

# SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTIC HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 243<sup>rd</sup> ASSEMBLY

## “Transforming Institutional Beings into Missional Actions”

How does one begin to describe the experience of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Synod Assembly? One commissioner responded, “The Assembly created an atmosphere where truth could be told, pain would be held, and hope was a present possibility.” Another said, “The meeting provided a space where commissioners could do the heavy lifting, and we did!” I describe the experience this way, “The Holy Spirit let loose and began working the redemptive act of “Crossing the Line!” One staff member said, “I liked the feel of the Assembly.” Moderator Taylor convened the Assembly by clarifying whose land we gather. The **Native American Tribes in Virginia** are the indigenous tribes who currently live and have historically lived in what is now the Commonwealth of Virginia in the United States of America. We are on land owned and occupied by the Monacan and Pamunkey Tribes.



Congregating under the theme “Transforming from Institutional Beings to Missional Actions,” the assembly launched into meeting March 11, 2019 at Ginter Park PC in Richmond, VA. Romans 12:2 undergirded the transformational assembly. This scripture shadows Big Tent and the 2020 General Assembly both to be hosted in Baltimore, MD using the same passage. Twenty-Seven Commissioners, Presbyters from Peaks, New Castle, AKAP, Coastal Carolina and James were present. Corresponding members included synod chairs of the Permanent Judicial Commission, Nominations Committee, Jubilee Fund Committee all surrounded by fifteen or more guests.

In previous assemblies, worship was central to the gatherings. The 243<sup>rd</sup> Assembly was no different.



Teaching Elder Jerrod Lowry, six months into the General Presbyter/Stated Clerks position at Coastal Carolina Presbytery, delivered the opening sermon and celebrated communion assisted by Teaching Elder Robbie Phillips. He challenged us using Romans 12:2. The sermon title was, “Change, Challenge and Controversy.” Lowry argued that, *“the culture is changing, causing some to be frustrated. Some say that change is not coming fast enough. The question to the Church is how do we respond to the change? Knowing what we know now, how do Disciples of Christ respond to change? Our response must be first to Discern and then respond!”* Evening worship the first day provided respite to reflect

allowing the Word of God to permeate the full day of intense learning. Thank you Jerrod for a good word!

**Powerful preaching convened** the assembly AND **prophetic preaching ended the assembly.** The preaching of Teaching Elder Tracy Keenan, new Missional Presbyter of New Castle made her Presbytery proud. From the selection of the text to the Jazzy musical rendition of “There is Blessing in the Struggle”, all were mesmerized. Tracy’s 20-minute sermonic conversation with Jesus ended with Tracy herself being “called out” by Jesus as being racist. Furiously, Tracy defended herself and still Jesus insisted, “Tracy you are Racist!” “As you know, no one can win an argument with JESUS! Jesus has the final word!



Thanks Tracy for an unforgettable sermon. By the way, New Castle Presbyter’s Ignite Team gifted the Synod with \$30,000.00 to engage in generative and missional ministry. Missional Presbyter Tracy Keenan and Synod Commissioner Donna Bowers presented the financial gift. Historically, New Castle Speer Trust Fund Foundation funded the Synod and the General Assembly (PCUSA) for the purpose of addressing the

root cause of hunger and poverty. The Presbytery has discontinued this funding. However, new funds are available to engage in creative mission. The Speer Trust Fund Committee will dissolve effective December 31, 2019.

Rather than remain inert, stuck on the sandy bottom while the raging current of racial injustice roll, could we Presbyterians choose to spring upward to the surface of this pain and then actually start swimming against it. The Assembly convened during a very precarious period in Virginia's history. Commissioners, presbyters and guests took a "deep dive" to confront enslavement, privilege, power, and racism and gender equity. The meeting occurred a month or so after both Virginia's governor and attorney general admitted to dressing in blackface in their past. Allegations of sexual abuse have been brought against the state's lieutenant governor. Just 18-months ago, White Supremacists, Neo-Nazis, and other hate groups marched in Charlottesville in support of confederate monuments, resulting in three deaths. Where is the voice of the church? What do Presbyterians have to say about such? The Assembly's strategy was to move persons from talk to actions around issues of white supremacy, power, and privilege and gender equity.

