

A WITNESS OF LAMENT & HOPE

From the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky

An invitation for the mid councils and worshiping communities of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to intentionally share in lament and give voice to hope within their own ecclesiastical, historical, and social contexts.

*“You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8*

As Jesus ascends into heaven, he claims for his followers an identity and a calling—witness. A Christian witness is one who has been claimed by God in the waters of baptism, experiences the love of God in Christ Jesus, and lives in the Spirit, sowing seeds of Christ’s just and peaceable reign. A witness participates fully in the present reality of human experience, while also giving testimony to the larger reality of abundant life in Christ. A witness holds tension between lament for the sin and brokenness of individuals and systems, and hope in the assurance of Christ’s just and peaceable reign and that God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven.

We, the members of the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky, the host presbytery of the 225th General Assembly, faithfully affirm our identity and calling—we, too, are witnesses, both to lament and hope.

Ecclesiastical Context

Our presbytery spans across 29 counties in the Commonwealth of Kentucky that extend from Frankfort, the state capital, in the east, west to Louisville, and south to the Tennessee border. We encompass urban, suburban, exurban, small town, and rural realities and reflect the cultural, political, racial, socioeconomic and other tensions represented across our country. We are uniquely positioned as the host presbytery of the General Assembly in that we are home to both the national office of our denomination, as well as Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, one of the historic seminaries of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Geographical & Social Context

As we offer this witness, we recognize that we do not do so in a vacuum, but rather, from within our own particular context of place, time, and history.

Kentucky is the [traditional homeland](#) of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Delaware, Mosopelea, Shawnee, Wyandot, and Yuchi Nations, who were [forced to cede their lands to European colonists](#). The Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky acknowledges the sovereignty and the traditional territories of these tribal nations and the history of dispossession that has resulted in the commonwealth currently having no federally recognized tribes within our border.

Geographically, Kentucky is part of the “Upper South.” Before the Civil War, public opinion was divided regarding slavery, which was rare in some parts of the commonwealth while quite common in others. Illustrative of this divided mindset, both U.S. President Abraham Lincoln and President Jefferson Davis, of the Confederacy, were born in Kentucky. Kentucky officially declared its neutrality, as a border state, at the beginning of the war, although by 1862 it was almost completely in Union control. [Kentuckians fought on both sides of the war: some 35,000 served in the Confederacy, while approximately 125,000—including approximately 24,000 black troops—served in the Union army.](#) Some church congregations within our region split over the issue of slavery, and pastors were removed from their calls in both direction—some for being pro-slavery, and others for being abolitionist.

Slavery was an integral part of our region’s pre-war economy, with enslaved people making up 20 to 25% of the population before the Civil War. The city of Louisville was a major point in the slave trade, with enslaved adults and children being led from the docks on the Ohio River to the holding pens of the slave auction at 2nd and Main Streets—just steps from what is now the Presbyterian Center.

After the war, the villages, towns, and cities of our presbytery were filled with racially segregated businesses, government centers, schools, parks, churches, and social and financial services. Even after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, discrimination and injustice against Blacks continued in many forms, including through the practice of redlining, the systematic refusal to provide mortgages in communities primarily occupied by people of color.

We acknowledge a troubling history with other minority groups as well. On August 6, 1855—known as [“Bloody Monday”](#)—anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic Protestant mobs, under the banner of the American Party (the “Know-Nothings”) attacked Irish and German Catholic residents in Louisville. Estimates of the death toll vary widely, from 20 to over 100 immigrants, with many more severely wounded, while more than 100 immigrant-owned businesses and homes were burned or otherwise destroyed. Similar antipathy toward religious, racial/ethnic, and other minoritized people has been an undeniable aspect of our history. Harassment, violence, and discrimination against members of the LGBTQIA community persists and, in some cases, is commonplace. There is no statewide antidiscrimination policy and [only 23 municipalities within the commonwealth](#) have adopted legislation prohibiting discrimination in employment and access to housing, commercial facilities, and public accommodations and services. Those laws protect only about 31% of the commonwealth’s population. In accordance with current federal civil rights protections, a same-sex couple in Kentucky may get married, but throughout most of the state, they could still be evicted from their home for doing so.

This problematic context is not unique to our geographical region, nor is it solely historical. The effects of the region’s history of enslavement, segregation, and racial, sexual, and other forms of discrimination continue to be felt and seen today. White supremacy and white nationalism continue to plague our present, and while certainly not unique to our region, systemic racism, homophobia, and xenophobia continue to mar our private and public institutions and structures. Perhaps the most recent widely recognized evidence of this was [the killing of Breonna Taylor by officers of the Louisville Metropolitan Police Department](#), and the subsequent mishandling of that tragedy.

