In the past two weeks, as you know, I was away in Portland, Oregon while attending the 222nd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This was a biennial denomination-wide event in which more than 600 representatives from all 173 presbyteries, 16 synods, including theological students, young adults and other ecumenical advisory delegates, came together prayerfully discern God’s calling to the Presbyterian church. We engaged in active listening not only to the Spirit, but also upon one another’s viewpoints. We debated in a Presbyterian way…that is decently and in order, and ultimately voted on various issues concerning how the church may be a better witness to the world. Some of those issues may be a bit more controversial and hotly contested than the others, but ultimately we recognized that although we may have a diversity of opinions, we are still called together to be the church in one body and in one Spirit.

While many were there for the very first time, others were there, as season veterans, to rekindle their friendship that they’ve developed and cherished over the years. This was all being a part of the connectional church all about. God assures us that **we are never alone**. Many of us are wrestling with the same challenges and struggles. We are all bound together in the same Spirit and in one voice, while acknowledging that God has made us all different and uniquely of our own.

The theme for this Assembly was “***The Hope in Our Calling***“, based on the passage that we read just now from Ephesians 1:18-19, *“So that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the* ***hope to which God has called you****, what are the riches of God’s glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe...”*

Although this theme may sound a bit generic and cliché, it was simple but yet profoundly to the point. I think this is exactly what the Presbyterian church needs to hear right now during times of uncertainties about our future, fears of survival, and diminished hope, that some of us may perceive. We must never forget that we still serve a faithful and a living God who does not disappoint those who anchor their hope and trust in Him.

Throughout the Assembly, I kept my eyes and ears opened looking for that “hope” in our calling. It didn’t take me long to find that hope through the people whom the Spirit has gathered….the people who are willing to step up to leadership in the midst of challenges, people who are willing to make an impact, even when others have told them that it cannot be done or they’ve tried that before. These people care to transform their prophetic voice and put their hope into actions. They’ve laid aside their differences and put God first, in order to serve as God’s instruments of peace and agents of hope in God’s mission, and not ours.

One evidence of such hope is that the church is willing to take a stand in what it believes in. With the approval of more than 2/3 of the presbyteries, the church for the first time adopted a new confession of faith – the “*Belhar Confession*” into our *Book of Confession* in more than 33 years. This Confession as you may recall, came out of the *Dutch Reformed Church* in South Africa during the Apartheid era in the mid 80’s. It focuses on the theme of reconciliation and directly addresses our society’s on-going struggle with race, racism, power, and privileges. Furthermore, this is the first time in the history of the Presbyterian Church that it adopted a confessional statement from the global south, instead of from the predominately Euro and American centric north. By doing so, the church is making a firm statement that God continues to speak to us through the diversity of voices and perspectives among ALL of God’s people. Over the years, we’ve seen the gravity of Christianity has shifted from the global north and west to the global south and east. The church in the global south and east are growing, vibrant and alive.

In celebrating the adaptation of this new confession of faith, at the beginning of each plenary sessions, members of the various racial-ethnic groups were invited to share their own perspective, experience, on-going pain and struggle, on the subject of race and racism here in this country. I was honored to be asked, as one of the speakers to share about my own journey growing up in this country, as Asian-American while confronting the various forms of racism (whether directly or indirectly). Some of you might have seen that video on line, if not, I’ve posted a link on my FB page.

Overall, I am grateful for the invitation to share my story to the larger church while recognizing that the Presbyterian Church as a whole is still predominately white (currently about 91%) and that there is still so much more work that lies ahead of us in order to dismantle systemic racism, power and privilege that are embedded in our culture, society and within our church. The church stands committed in taking bold leaps of faith in the right direction. We should all be proud of ourselves. One of the most memorable moments of this Assembly was when we all spontaneously got together and sang “We Shall Overcome”. It surely was a powerful sign of unity for the body of Christ.

The church has also made a strong statement concerning the future direction and leadership of the church, with the election of the first ever Co-Moderators platform instead of having a traditional Moderator/Vice-Moderator format. Both of our Co-Moderators (TE Jan Edmiston & TE Denise Anderson) are women, one is black and one is white. We’ve never done it this way before…but we did!

Furthermore for the first time in 12 years, we also have a new Stated Clerk. TE J. Herbert Nelson became the first black stated clerk in our denomination. The Assembly honored and celebrated the retirement of the Stated Clerk – Rev. Gradye Parsons, after 37 years of service to the church and 12 of those as the Stated Clerk, who is the public voice of the denomination.

Indeed, this is an exciting time, but yet also a discerning time, to be a part of the Presbyterian Church as it strives to honor God’s calling to be God’s church of the future. Instead of focusing on our own fear of survival and other needs, which there are many, we have chosen to affirm our commitment to be a more welcoming and inclusive community of faith. As in the closing worship service, the former Vice-Moderator TE Larissa Kwong-Abazia mentioned that *“We need not to focus on the membership, but focus upon building up the Kingdom of God.”* It is under the leadership of these rising leaders who have demonstrated a clear vision and a renew perspective and outlook towards the future of the church, we shall find “Hope in Our Calling.”

As a church, we recognize that we have neglected our calling and failed to honor God’s will. We’ve focused on the wrong things with our own agenda. We confess that we are not perfect and we strive to do better as the Way Forward. We need to go the extra mile, work a little harder, stretch beyond our own comfort zones, in honoring God’s gifts and callings in our lives. We need to “step up our game” both individually and collectively as a church, in order to see God’s Kingdom come to fruition.

As the newly elected Stated Clerk addressed to the Assembly, ***“We are not dead … we are alive, we are reforming and we are transforming this world, one person at a time.”***

In the passage that we read earlier from Paul’s letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul also addressed the issue of unity within the church in the midst of a polarized society. The church needed a new sense of vision and direction going forward. Paul urged us the church to examine our own conducts and behaviors through humility and grace, rediscover the joy and the hope that we have in our own calling. Pray without ceasing and seek God’s wisdom by laying aside our differences, while discerning “what’s next” in our lives. As Paul wrote in verse 22 reminding the church that ***God has put all things under his feet and has made himself the head over all things for the church.*** Christ is the head of the church, and we are the different parts of the body.

At times, we may think we know all the in’s and out’s of running the church. We think we know all the church polity and jargons of making motions, substitute motions and amendments, in order to get what we want. We may think we have the best strategy or implementation plan all worked out that will revive and save the church from falling into the abyss. But **what good is it if we, ourselves do not believe in it or if we do not surrender ourselves to the Lordship of Christ, and under God’s authority and trusting in the leading of the Holy Spirit.**

God’s hope is implanted in us through our baptismal calling. All of us are already being sent as commissioners and delegates to go to wherever God is sending us, to carry out God’s business and God’s mission here on earth. God has already chosen us and has sent us into the mission frontier, right here and right now. **Together we have a mission to transform the lives of others as God has transformed ours through the Hope in Our Calling.** In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, Amen .