The Assembly Gathering featured dynamic plenaries and presentations. The first plenary set the context



and provided the framework for examining the ways systemic racism, privilege and power have impacted everybody beginning in childhood when boundaries or 'lines' socially separating persons of color and others were put in place. The second plenary traced the influence of historical documents that have guided and continue to guide the United States in making judicial rules! They included the Constitution of the United States and the Doctrine of Discovery, which favors

white male land owners. The third plenary provided a way out or how to address this malaise. Can the SOMA be on the forefront of a redemptive process which moves persons from places of comfort to places of discomfort? The synod offered persons opportunity to engage in an immersion experience that others around the country have taken. **Can Presbyterians Swim?**

**Plenary One** featured the co-founders of "Coming to the Table Richmond", Danita Green assisted by Martha Rollins who is a descendant of General Robert E. Lee. Coming to the Table is a group that meets at Ginter Park PC monthly to provide resources and support for people who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism rooted in the nation's history of slavery. Danita is a trauma specialist and assists individuals and groups to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism rooted in the nation's history of slavery. She framed her narrative around "crossing the line." It was a riveting childhood story of family, traveling, watermelons, Atlantic Ocean, special friends, and experiencing racism in such a way that permanent "lines" were drawn in her household and culture. The segment was facilitated by a five member team from "Coming to the Table". The small groups addressed two questions, namely, (1) "Was there a time in your life, when you were expected to defend yourself for crossing the line, and (2) Was there a time when you were expected to defend someone else who crossed a line?"



**Plenary Two** concentrated on a Ted-Talk video presentation by Mark Charles, a dynamic and thought provoking public speaker, writer and consultant. The son of an American woman of Dutch heritage and a Navajo man, Charles offered a unique perspective of three of the most misinterpreted words in American History; **"WE THE PEOPLE!"** Do we mean "all" the people or "some" of the people? The Ted Talk was the primer. The understanding came from the facilitator. Jihyun Oh who is Manager of Call Process Support for the Office of the General Assembly (PCUSA). With precision and focus, she led us on a deep scuba diving expedition to examine how systemic racism, power,

privilege, and gender exclusion permeates history, politics, religion, and our own lives. What does this mean for us as the Church? What does it mean for the individual? How does a nation overcome a Doctrine of Discovery that continues to be used in Supreme Court rulings? Do we really want a nation utilizing historical documents that undergird and support Racism, Power, and Privilege? If truth were told, Racism, Power and Privilege are bipartisan issues. **Can Presbyterians swim?**

**Plenary Three** brought forth three riveting testimonials. Each sought to challenge onlookers to trade comfort for more discomfort. January 13-16, 2019, synod leaders and moderators from around the country gathered in Montgomery, Alabama for an immersion experience in The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration as well as The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, commonly known as the "Lynching Memorial." Afterwards, museum staff spoke to synod leaders, and the Rev. Denise Anderson, coordinator of Racial and Intercultural Justice at the Presbyterian Mission Agency, led them in a time of reflection and work, the following day. In a space of discomfort, hearts, heads and our spirit intersect. It is there that the Holy Spirit is free to conduct the work which only the Holy Spirit can do in us.



**Abingdon Commissioner**, Cindy Privette traveled to Montgomery two weeks before the assembly convened; motivated by the closed-mouth attitude of people from her small town to talk about racism.



While listening to a story on NPR on the Lynching Memorial in Montgomery, she recalled hearing a story about a man, Raymond Byrd who was lynched in her area in 1926. This motivated her to do some research about the lynching of Raymond Byrd and when she did so, there was some intense reaction from community members. The community failed to acknowledge this violent act against a black man who was indeed lynched be-side a church. So she traveled to Montgomery to visit "From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration" Museum at her own expense to research this name, and to review the map documenting lynchings in Virginia. The Commissioner clearly articulated that, *"The blood of Raymond Byrd is crying out from the earth beneath his feet. I am determined to get the word out because there will be no healing until the truth is told."* She urged every commissioner to travel to Montgomery, do the research, and identify lynchings in your town or county and return home to do something about it. Her intentions are to, with a group of like-minded people, be able to dig up soil from the ground on which Raymond Byrd was lynched and take it to Montgomery to join the hundreds of jars. Cindy exclaimed with power and conviction, *"I will not rest and be quiet until it happens!"*

