

## Report from General Assembly 145<sup>th</sup> General Assembly

The 145<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada was held in Waterloo, Ontario, on June 2-6, 2019. I attended as a representative of the Presbytery of Montreal, alongside Rev. Joel Coppieters, Rev. Roland De Vries, Rev. Douglas Robinson, Rev. Daniel (Dan) Shute, Theophilus Anyam, David Christiani, and Trevor Holmes. I note that this year I was the only woman commissioned by the Presbytery of Montreal (an observation that I brought up at the recent Presbytery meeting) and I hope that in the future the commissioners we send will reflect the makeup of the Presbytery a little better.

The Moderator of General Assembly was Rev. Amanda Currie from Regina. I found she did an amazing job, especially given the strong emotions engendered by this year's discussions and decisions. She knew when to push us along, and when to back off a little and give us space and time to listen to each other.

The theme of this year's Assembly was "Receive the Holy Spirit," as our gathering happened right before Pentecost. Many of the sermons and worship materials focused on the transforming power of the Holy Spirit and the Spirit at work among and through us. A praise band led the Assembly in music which enhanced worship and provided a moment of decompression after heavy sessions. Overall organization was good and I appreciated the addition of an extra day which allowed for a free night on Monday evening. The time off from dealing with business was a welcome change of pace. I was pleased this year to meet a handful of commissioners who were closer to my age range (late 20s-early 30s) and who were quite engaged in the proceedings, and this year's Young Adult Representatives were equally engaged and very well spoken at the microphones.

In the course of the Assembly, we were addressed by 3 ecumenical guests: 2 representatives from the Korean Christian Church in Japan, Revs. Jonghyun Kim (Moderator) and Byungho Kim (General Secretary) as well as Mr. David McIntosh, their translator and co-director of the Centre for Minority Issues and Mission in Tokyo. They spoke about the missionaries from the PCC who have worked in Korea and Japan over the years and presented a plaque recognizing their work and the close partnership between the PCC and the KCCJ. Dr. Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit environmental, cultural and human rights advocate, was the recipient of this year's E.H. Johnson award for cutting edge of mission. She is the author of the book *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Story of Protecting her Culture, the Arctic, and the Whole Planet*. And finally, Mr. Kerry Rice, an elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and their Deputy Stated Clerk, who spoke about gun violence in the USA, climate change, and racism, and the need for the Church to be a leader on such issues.

While the discussions and decisions about sexuality and inclusion predictably dominated the Assembly, many other items were also covered. We marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PCC's 1994 Confession to God and Indigenous People for our role in the residential schools system. Against this backdrop we voted to officially repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and the concept of *terra nullius*, which were used as justification for European colonial practices and attitudes. While this repudiation is an important and historic move, I note with some disappointment that the PCC is the last denomination among the signatories to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Act to do so. We also voted to increase funding for the National Indigenous Ministries Council and constitute them as an official standing committee of the church with all the associated privileges and control of their own budget. Finally the report from the

Inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls was referred to the Life and Mission Agency for study and recommendations on what we can do to respond.

We also considered a report from the LMA on endorsing the Joint Statement on physical punishment of children and youth, a document developed by a coalition of 6 Canadian organizations led by the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario and which has been endorsed by over 600 religious, medical and ecumenical bodies. After long discussions the topic was ultimately referred back to LMA for further study and report next year.

The Church Doctrine Committee produced a document titled "Living in God's Mission Today" which, as its name suggests, is meant to be a reference on mission, what it is, how we live it and how it applies to our modern contexts.

Despite the general geniality of the assembly, tension regarding the discussion on human sexuality was inescapable. Compared to last year though, I felt there was more of a desire to finally reach a decision and break the deadlock the denomination has been in for years. The Special Committee of Former Moderators that was struck last year did an admirable job proposing 4 possible pathways forward for the church (A-Current Practice, B-Inclusion, C-One Denomination/Three Streams, and D-Pastoral Accommodation) and coming up with a process by which the Assembly could come to its own decision, and after a period of discernment in Committee of the Whole and a vote by secret ranked ballot, the result came back in favour of B-Inclusion. When the Assembly voted to affirm the decision of the Committee of the Whole in favour of B-Inclusion (126 for/91 against), the atmosphere was heavy in the immediate aftermath as dozens and dozens of people lined up to record their dissent. A committee on implications and next steps was struck to produce the official recommendations which would be sent to the presbyteries under the Barrier Act, but due to the large amount of upset generated by the decision and the process by which it had been reached (all the commissioners from both Korean Han-Ca presbyteries withdrew from the Assembly on Wednesday morning), the Moderator instituted a special sharing and listening hour on Wednesday evening where people who felt they hadn't been heard could speak.

In the end, the Assembly adopted a compromise position on Thursday morning (attached) which passed with a much larger majority in favour and significantly fewer dissents, and which I believe has a greater chance of preserving church unity and passing in the presbyteries. Someone I spoke to after the final vote put it this way: we took 3 steps forward and 1 step back. I am aware of some people who are upset and disappointed by the backtracking compared to the vote on Tuesday, and I myself am concerned that the decision was made without hearing the voices of LGBTQI people themselves. Still, I recognize how significant it is that we managed to make a decision that not only breaks the deadlock in the PCC, allowing us to focus our energy back into other things, but also fundamentally changes our polity to something a little bit more inclusive. The story isn't quite over yet, as the remits still need to be voted on at the Presbytery level and brought back to next year's Assembly for the final word, but I have hope that we will only continue to become more open and inclusive from here.

Respectfully submitted,  
Sarah Dupont