

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church is held every other year in different cities around the country. The voting commissioners are pastors and elders in equal numbers chosen by their Presbyteries. There are 173 Presbyteries in the U.S. and Puerto Rico. The purpose of the Assembly is to set direction for the national church.

I have served twice as a voting commissioner to General Assembly – in Hartford Connecticut and Syracuse, New York and have attended about ten General Assemblies in all. Wayne Tingley from our congregation has served as an elder commissioner from this Presbytery.

I have served at the last four assemblies as a member of the GA team for Presbyterians for Renewal which is the largest of several renewal groups in the Presbyterian Church. The GA is not all Presbyterians for Renewal does. It is also involved in youth programs and conferences for small churches. But every two years, the GA Team becomes very important. As a result of this involvement, I tend to be pretty aware of what is going on and “connected.”

This year I also served as an advocate for one of the overtures sent by our Presbytery of Santa Barbara – this one dealing with some proposals for a sweeping overhaul of our form of government. Most of the business that comes before the Assembly starts as an overture. An overture is first proposed by the Session on a local church and taken to the Presbytery. If it is approved by vote of the Presbytery, it becomes a part of the business of the General Assembly.

There were many big issues at this GA. But the overriding one, as it often is, was the issue of the ordination of gays as elders, deacons and pastors in the church. That flavored everything we did. Even issues I thought weren't connected are connected.

The Presbyterian Church as a whole is in significant numerical decline. That has happened year after year but had accelerated this past year by a number of large churches leaving the PCUSA, several of them churches I know well in Sacramento Presbytery. In addition the great majority of Presbyterian Churches are either plateaued or shrinking. Moorpark Presbyterian is atypical in that we are growing and forward looking.

Some people think the decline is a structural problem. They are all about changing the structure of how they do things. I believe the problem is one of our message. Jesus said, “My sheep know my voice and a stranger's voice they will not follow.” People don't hear the gospel in many of our churches and at a national level and they don't respond to what is substituted.

Some years ago, when I first came as organizing pastor of MPC, I attended a conference put on by the national church on new church development. The national staff asked what they could do to help us. The common response was “just leave us alone and we'll do just fine. Just don't do anything stupid at the national level to torpedo our work.” But that's impossible. Stupid is in the DNA. It often masks itself under the word “prophetic” in the sense of people seeming themselves as fearlessly speaking the truth as the prophets did – no matter the consequences to the church as a whole.

This comes out especially in the issues around gay ordination.

There were several issues at GA.

First, the Assembly voted to not change the definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman. That still sticks even in California.

Second, the Heidelberg Catechism.