



A Day in the Life of an Assembly Junkie Moderator's Comments Posted 1 June 2019

By Rev John P Wilson

I missed out on his top-floor suite, but President Reagan loved staying at the Anatole whenever he was in town. Dallas' Hotel Anatole is impressive with its cavernous ballrooms, meeting areas, lobbies and grounds. It's large enough to be allocated its own postcode if it was in Australia. This was the venue for the 2019 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America.

PCAmerica is a growing denomination of 1600 churches, and so they need a spacious venue to accommodate 1600 ministers, 1600 elders, family members and invited guests from other denominations. You were there too, representatively – through your Moderator who was an invited guest.

MORNING WORSHIP

Though there's much business to cover, and a contentious debate anticipated on the church's response to sexuality and gender issues, the church paused for three worship services, an hour and half long each time. There's no rushing into business without first bringing to the Lord the praise due to his name and sitting under the preaching of his Word. There's something thrilling about singing "holy, holy, holy" in the presence of 3,000 people. I'm listening to 2,999 fellow witnesses to the holiness of God – thinking: Well, they can't all be wrong!

LUNCH WITH GLOBAL CHRISTIANS

One highlight was taking Davi and Adriana for lunch at Media Grill, one of several restaurants and cafes within the hotel complex. What a delightful couple. Rev Dr Davi Gomes holds the highest office for Mackenzie Presbyterian University in Sao Paulo, Brazil. His position is a Presbyterian Church of Brazil appointment. Not all staff are Christian, but the Chancellor has enormous influence for the gospel in safeguarding policy and

curriculum, although he has to walk a careful path. Altogether, there are nearly 50,000 students enrolled. Davi is now the International Director for World Reformed Fellowship – a fellowship of churches of which we are a part. It's great to sit with a church leader who's so passionate about being a world Christian and hear his vision for mutual encouragement and fellowship among reformed churches across the globe.

STRUGGLING TO STAY AWAKE

As in any Assembly, it's hard to concentrate all day. All the more so for one used to occupying the front desk. It's much easier to shut eyes and drift in the distant back-row observer's seat. I tried valiantly to listen to and observe all the General Assembly reports and video presentations in the afternoon, but almost felt sick with tiredness. The air conditioning was pumping out freezing air, so by 5.30pm (when 2000 delegates emerge like lines of lemmings to find a cafe for dinner) I sat in the late afternoon heat of Texas to thaw out. I fell asleep, then had a lovely conversation with an elder from Michigan. We exchanged stories of how we came to faith.

DINNER WITH PCAMERICA LEADERSHIP

I was invited to meet with the moderator of PCAmerica, the immed-past moderator, the international director of Mission to the World (MTW), field-ops director of MTW, Prof of theology at RTS and two MTW Australian church planters for dinner. We talked together about mutual recognition of, and cooperation in, church plants in Australia. It was a joy to recite the story of God's grace in reviving our church since 1977. It was a great privilege to address these leaders about what I think has been decades of misunderstanding around the true nature of our

denomination here in Australia.

EVENING OF RIGOROUS DEBATE

After evening worship (which was interesting, because it was a bit “freer” than the morning worship) the General Assembly met again for business and I was really glad to have witnessed it. Here was a church debating pros and cons of affirming the Nashville Statement on what we affirm (or deny) with regard to positions on sexuality and gender. The Statement is designed for the sake of churches being informed and for use in discipleship. It was a three hour spirited debate (but VERY respectful). All of it was conducted within the theological givens of our position but at variance with respect to pastoral sensitivities and meaning of terms. Especially under review was the term “gay-Christian”. Some still choke a bit on the expression, but I think it’s being used solely of someone who can’t help being same-sex attracted, but is determined not to give into the associated sinful desires, prays daily not to yield to temptation as any of us men do anyway regarding women, who lives a celibate lifestyle and seeks to please Christ. At least, I think that’s what’s meant. Then there was a strident minority position expressed, taking exception to Article 7 of the Nashville Statement (let the interested reader look this up).

What I enjoyed was the spirit of PCAmerica. NO ONE was grandstanding, everyone was listening. All had theological unity around Scripture and the Confession. In the end, the Assembly affirmed the Statement as faithful to biblical teaching, but also agreed to set up their own study committee to look at the whole

subject afresh. WHATEVER they eventually come up with, they will still have outliers who will challenge. In every group of Christian thinkers there will always be someone on the left of the spectrum, and if you write the statement to include that person, then there will ALWAYS be someone left of him. The final 11pm vote was 803:541 (counted via electronic clickers).

What I enjoyed especially was how church elders stood and spoke, like elder Melton Duncan. I include in this the brilliant moderating of the Assembly by an elder of the church. Then also, I loved contributions by ministers and church theologians (but never with priority ... they stood in line and took their turn). I witnessed powerful speeches by Harry Reeder (of Briarwood), Ligon Duncan and the clincher by Kevin de Young.

I stayed until 11.30pm, while the General Assembly was still going. I was proud to be part of the world-wide Presbyterian communion of saints. Passion but no rancour. Deep debates of theology but always with profound desire for pastoral sensitivity. No one pushing to insist precedence. A court of 1500 elders and ministers coming to a mind for the church through good polity and with reasoned biblical debate.

As morning dew falls on the ground to refresh the earth, I felt refreshed. It’s a good and pleasant thing to witness: when brothers live together in harmony (Psalm 133).

Rev John Wilson is the Moderator-General of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.