meets every 2 years to make decisions that impact the entire denomination.

The General Assembly is governed by commissioners who are pastors and elders in local churches who are elected through the presbyteries. This year there were 538 voting commissioners. In addition to the voting commissioners, each presbytery can send a young adult advisory delegate.

This year, our presbytery sent my daughter Mary Kathryn as our young adult advisory delegate or YAAD. There were 150 YAADs this year. There were also 14 seminary students serving as advisory delegates.

All of the commissioners and advisory delegates are randomly assigned to a committee. The advisory delegates can speak and vote as part of the committee. After 2 days of committee meetings we all came together in plenary.

In the plenary, the advisory delegates vote as advisors, but their votes do not count except to advise. So, on the plenary floor the advisors vote, and the voting commissioners immediately see how the advisors voted. The commissioners then use electronic devices and vote on the issue before us.

The first major item of business is to vote on the moderator. The moderator is the highest elected position in our denomination. For the second consecutive Assembly we elected co-moderators. They are Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri, a ruling elder and ESL teacher from South Florida who is originally from Puerto Rico and Cindy Kohlmann, a pastor from Boston.

In addition to doing the business of the church, we gathered daily in worship with opportunities for Bible study. We had mission opportunities and it was not unusual to break up a plenary meeting with dancing. Having a Puerto Rican moderator did add some spice as we learned how to salsa while in plenary.

On Sunday morning, we chose a local St. Louis area church to attend and we were carried by buses to these congregations. Mary Kathryn and I chose a church which was having a combined worship service of an Anglo and a Kenyan congregation that typically meet separately for worship in the same building.

Mary Kathryn was randomly assigned to the church polity committee. They dealt with proposed changes to our Book of Order. I was assigned to the environmental concerns committee.

I didn't really pay much attention at first to what was assigned to our committee. But then I discovered that our committee was assigned the most controversial overture to come before the assembly. The overture coming from 40 presbyteries to direct the Presbyterian Church to divest all of our financial resources away from "fossil fuel companies."

Our committee had 56 people on it which makes it difficult to do business. Outside of our committee tables we had over 100 people observing our actions. Many of these people lobbied for their respective causes. The most voices we heard came from a group calling themselves “Fossil Free PCUSA.”

Fossil Free PCUSA are faithful and committed Presbyterians, mostly young adults, who felt committed to advocating for a total divestment from any company involved in extracting and producing gas and oil from fossil fuels.

We had respectful and engaging conversations. When the final vote came on this issue, our committee voted 35-20 to divest from Fossil Fuel companies. I was in the minority. Everyone on the committee believed that climate change is real and caused by human action. We all believed that we have a responsibility to move toward an economy based on renewable energy sources like wind and solar. Our disagreement was in how to achieve this goal.

I was in the minority on our committee that believed that we should continue to engage with large corporations and try to influence them to make sustainable decisions to protect God’s Creation. We heard reports that the PCUSA is making a positive difference but that it takes time to see the results of what we are doing in speaking truth to power in corporate boardrooms.

I then became part of a group that drafted a minority report to present on the floor of the assembly. Our group of 12 people worked many hours on our report. I was one of the 2 people chosen to present the report and speak to it. In my 3-minute speech, I sought to challenge the assembly to not just make a statement because the issue was more complicated than some were presenting it to be.

I shared what I had learned and our responsibility to speak truth to power in the streets and in the boardroom. It was a daunting and exciting task to do this in front of about 1000 people in the hall and others watching via live stream. After 4 hours of discussion, our minority report was passed by the assembly by a vote of 79% to 21%.

The PCUSA will not, therefore, carry out a general divestment from so called fossil fuel companies but instead continue to seek to influence policy through engagement.

Though I and many others were relieved by our actions, those that advocated for divestment were brought to tears. As we left the hall we were met by a silent protest called a “die in” where advocates for their cause prostrated themselves on the floor as if they were dead. Those advocating for divestment wanted to remind us that people are dying because of climate change.

They felt that we had made a terrible decision. After the decision was announced, some of my friends and family members have expressed disappointment to me for helping to defeat the call for divestment.

So how did I choose to respond to these committed activists who felt defeated and ashamed by our actions as a body? I was one of the ones, of course, that worked hard to defeat what they wanted the Assembly to pass.

What I have chosen to do is to seek to be faithful to the New Testament scripture we read today. Paul tells the Romans that if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.”

I chose at the end of the Assembly to make a financial donation to Fossil Free PCUSA. This is the group that advocated so passionately for divestment. I make this donation in honor of the young woman that sat beside me in plenary and was heartbroken at our decision.

I make this donation because I am attempting in this small way to follow these words of guidance from Romans. If we want to follow the ways of Christ, then we give food to our enemies when they are hungry and give them drink when they are thirsty.

The people who advocated for divestment are certainly not my enemies. They are faithful Christians who agree with me on the need to reverse the effects of climate change. We only disagreed on methods to achieve this goal.

But we see lots of examples in our nation today when we demonize the other and we respond by seeking to hurt or degrade the other in some way.

I wonder what would have happened if the bakers who refused to bake the cake for the same gender wedding couple had instead said to the couple, "I disagree with what you are doing but I am going to make the best cake you have ever eaten."

I wonder what would had happened if the restaurant owner who refused service to Sarah Huckabee Sanders had informed her that the restaurant owner disagreed with what she and the administration were doing in terms of immigration policy. But that instead of refusing her service, they would have given her a free meal instead.

I wonder what would happen if instead of my friend spending his time and emotional energy posting nasty things about his in-laws on Facebook who disagree with him politically, if he instead sent his in-laws a nice present of food.

And I wonder what would happen if instead of saying nasty or cruel things about the person that you dislike, if instead you did something nice for them? What if we fed our enemies rather than tried to tear down our enemies?

To feed our enemies goes against our culture. Our culture says to belittle those that disagree with us. Our culture says to demonize the other and make them objects to scorn. But we are called by God to be counter-cultural.

Who is it that you consider your enemy in some way? Who irritates you? Who do you dislike? What would happen this week if you gave the person you dislike something to eat or something to drink? Of course, if I receive a bunch of gift cards this week I guess that I should be concerned. AMEN.

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-Given: July 1, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)