

How General Assembly Works

A Leader Reader by Sharon K. Youngs

Introduction

Noted author Barbara Kingsolver and her family made a monumental decision a few years ago. They decided to undertake a yearlong initiative in which the food they ate would come from their own hands or from their neighbors who had grown it; otherwise, they would do without.

“Many bright people are really in the dark about vegetable life,” Kingsolver writes in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, which chronicles her family’s experience. She continues:

Biology teachers face kids in classrooms who may not even believe in the metamorphosis of bud to flower to fruits and seed. . . . For modern kids who intuitively believe in the spontaneous generation of fruits and vegetables in the produce section, trying to get their minds around the slow speciation of the plant kingdom may be a stretch.¹

Kingsolver’s husband and biology professor, Steven L. Hopp, sums up the botanical process in this way: “Starts with a seed, grows into a plant. Water, sunlight, leaves, roots. A carrot,” Hopp concluded, “is actually a root.”²

When the 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) convenes in Pittsburgh this coming June, roughly one thousand commissioners and advisory delegates will set about their task to work through a list of business items in the form of overtures. While it might appear that the overtures are a “spontaneous generation” of business items before the highest governing body of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or even that the commissioners and advisory delegates themselves dropped in from the streets of downtown Pittsburgh, in actuality the overtures and the commissioners and delegates will

Prayer

We thank you, Lord God,
for brave and believing people
who brought your message to this place.

.....
By their energies this church was gathered,
given order, and continued.
Remembering all those Christians who have
gone before us,
may we follow as they followed,
in the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ,
the head of the church. **Amen.**

—*Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY:
Westminster John Knox press, 1993), 804.

have traveled through a careful and deliberate journey of discernment to arrive at the assembly.

Beginning of the Journey

Ruling elder and teaching elder commissioners will come from each of the 173 presbyteries of the PC(USA), similar to the makeup of the House of Representatives and the Senate of the U.S. Congress. Presbyteries will vary in how they elect their commissioners: some by rotation, some by seniority, some by application, and some by other means. Yet, they will elect their commissioners through thoughtful prayer. Each presbytery is also encouraged to elect one young adult advisory delegate to the assembly. Additional advisory delegates will include theology students, mission coworkers, and ecumenical representatives.

The majority of the business before the assembly travels a somewhat similar path. The root of an overture

generally begins as an individual idea or inspiration. (Perhaps you have been the individual with the idea.) The idea might have been borne out of a person's faith experience in the world or the church—a conversation, a prayer, a church school class, an encounter at work or while engaged in mission, a worship service—the possibilities are practically endless.

From there, one of the foundational understandings of Presbyterian polity is lived out: decisions are made not by one person but by people discerning together the mind of Christ.

Discerning along the Way

Often, an overture's first step beyond an individual idea involves members of the session of a congregation discerning together whether the issue on their hearts should be addressed by the entire PC(USA). It generally takes more than one meeting of listening to one another, studying Scripture, and praying before the decision is made to move the issue forward.

The session sends the overture—identified no longer with an individual, but with the session—to the presbytery of which that congregation is a part. The overture is assigned to a committee of the presbytery, whose members carefully consider the issue in a process similar to the one used earlier by the session.

Through prayer and study and attentive listening to representatives of the session that sent the overture, the presbytery committee discerns whether to move the overture forward to the full presbytery for consideration. If it is moved forward, the minister members of that presbytery and ruling elder commissioners that are elected by their sessions to the presbytery meeting discuss the merits of the proposed overture and seek to answer the critical question: Is this an issue for the whole church?

If approved by the full presbytery, the overture moves forward to the General Assembly, where it now carries the presbytery's name and requires the presbytery's support.

Keeping Up with General Assembly

Whether or not you attend, you can keep up with the business and activities of the General Assembly by visiting www.pcusa.org/ga220, the official Web site for the 220th General Assembly (2012) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

At the Assembly

General Assembly commissioners and advisory delegates continue the discernment process by considering the overture in an assembly committee. (General Assembly commissioners and advisory delegates are divided randomly into assembly committees through a computer process.) Together, assembly committee members listen to voices with wider experiences beyond their own, discuss different understandings of Scripture, and seek the guidance of the Spirit through prayer.

The assembly committee sends its recommendation about the overture to the assembly as a whole where all of the assembly commissioners and advisory delegates listen and discuss the committee's recommendation and discern together as they seek the mind of Christ on this matter.

If the General Assembly approves the overture, its journey continues as congregations, presbyteries, synods, and General Assembly agencies discern what it means for their ministry and witness. If the overture happens to involve amending the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), then the approved overture becomes a proposed amendment that is considered and voted on by each presbytery. A majority of "yes" votes by presbyteries is required for a proposed amendment to become part of the denomination's Constitution.

"Starts with a seed, grows into a plant. Water, sunlight, leaves, roots. A carrot," Hopp concluded, "is actually a root."

Starts with an idea, grows into an overture. Session, presbytery, General Assembly. Study, discussion, prayer, decision. An action of the General Assembly begins with an idea or inspiration of an individual and travels the long distance through our discernment as the whole church, listening for what God is calling the church to be and to do.

Endnotes

1. Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 11.
2. *Ibid.*, 12.

About the Writer

Sharon K. Youngs is assistant stated clerk and communications coordinator for the Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She is a minister member of the Presbytery of West Virginia.