

Matthew 25 Church

In June, I had the privilege of attending the 223rd General Assembly, in St Louis, Missouri as a Theological Student Advisory Delegate. General Assembly is the overarching governing body, where we as Presbyterians gather to discern the call and direction of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The assembly consist of elected commissioners, half of which are ruling elders and the other half are ministers of the word and sacraments; young adult advisory delegates, theological student advisory delegates, observers, families and Presbyterian groupies. As a Theological Student Advisory Delegate, I was given an advisory vote in the plenary meetings and voice and vote within the committee I was selected to serve on.

It is at General Assembly that we are reminded that the body of Christ is a multigenerational, multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural community, grounded in the Word of God and steeped in tradition and history. It is also here that we are reminded that we cannot live out our calling to be the body of Christ in solitude, it takes a community. As a TSAD, I served on the Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee where I encountered and engaged with Presbyterians from across the country and across the globe, many of whom spoke different languages, as well as people from other faith traditions, all working together to discern the will of God for future and life of PC (USA).

In 2016, the 222nd General Assembly, “called upon the Presbyterian Church (USA) to be a ‘Matthew 25 Church’ instructing future assemblies to create opportunities

to engage in acts of service to and with communities at risk and to confront racism and the systems that destroy the environment and keep people marginalized.” It is with this charge in mind that the theme for the 223rd general assembly was Engagement as a Matthew 25 Church, “Kingdom building for the 21st Century.” Throughout the week we gathered together as a community to explore what it means to be a Matthew 25 church and how we as the people of God are called to become a Matthew 25 church. However, before we can become a Matthew 25 church we have to know what a Matthew 25 church is.

In the reading for today, Jesus is sitting with the disciples at the Mount of Olives, he is speaking to the disciples in parables. Here in Matthew 25: 31-46, Jesus tells the disciples that in the days of glory, when the Son of Man returns the nations will be gathered unto Him and the people will be sorted into sheep and goats. Jesus explains that the sheep will be sorted to the right and the goats to the left, accordingly. The sheep, those on the right, Jesus proclaims to the disciples will inherit the kingdom of God, the goats, those on the left, will inherit eternal punishment. So how does one end up on the right or the left?

Jesus proclaims in the gospel of Matthew, I was hungry and in need of food, I was thirsty and came in search of water, I was a stranger in a foreign land looking for a friendly face, I was naked and needed covering from the cold, I was sick and in need of care, I was imprisoned with no one to care, I was marginalized, oppressed, alone and

afraid. I stood in need of someone to act, to care, to respond and I found you. Now depending on your response, you are either a sheep or a goat. The goat, we are told did not respond to the need of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick or the imprisoned. But the sheep hears the call of the Good Shepherd, sees his need and fulfills it.

The charge issued by the 222nd General Assembly was for the Presbyterian Church USA to decide that we are going to be counted among the sheep. Jesus, the Good Shepherd is standing in front of us. We can see him in the face of those among us who hunger and thirst. He is there among the stranger alone, confused and afraid. He is there among those who came in search of a new home and a better life and instead find cages. He is there with those who struggle and fight to have their sexual orientation affirmed and validated. He is there in all of creation, asking will you remember me, will you remember your duty to care for me and protect me. The church is confronted with the world outside its doors, it is confronted by the Good Shepherd who calls us to be his sheep.

What does it mean to be a Matthew 25 church? It means being the hands that prepare the meal that feed the hungry and the poor, being the feet that walk alongside the stranger, it means being a voice and an ally to those who have no voice. This year at General Assembly we addressed a range of issues regarding the separation of children from their parents crossing the Mexican border, gender identity, gun violence and fossil fuel divestment but we also put our words into action. The theme 'Engagement,' as a

Matthew 25 Church “Kingdom Building in the 21st” century was not simply a matter of talking about who we are called to be, it was about living out who we are called to be.

On Tuesday, June 19, 2018, hundreds of Presbyterians gathered together in St. Louis at the America’s Center Convention Complex. Through prayer and singing, we prepared our hearts and our minds as we gathered together and prepared to march to the St. Louis City Justice Center. Standing there in the convention center we heard about a bail bond system which, disproportionately affects poor individuals and minorities, and keeps people incarcerated until they can make bail. We were joined by advocates from the Bail Project and the St. Louis Action Council, who explained that the inability for individuals to pay their bond has led to a system of mass incarceration, job loss, and the separation of families for extended periods of time. The incarcerated are housed in workhouses that are unbearably hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter.

Engagement requires action. Hundreds of Presbyterians poured out of the America’s Center Convention Complex into the streets of St. Louis linked arm and arm in solidarity. We took to the streets chanting in one voice. We marched through the streets of a city we did not call our own, for the peoples we did not know and would never meet. We walked together: white, black, Asian, Latina, young and old; we came from different parts of the country and the world and although most of us were Presbyterian we were joined by our ecumenical brothers and sisters in Christ.

Standing on the steps of the City Justice Center, we as the Presbyterian Church, were able to present \$47,000, collected from Saturday's opening worship service and online donations, to the Bail Project coordinators to bail out incarcerated individuals. However, more important than the monetary donation we as the church were able to make, is the message that we want to send. There is hope. You are not alone. There are people willing to stand up and challenge the systems of injustice and equality, oppression and racism. There are people willing to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned.

The march to the City Justice Center in St. Louis marks the beginning of the Hands and Feet initiative: Presbyterians Engaging in Communities. The Hands and Feet initiative is a commitment made by the Presbyterian Church to facilitate change and communicate God's love through action, engagement and involvement. Through the Hands and Feet initiative the Presbyterian church partners with local and national agencies to strengthen, encourage, support mission efforts in those cities that host the General Assembly.

The Hands and Feet initiative is one way the Presbyterian Church is working to become a Matthew 25 church. It is one of many ways the church can be counted among the sheep. It would be easy for the Presbyterian Church to be a goat in host cities, to enter those places concerned only with the business of General Assembly. To eat, sleep, meet, sight-see and leave never interacting with or engaging the needs of the people of St. Louis

or other host cities. However, we must remember that the business of the General Assembly is to discern the will of God for the greater Presbyterian Church. It is and has always been the will of God that the church carry-out the example set forth by Jesus Christ in and to the world.

Although the Hands and Feet initiative was instituted as a way for the General Assembly to engage with the communities hosting General Assembly through partnering and collaborating with local mission agencies and advocacy programs, the Hands and Feet initiative services as a model for what we as local churches can do. It is not enough for a church to exist in a neighborhood or community; it must engage with that community. A church that does not engage with the community at large but is only committed to the community within its own walls runs the risk of becoming a goat. The Good Shepherd is calling us out to join him, to follow where he leads. He is standing in the need of someone to be his sheep and he found you. Amen.