**Synod Moderator**, Susanne Taylor caravanned to Montgomery January 13-16, 2019 with 43 other synod leaders from across the United States and Puerto Rico. The daughter of a Presbyterian pastor, Susanne shared personal accounts of attending grade schools where only a few black students attended her school. Her father moved from Tennessee to Birmingham in 1963 and it created a culture shock. This was at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1966, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. She described the terror and trauma of her mother who paced the floor looking out of the house window as her husband and one elder from the church participated in a Peace March in honor of the slain Civil Rights leader. Taylor describes herself as a descendent from slave-owners for which she not proud. Susanne provided this background to help commissioners understand some factors that have colored her life and influenced her outlook. This is who she was prior to experiencing the Museum and Monument. Her life has changed since hearing the voice of an enslaved "mother singing, children asking whether she has seen their mother and a mother asking whether she has seen her babies." She walked out of the museum for a moment with tears



in her eyes experiencing guilt and shame for the historical hatred expressed by her ancestors. Susanne believes traveling to Montgomery has profoundly impacted her life and urges others to do the same.

**Stated Clerk**, Warren Lesane recalled the 1983 Plan for Reunion which united two bodies of Presbyterianism. The plan had unintended consequences! Five Black governing bodies had to be dissolved in order for the last of 16-synods to be reconstituted along with its presbyteries. Their disillusion has led to disillusionment. This action of the church severely impacted the “pipeline” of African American leadership for the larger church. Warren exclaimed, *“The church said that all parties were asked to live into this new church plan of reunion, however, Black folk and Black churches were asked to bear the burden of the new relationship.”* How do you live into a new church without discussing and resolving history, heritage and actions that lead to the denominational splitting in the first place?

Lesane suggested that, *“Maybe God has provided a “redemptive moment” for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the PCUSA to take the lead in addressing slavery, racism, power, privilege and white supremacy together as we relive the cold, difficult history at this time.”* The Stated Clerk



offered questions for all to ponder! (1) What would happen if the synod partnered with its 14 presbyteries to help organize, facilitate, fund, and plan the next steps for Immersion Experiences aimed at traveling to Montgomery AL? (2) What could happen in the region if synod made as one of its mission priorities to address racism, power, privilege, and gender equity and assist its presbyteries to do the same? This Assembly provided a “safe space” to address difficult challenges facing God’s People and the Christian church. Might individuals, congregations, presbyteries, and synods begin transforming? **Presbyterians really can swim.** They can even take deep dives without being afraid to “cross the line!”

**Executive Committee** (1) Refined powers and authority of the Synod Administrative Commission (AC) for AKAP. The AC will not have original jurisdiction and five of the seven members are in place; (2) Received a recommendation from the Administration Committee addressing an overture submitted by AKAP; (3) Heard an update on the Next Generation Initiative; (4) Voted to dissolve the Speer Trust Fund Committee effective December 31, 2019; (5) Approved \$100,000 from the Global Witness and Peacemaking Fund to assist NC Presbyteries with Hurricane Recovery. The chairs of the Grants/Awards and Presbytery Initiatives Committees were assigned to approve requests. \$2,500 was approved for Neuse Forest PC to upgrade an educational building to house permanent volunteer, and \$3,200 was approved for Charlotte Presbytery to build and deliver showers and bathroom trailers to serve churches in NC working in partnership with the Presbyterian Disaster Agency.

**Administration Committee** (1) Approved guideline changes to the Jubilee Fund to allow New Initiatives, projects that support advocacy interest groups and ministries that preserve and increase longevity of African American churches and congregations. (2) Held the first reading on a policy to address presbyteries requesting reductions in per capita apportionments; (3) Reviewed a proposal from Westminster Presbyterian Homes to ask the Synod to assume its functions; (4) Received proposed goals for the Synod Executive and discussed evaluations; (5) Heard from AKAP Stated Clerk on the details for AKAP overture to the synod; and (6) With synod’s limited funds, the committee is discerning whether to continue funding maintenance requests from presbyteries/churches or to focus on funding mission.

**Finance Committee** reported that operating budgets for 2018 and 2019 will have deficits. This was anticipated. The deficits are covered by transfers from gains on investments in 2017 & 2018. The committee is exploring creative funding sources other than per capita: i.e. Mission Sharing Pledges from Presbyteries, Grants, and Philanthropists, etc. It will work with the executive committee to revise synod’s



4% 20-rolling quarters spending policy in order to free up more spending capital. The synod approved a Per Capita Apportionment increase from \$.85 to \$1.15 effective 2020.

