

224th General Assembly elects Street-Stewart, Bentley co-moderators

Pair garners 304 votes in first-ballot election Saturday



 June 20, 2020  Mike Ferguson  Presbyterian News Service

LOUISVILLE —Elona Street-Stewart, executive of the [Synod of Lakes and Prairies](#), and the Rev. Gregory Bentley, pastor of [Fellowship Presbyterian Church](#) in Huntsville, Alabama, were overwhelmingly elected to be co-moderators of the 224th General Assembly Saturday.

The two garnered 304 votes, easily winning on the first ballot. The Rev. Marie Mainard O'Connell and Arthur Fullerton received 90 votes. The Rev. Sandra Hedrick and Moon Lee got 65 votes.

Immediately after their election, the two were installed as co-moderators by the co-moderators of the 223rd General Assembly, the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann and Ruling Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, as well as the Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

"I am hippopotamus happy and dinosaur delighted," Bentley said.

 "is just wonderful," Street-Stewart said. "We look forward to meeting the fabulous expectations our current co-moderators have established for us."



Elona Street-Stewart and the Rev. Gregory Bentley were elected Saturday to be co-moderators of the 224th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church

"The world needs a church that has no fear over its diversity," said Street-Stewart, a descendant of the Delaware Nanticoke tribe and the first Native American to serve as a moderator as well as a synod executive in the PC(USA).

"We believe the denomination is headed in the right direction," especially with the [Matthew 25 invitation](#), Bentley said. "We want to heed Christ's call to not be afraid ... We want to run this race with perseverance, looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."

Street-Stewart noted the synod she leads was the first to say yes to the Matthew 25 invitation in the spring of 2019. "Diane," she said during a post-election news conference, referring to Presbyterian Mission Agency President and Executive Director the Rev. Dr. Diane Moffett, "has a very powerful message."

"We believe in those goals" of building congregational vitality, dismantling structural racism and eradicating systemic poverty, Bentley said. "We just need to get more workers in the vineyard."

His said the congregation he serves has [five core practices](#). The one that sticks out for him is radical hospitality. "It's not just being nice and polite," he explained. "We need to create space to say, 'You are welcome here' — not just with words, but a space to genuinely share our lives."

Asked about protests over police killings and the intractable problem of white supremacy, Street-Stewart said the PC(USA) "already has incredible statements and social witness policies." The denomination needs to be at the center of economic and social change, she said. "It's going to take a greater understanding of what we have said we are about," she said. "White supremacy is a hard issue because there's a lot of fear involved."

Studying and talking together can be helpful tools for the nearly 90 percent of Presbyterians who are white, she said, as are going to conferences and serving in organizations led by people of color.

"Let's come with the attitude that says, 'You are the ones to be the teachers. Tell us what you are doing,'" she said.

Both said they plan to travel to Louisville in the next few days to prepare for the scheduled two days of online plenary sessions set for Friday and Saturday, June 26 and 27.

"They gave us the option that you can do this from home," Bentley said. "But if something hinky goes on, you're right there. We felt that was best."

"We need to be at the place where the best of the best are working with us to guide us," Street-Stewart said.

She said that when travel restrictions are no longer in effect, the new co-moderators will visit places "where we are unimagined. We aren't going to fit the profile. We aren't going to fit the measurements that people want in all places." In fact, "we might fit the description of something that people fear or couldn't imagine." She said sometimes when she meets people, "I am not what they imagine a synod executive would be."

Most Americans "don't understand the long relationship" that Indigenous people have had with Black people, she said. "Every moment is a teaching opportunity."

Asked about the possibility of stretching the virtual assembly by a few days, Bentley said, "Let's put the pedal to the metal. If that's the desire of the assembly, I'm on board with that."

However, "I'd much rather be two miles deep and two inches wide," rather than the other way around, he said. "Let's drill down on a few things and really get a handle on it."

Asked how Presbyterians can be in prayer for their new leaders, Bentley identified three prayer requests: for stamina, perseverance and patience.

"We are going to pack a lot into the next two years," he said. "We are excited about it, but we know it will be taxing."





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