

Presbyterian Church (USA) 226th General Assembly in Salt Lake City
Yellowstone Presbytery YAAD - Joelle Evans

As this year's Young Adult Advisory Delegate (or YAAD) for Yellowstone Presbytery, I can safely say that being part of the general assembly is an experience like no other. The days were long and there was much work to be done, but I'm so glad to have been a part of it. I had a pretty large learning curve ahead of me too, learning to use the meeting tools and procedures were new challenges for me but were especially important to make things run smoothly.

This year the GA was partially in-person and partially virtual. We met for 3 days on zoom to discuss committee business first and then we all met in Salt Lake for plenary. I was on the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee, which I really enjoyed. We discussed issues like the inhumane conditions of lithium miners, although the "main event" of our committee was a debate between two overtures that either called for the church to divest from fossil fuels or to continue our current course of action. I think that for the most part the church agrees fossil fuel usage needs to decline. However, conversation arose around whether we could do more good by divesting immediately or by continuing to invest so that our investment group can continue putting pressure on these companies to be more environmentally friendly. Both in committee meetings and in plenary this discussion took much longer than expected. The committee also voted to let the US Treasury Department speak at plenary about the Inflation Reduction Act. I bring this up because I think we should look into it. The act provides governmental support for churches to do things like install solar panels, which aligns with the church's mission to support and take care of God's creation.

On the note of plenary, being in Salt Lake was so much more than just meeting and discussing various topics. There was music, group dinners, dance breaks, and so many more things that made this trip a first for me. For anyone who doesn't know, I'm one of the piano accompanists at my church. You could safely say that music is my happy place, and being there and part of a choir of hundreds of people is one of, if not the, most spiritual experience I have ever had. Some hymns I liked more than others, but they came from a hymnal called *Glory to God* and both "Glory to God, Whose Goodness Shines on Me" and "Listen to the Word That God Has Spoken" I found especially powerful.

One of my favorite things to tell people about being at the GA is that yes, we did a lot of sitting, but we also had dance breaks! There were a couple times where the atmosphere was so intense that we all needed a break and the songs were right, so we had people dancing in the aisles or doing line dances up near the stage. I think that in a lot of cases it was just what we needed, I know I personally did. The dance breaks made it a lot easier to not be so somber, especially in the face of hard news. There was only one overture that passed with 100% support from commissioners and it was on the topic of gun violence, especially in schools. Those who spoke in support of the overture each told a heart-wrenching story of their own experiences and I wish I could share the feeling of powerlessness and pain and sorrow in that room because it was unlike anything I've known.

Most of the GA wasn't that intense, there was a lot of joy too. The YAADs got together on an almost daily basis to be a community and make sure we were all doing alright. This was often after plenary so it got to be really late at times, but having a way to all be on the same page and knowing that we had support if and when we needed it was invaluable. These

meetings as a group were greatly appreciated, as were the 3 presentations/meetings that I registered for before plenary. One was about racial equity and women's intercultural ministries, another on how working for the church can help you get governmental student loans forgiven, and the last on reproductive justice. I am absolutely thrilled to see such support for BIPOC and women's ministry in the church! I'm proud that the church supports so many demographics, especially when the popular image of the church seems to be one that isn't nearly so diverse. The reproductive justice luncheon also surprised me, but in a pleasant way. Rev Dr Peters presented and if you would like to learn more about it I would recommend visiting her website at rebeccatoddpeters.com. I know abortion is a hot topic so I won't discuss my views here, but I really enjoyed her presentation. Lastly, thank you to the Presbyterian Church for helping those with student loans to get them forgiven! There is a governmental program called Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) that says if you work for a non-profit for 10 years or more, then you qualify to get your student loans forgiven. However, this process can be long and confusing, so the church works with PeopleJoy to simplify this process for church employees. As a college student, I can't even begin to tell you how amazing it is to know that there are ways to relieve college debt and that I may not have to face it on my own so thank you.

Overall, the GA was a remarkable experience. Yes, there was a lot of waiting and listening with different overtures, but we also sang and danced together between them. It was hard to feel alone during that week, and I hope more people can experience that feeling of being connected and part of something bigger than themselves.