**Grants and Awards Committee** approved \$55,885.00 in scholarship, grants and awards. Euler Scholarship approved Daniel Heath for \$6,000 to attend Princeton Seminary. The Stultz Scholarship approved \$5,000 for Alexander J. Freeman to enroll in a Presbyterian college. The Visionary Grant approved \$5,000 for WNC to train *Volunteer Advocates* to specifically help African-American Churches. Peacemaking Grants were approved for Presbytery of the James “Come to the Table (\$5,000),” in its work towards racial healing and racial reconciliation, “Dismantling Racism (\$7,635), and Bott Memorial (\$4,000) to provide school supplies for children. Small Church Grants were approved for Mt. Olive (\$1,500) -NHO to provide backpacks to children receiving free school lunches; Genito (\$1,000) -JAM to replace church sign; 1stPres Milford (\$2,850) –NEW for new air conditioner; Calvary Presbyterian (\$4,000) -WNC plumbing repairs; Marshall Presbyterian (\$4,000) –WNC to repair manse; Little River Presbyterian (\$2,200) –NEW for mold damage; Knox Presbyterian (\$2,850) –BAL for digital media project; Faith Presbyterian (\$2,850) –NHO for parking lot repair; and Bethlehem Presbyterian (\$2,000) – JAM for HVAC repairs.

**Presbytery Initiatives** discussed streamlining synod structure by folding its work into Grants and Awards Committee. It approved two grants: (1) Mid Atlantic Black Caucus was granted \$4,700 to identify issues in presbyteries in order to revitalize black congregational ministry. (2) WNC was approved for \$10,000 to use for Triennium scholarships for African American and youth of color from five NC Presbyteries.

**Committee on Representation** reports that synod submitted its annual report to the GACOR. Goals for 2019: (a) redesign presbytery reporting requirement forms; (b) meet twice annually using Zoom and Face to Face; (c) increase presbytery reporting to 100 percent. Synod approved SCOR consulting with individual presbyteries regarding their annual reports so as to increase compliance and to learn best practices.

**Nomination Committee** reports Nomination Committee - Class of 2021 George Wilson (BMRE) CCC; Sarah Schutte (WFTE) JAM; Gerry Hendershot (NAT) WMRE; Mae Hall (BFRE) NEW; Deloris Parker (BFRE) NHO; Committee on Representation – Kim Robinson (AFRE) AKAP, Donna Fair (BFRE) CHA; Veronica Thomas (BFTE) EVA; Steve Mabie (WMRE) NHO; Jubilee Committee – Rourke Moore (BMRE) NEW; Frances Turner (BFRE) NHO; Speer Trust Committee – Connie Weaver (WFTE) JAM. Current Vacancies: Abingdon: COR2021, Atlantic Korean American: Jubilee 2021; Speer 2021; SPJC 2019, Baltimore: NONE; Charlotte: Jubilee 2021; Coastal Carolina: Speer 2021; Eastern Virginia: Speer 2020; James: Jubilee 2019; National Capital: NONE; New Castle: NONE; New Hope: NONE; Peaks: CON 2021; COR 2020; Jubilee 2021; Speer 2021; Salem: NONE; Shenandoah: NONE; and Western North Carolina: Speer 2021

**Stated Clerk Report** - Pastoral Concerns included Bronwen Boswell, Jessica MacMillan, Stephen Scott, Donna Bowers, Luis Nino and Jon Barton (all grieving deaths). Concerns were shared for Ted Churn and Richard Claterbaugh with health challenges and Salem Presbytery staff in a time of transition. Judicial Matters: General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission ordered synod to suspend its Administrative Commission, pending modification to delineate the powers of the AC. Presbytery Staff continues to change. Participation in the Presbytery Leadership Formation (PLF) is at an all-time high. Synod contributes \$4,050 for new presbytery leader over three years who receive orientation, residency training, and coaching. ABI is vacant. AKAP David Kang Presbyter Executive/Stated Clerk\*; BAL – Jackie Taylor is General Presbyter\*; CHA – Jan Edmiston is General Presbyter\*; CCC – Jerrod Lowry is General Presbyter/Stated Clerk\*; EVA – Liza Hendrix is General Presbyter; JAM – Fred Holbrook is Transitional General Presbyter/Stated Clerk\*; NAT Vacant; NEW – Jessica McMillan is Connectional Presbyter\* and Tracey Keenan is Missional Presbyter\*; NHO – Ted Churn is General Presbyter/Stated Clerk; PEA – Carl Utley is Transitional General Presbyter\*; SAL – Stephen Scott is Transitional General Presbyter\*; SHE – Bronwen Boswell is General Presbyter/Stated Clerk; and WNC – Bobbi White is the General Presbyter. (\*Asterisks indicate participants in the PLF)

