

Presbyterians elect new leaders, skip fossil fuel divestment

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The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was marked by several firsts: it elected a black man for the 1.6-million-member denomination's top leadership role, chose comoderators for the general assembly, and added a confession from the Global South to the church's Book of Confessions.

Meeting June 18-25 in Portland, Oregon, delegates also voted 490-91 against immediate divestment from fossil fuels. Instead, they chose selective, phased-in divestment paired with corporate engagement.

And they also opted for a study of the boycott, divestment, and sanctions movement in the Israel-Palestine conflict, including opposition to it, rather than calling for an end to any support of BDS.

Delegates elected J. Herbert Nelson, director of the PCUSA Office of Public Witness, to a four-year term as stated clerk beginning August 1.

He said the denomination "is not dying, but I believe we are reforming. Only through the eyes of faith can we see beyond death."

Nelson succeeds Gradye Parsons, who is retiring after 37 years of ordained ministry.

The denomination, which is more than 90 percent white, also broke new ground by choosing comoderators of the assembly for the first time: T. Denise Anderson of National Capital Presbytery, who is black, and Jan Edmiston, a presbytery executive from Chicago, who is white.

Gigi Goshorn, a young adult advisory delegate from the Lake Michigan Presbytery, was impressed by the evident friendship between the two women.

"It's clear that each of them could have done this by themselves, but they have chosen to do it together," she said.

Decades after it was birthed in South Africa by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church during its movement against apartheid, the Confession of Belhar is now the 12th of those recognized in the PCUSA's Book of Confessions.

"Your decision affirms that, like those other historic standards of faith, the Belhar Confession transcends its historic circumstances as a standard for faith in all places and times," Godfrey Betha of the United Reformed Church in Southern Africa said to the assembly after the vote. "Your decision affirms to your church, to all: when you come looking for the demon of racism, don't come to us." —the *Christian Century* staff from reporting by General Assembly News

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