The theme of the 224th General Assembly (2020) was set to be “Called to a Movement Beyond Institution,” based upon Romans 12:2. In light of the pandemic, the Stated Clerk has now called for the theme to be “From Lament to Hope.” How do we help the church both lament our recent losses while also living into new hope?

ELONA SAYS:

Loss, despair, anguish, belonging will be the order of the day when the Assembly convenes and virtually connects people across the church. Even though we will be isolated, we will not be alone. The theme expresses our frustrations and weaknesses making space to acknowledge our interdependence. When we care about people, we form trust and trust builds hope. Hope is the genuine mission of the church, a gift of purpose directed beyond ourselves toward the next generation. This 224th GA will be followed by others. We won’t know who it blesses in the future, what our work means for someone else, how it may restore ministry, or repair suffering. The pandemic has changed lives so much in the last few months. We cry, ‘How long O Lord’ of Psalm 13, and mourn inconsolably like Rachel in Jeremiah 31:16. Right now, we feel abandoned, grieving loved ones, missing social togetherness, and yet experiencing a deeper connection to each other, to the church and to God.

Our lament acknowledges our meeting in a world full of pain, death and injustice. Our lament also reflects our humanity in an infected world and an invocation for God to intervene with righteous repair. When we lament, we grieve what is true: the hard truth of our humanity and separation from God. We were created to live with God in a garden, yet the entire human story has been about separation, and our attempts to belong again. We acutely face what Walter Brueggemann calls a ‘fearful future accompanied by a faithful God.’

When we call the church to lament, we engage in the real despair and healing of injustice. Rachel’s inconsolable weeping is the heart wrenching tragedy of her lost children, removed from the land, erased from shared history, and distressed over an entire nation facing extermination. A story of lament so powerful that God comes to repair the historical trauma of broken people in a violent world, to a nation so needing a promise of hope. God says wipe your tears, for those you mourn, those who have been kidnapped, trafficked, imprisoned, brutalized, or enslaved.

God speaks over chaos, anger, pain and fatigue calling for reparations of wounds suffered across generations, a call for healing the oppression of people and exploitation of land. God reminds us the church could have interrupted the complicity of injustice and exploitation in our national history. God compels us to recognize the invisible but real costs of institutional privilege. ‘I will reward you AND your children will come back home in the healing of the nation.’

Our generation and the next are urged to imagine, after the labor of waiting, relentless uncertainty, and formidable loss, that hope prevails in Jesus, who promised to remember us and restore the KINdom of God. Hope may be buried beneath this pandemic’s health and safety guidelines in the virtual General Assembly distancing from one another. Only in the spiritual solidarity of truth-telling about the brokenness of our communities, understanding the real fear of loss and pain deep in the core of our humanity, can we help the church proclaim hope, the restoration offered in Christ.
GREGORY SAYS:

Lament is acknowledgement of the loss of someone and/or something that is precious to us. We recognize that injury and woundedness has occurred as well as the need for restoration and repair. Not only do we need to lament recent loses, there are ancient and enduring losses that haunt us that need to be lamented as well. The very founding of our nation generated grievously injurious conditions for which we have not adequately and appropriately lamented (and repented) such as the genocide of First Nations people and the theft of their land and the enslavement of Africans. So yes, we must properly lament recent and not so recent losses...not either/or but both/and.

Dr. Carolyn McCrary, professor of pastoral care and counseling at the Interdenominational Theological Center contends that as African Americans, given our experience in this land, that hope is the only thing that has kept us sane in the midst of insanity. Lament and hope must be held in creative tension in that while we lament, we summon the courage to agree and cooperate with God to bring about the conditions that promote healing, wholeness, and well-being. We survey the contemporary landscape of our existence to locate the places of injury and woundedness that continue to plague our people. And hope begins to well up as we heed the words of Isaiah 58:7 to share our food with the hungry and to provide shelter for the homeless, to clothe the naked and to not turn away from our own flesh and blood.

Jesus of Nazareth expanded and amplified this notion in Matthew 25 when the sheep replied, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me.”