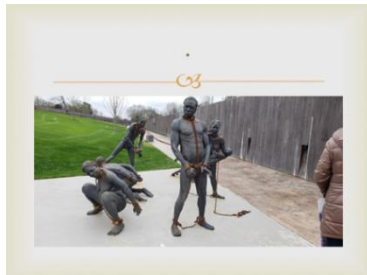
**General Assembly** – Baltimore Presbytery COLA updated the Assembly on 2020 General Assembly plans. Carrie Finch Burris wants the Baltimore Assembly to be hosted by the Mid-Atlantic Region. Synod has agreed to provide \$10,000 towards funding. Board of Pension – Martha Reisner and Sy Hughes from PMA Mission Engagement provided updates on their work. They were available for further conversations. The Synod Stated Clerk is the chair-elect of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board (PMAB) and also serves as a Corresponding Member of the Office of the General Assembly (COGA).

**Hurricane Recovery** – Ben Cahoon and Robbie Phillips captivated the assembly as they shared ways they have addressed disaster recovery since Hurricane Florence caused synod assembly to end early September 2018. Ben, who is Mayor of the Nags-Head reflected as a government official, father, church member and member of New Hope Presbytery. Robbie Phillips responded as a pastor, presbyter and a community leader. Coastal Carolina is partnering with organizations including PDA to address long-term-recovery. The Synod set aside \$100,000.00 to assist with disaster recovery in North Carolina. Presbyteries and churches may apply for these funds; however applicants must be endorsed by the presbytery.



**#ALMOSTDONE!** (1) The Assembly approved the Kate B Reynolds Trust Fund Certification Committee to distribute \$578,341.68 to 445 recipients in the amount of \$1,299.64. (2) The Jubilee Fund Committee awarded \$2,500 to Fifteenth PC (NAT) for Congregational Leadership Development; \$2,500 was awarded to Lloyd PC (SAL) for Outreach to Youth and Families; and \$2,500 was awarded to Calvary PC (WNC) for Grace Young Enrichment Camp. (3) Massanetta Spring Clayton Rascoe provided stats, shared flood damage impact, and encouraged participation in “Giving Tuesday scheduled for April.” (4) The majority of SPJC Complaints coming before the synod were from AKAP totaling six. Two cases involved NAT and one each from WNC, ABI, and SHE Presbyteries. One complaint is currently pending. (5) Synod Presbyterian Men’s Conference will be held at Massanetta Springs July 19-21, 2019. (6) The Assembly received a report from Forrest Kearns, President of the Westminster Presbyterian Homes of Lynchburg Board of Trustees. The Administration Committee is working to address the particular needs.

**PARTNERSHIP!** Is this a Prophetic Possibility and a Holy Opportunity? What if the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic partnered with its 14-presbyteries, 1,300+ congregations, caucuses, Presbyterian Women, Presbyterian Men, Committee Women of Color and others to: (a) Coordinate Immersion Experiences to visit the Legacy Museums “From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration” and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice (Lynching Memorial); (b) Help fund and facilitate Immersion Experience Conversations on-site and back at home; (c) Design a Mid-Atlantic “Great Big Tent Event” in which Power, Privilege, White Supremacy are the foci; (d) Model for the Church and the nation our willingness to faithfully listen to God’s voice that calls us from comfort to discomfort long enough for the Holy Spirit to transform hearts, minds and souls. As Synod Executive and Stated Clerk, I believe that God has provided this synod a “Kairos Moment” to place repentance above all else. Then and only then are we able to ***“Walk Together Children, Don’t You Get Weary, There’s a Great Camp Meeting in the Promised Land.”***



Here’s what you can do! Contact your presbytery, synod commissioner(s), or the synod office. The Synod Executive Committee wants to hear from you. What is the Spirit saying to you? Share your thoughts, prayers and uncomfortable moments. Send comments to [clerk@synatlantic.org](mailto:clerk@synatlantic.org).

**Share the Highlights of the 243<sup>rd</sup> Assembly with your congregation, presbytery and across the synod!**