

DATE: July 5, 2026

TEXT: Revelation 22:1-2

THEME: The PC(USA) continues to seek to be faithful to God's call.

SUBJECT: Perseverance, Wholeness

TITLE: The Leaves of the Tree

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How is the PC(USA) persevering toward wholeness?

Prayer: Gracious and loving Spirit, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Early in my years as a pastor, apparently I preached for varying lengths of time. I typically used notes and outlines (as I'm doing today), rather than write out my message. One congregation member, when asked if I was long-winded or succinct (did I go on and on or did I keep to 15 minutes), simply replied to a visitor, "He's versatile." (Why do I write out my sermons? 1) Keeps me relatively on-topic and 2) provides a way for people who don't hear very well to follow along). Mark Twain is credited with the words: "No sinner is ever saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon," so I'll try my best - without a written out sermon - to keep it under 20 minutes.

Theme of General Assembly 227: Persevering Toward Wholeness

Persevering ...

- First Presbytery in North America - 320 years ago
- First Presbyterian congregation - 343 years ago
- Rev. Dr. Margaret Towner was first ordained woman in the Presbyterian Church - 70 years ago (1956)
- Our numbers are shrinking. Now we're just over 1 million members. At the current rate of decline, we'll dip below 1 million by our next GA in 2028. Still, 4,000 people joined the PC(USA) by letter of transfer in the last two years.
- 508 commissioners came from all of our 166 presbyteries. In four days of meeting, they addressed at least 114 overtures (bills). They spoke passionately and disagreed vehemently (and mostly respectfully). If the denominations numbers are declining, the faithful search for God's will remains as focused as ever. (TWO partner advisory delegates (Cuba and Venezuela) could not obtain visas and so they were not able to participate. Other delegates from Africa also couldn't get visas, but they found proxies who were already in the U.S.)
- 70% of our churches have fewer than 100 members. While larger congregations like Southminster have a strong voice and a strong presence, the voices and ministries of

the 70% are also vital and strong. (Story of church at Tudor Oaks Senior Living Community in Muskego, WI).

Toward Wholeness ...

- As our denomination wrestles with the questions “Who are we and what are we called to be and do”, the PC(USA) has undergone four reorganizations over the past 30 years, the most recent taking place in the past two years.
 - Presbyterian Mission Agency + Office of the GA = Presbyterian Life and Witness
 - The reasons are many and the process was long, but it speaks to our continuing desire to structure our denomination in such a way that equips the saints for ministry and seeks wholeness as a denomination
- On Wednesday, we were invited to form small groups and ask: What does wholeness look like to you?
 - We - you and I, the church, society, the world - have been through a lot in the last 25 years (a pandemic, increasing climate change, the public health crisis of gun violence, loss of trust in our leaders, an onslaught of data and information that is readily accessible to us through a small device we carry around with us everywhere. If you're bewildered by it all, you're not alone. How are we to make sense of the world? How are we to understand ourselves as human beings in this changing world? How **are** we to seek wholeness?
 - Being “on the way”
 - Strive toward completeness, knowing we'll never quite get there
 - Envision the Beloved Community (work toward economic, social, environmental and racial justice against structures / systems / our own avarice that constantly pull us in the opposite direction)
 - Don't believe the hype that ... there's a magic solution “out there” that will solve our (perceived) problems. **We have everything we need.**
 - Don't believe the hype that ... numbers tell our story (more people in the pews = stronger faith; strong budgets indicate health and falling budgets indicate sickness)
 - Faith has never been about numbers. Budgets ARE connected to decisions, priorities, passions, relationships, values, visions and aspirations and are faith statements to a certain degree, but to categorically say that a church is healthy because it has X amount of money in the bank is just not accurate. Similarly, to say that every church with a falling budget is a dying church is just as misguided.

So, here's a snapshot of what our numerically falling denomination discerned and decided last week:

- 1) Every two years, the PC(USA) will host a gathering of LGBTQIA+ Presbyterians. No less than \$100,000 will be allocated for those gatherings.

- 2) We called on Congress and the President to enact a full trade embargo on the State of Israel until their government has ended their occupation in Palestine and all Palestinian refugees are granted the right to return home.
- 3) We expressed sadness for all who have died in ICE custody or have been killed by ICE agents and called for a thorough investigation into their deaths
- 4) We encouraged all Presbyterians to pray for Congress and our President and to urge Congress to exercise their constitutional responsibility to serve as a check on Executive power.
- 5) We named, defined and repudiated white Christian nationalism for the heresy that it is.
- 6) We created a standing committee to study and make recommendations regarding AI
- 7) We recognized that, when seeking a job, it is equally difficult for a black person without a felony to find work as it is for a white person with a felony. And so, we passed a couple overtures that mandate regular anti-racism training for teaching elders, ruling elders and candidates for ministry.
- 8) We also recognized our own mishandling of the power and authority given to us by God when the church terminated the positions of mission co-workers throughout the world, ordering an investigation of the church's restructuring and closure of World Mission

And much much more. I've got a list of actions that the GA encouraged members and congregations to take.

I'd like to close with a few thoughts based on the report from our GA Stated Clerk, Jihyun Oh:

- We have persevered as a denomination through all of the various splits, schisms and reorganizations that have occurred over the years.
 - People have given steadily - financially - over the last 50, 100 or 343 years to restricted and unrestricted funds (we currently have in savings 40% unrestricted and 60% restricted). Most of those people who gave could not imagine what we are now funding: support for immigrants (Africa, Asia and Central/South America), responses to generative AI, LGBTQ+ support, advocacy for medically necessary evidence-based gender-affirming healthcare. Yet, I believe, they are posthumously supporting the work of the Spirit in our changed and changing world.
- Who are we as Presbyterians?
 - Many will say that we are **a people who love committees**; I would respond that we have lots of committees because that's how we discern the will of God - through collaboration, dialogue, disagreement and a shared desire to seek truth.
 - **We are decent and in order.** But we're decent and in order SO THAT we can (hopefully) attend to the voices of minorities. The opinions of people on the edges of mainstream thinking matter to us, and so we provide mechanisms to be able to hear their voices.
 - We are **a people who are guided by our confessions**. Some of our confessions have fallen to the wayside and others are more prominent currently and another confession may soon join the canon. I think this is OK because it

shows that we are continually asking ourselves: what do we hold dearly and what might we hold more loosely? Identity is not static. It's dynamic because the Holy Spirit is constantly at work. We ARE moving into an increasingly diverse future theologically, ethnically, racially and culturally. The question is not "How will we hold onto our cherished traditions and values?" but "How will we continue to persevere in this ever changing world and remain faithful to God's call?"

Rev. Jihyun Oh left the Assembly with a final thought. We like "Hero" narratives. If Joseph Campbell is to be believed, we've been telling stories about heroes for a long time because we find meaning and hope by participating through the journey of the hero going back thousands of years. As Christians, we find meaning and hope by participating in the life, death and resurrection of our hero, Jesus Christ. But the bulk of the work of the Church is carried out by non-heroes, the everyday, loving, committed and persevering actions of people working together consistently and faithfully. THAT is the Church - no matter the denomination.

Let us pray:

God, guide us all into the future. We earnestly seek to live out our faith in you with energy, intelligence, imagination and love, not knowing where we're going or what we'll find along the way. We ask only that you help us to persevere throughout the finite number of days we have been given, remaining as true to your word as we know how so that we may become leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations. Thank you for blessing us. May we, in response, richly bless others. Amen.