We acknowledge that both our lived experience and this witness to the General Assembly are shaped and informed by these troubling aspects of our context. However, as people of hope, we

are not exclusively defined by them. We also recognize and affirm that they are not determinative of our future.

Our Witness of Lament & Hope

The theme of this General Assembly is “From Lament to Hope.” In mid-2021, the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky created space during a regular presbytery meeting for members to reflect on our own experience of recent times—as individuals and as the church. Participants from the most rural to the most urban parts of our presbytery were asked to reflect upon and offer witness to two questions: “What do we lament?” and “Where do we find hope?”

The most common lament shared was the loss of life as a result of the pandemic. We mourn the deaths of those we knew and loved personally, and those known and loved by others, and we lament that the death toll continues to rise.

We also lament how the pandemic has affected our communities of faith in other ways, including:

- The loss of gathering in person to worship and participate in the sacraments
- The loss of much of our capacity to provide spiritual nurture and development
- The inability to provide in-person pastoral and congregational care and support in times of loss, sickness, and death, whether caused by the pandemic or otherwise
- The inaccessibility of sharing in the joyful fellowship of life together, or even simple physical human touch, as God’s people

Each of these laments of life within the church has parallels in our other family and societal settings as well. The loss of being able to gather together for major milestones in our homes, our schools, our workplaces, and other settings that, along with the church, would otherwise have helped us to emotionally navigate such a crisis. This situation has been worsened by the emotional rollercoaster of repeatedly being heartened as COVID infection rates decline, only to have that hope torn away with the discovery of a new variant and infection rates skyrocketing again.

In the midst of the losses caused by the pandemic, the members of our presbytery also lament that some long-standing problems with governmental policies and structures were made even worse during recent times. Immigration policies which have long been inadequate, overly complicated, and unjust, were made even more frustrating, exclusionary, and morally intolerable. Public support systems for those experiencing poverty were weakened. Both before and during the pandemic, public policies that protected the environment were drastically rolled back or eliminated. The scientific reality of climate change has been denied by many, and national goals for reducing human-based climate change were tossed out.

Within our own geographical context, we lament the devastation caused by the tornadoes, unprecedented in both number and severity, that damaged parts of Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky, including parts of our presbytery, in December of 2021, sure evidence of the climate change we are experiencing. In our lament for the lives, homes, and other property that were lost or

irreparably harmed, we recognize that catastrophic weather disasters will continue to increase in the wake of the insufficient climate change policies and action identified earlier.

We greatly lament the racial injustice that has continued to tear apart our nation and our own presbytery. Louisville, the host city of the 225th General Assembly, the home of our presbytery offices, of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and of our denominational offices, is also the home of Breonna Taylor, and other victims of racial injustice. We lament the social divide—in Louisville, throughout our presbytery, and across the country—that led to more than a year of legitimate and justifiable protests and demands for racial justice and equity. As part of this concern, we lament the ongoing attempts to gut voting rights protections and the morally unacceptable gerrymandering designed to disenfranchise people of color.

We also lament the many other issues that have damaged and divided our nation, our communities, our congregations, and our families. We lament that in this time, almost every issue becomes a proxy debate for something else—when, for example, something as simple as receiving a tested, proven, highly effective vaccine to protect against a deadly virus becomes an emotionally charged partisan political argument. We lament this situation, and sometimes, in our most candid moments, even as people of the hope found in Jesus Christ, we wonder if these divisions might be too severe to ever be healed.

And yet, we remain people of hope. In addition and in response to the laments summarized above, we offer witness to numerous signs of hope:

We find hope in the fact that there are now proven preventative vaccines for COVID-19; that every day, more and more people receive them; and that so far, they have proven highly effective at preventing serious illness and death.

We find hope that, while still somewhat limited, we are able to come together in family, social, and church settings again. We are grateful for every in-person handshake, even if we break out our hand sanitizer immediately afterward. We have a renewed appreciation for the image of God in one another, and renewed joy in seeing that image reflected in the faces and lives of others, in person, once again.

The 218th General Assembly (2008) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) adopted [“A New Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century”](#) as a faithful and accurate statement of Christian social teaching and practice, and ethical social policy. We find hope when we see that some of the public policies that had previously been weakened are now beginning to be set right, or at least improved, becoming more consistent with the ethical tenets of compassion, peace, and justice summarized in the creed, and that Christ calls us to embody and enact in our world.

A significant part of our hope is that while much more needs to be done, there has been some progress toward improving racial injustice and inequity within the boundaries of our Presbytery and beyond. Policies within our system of policing and public safety, as well as other oppressive social systems, have begun to change as a result of the public outcry of these past years.

We find hope in the slow but steady movement toward greater social acceptance of our LGBTQIA siblings. Each year additional municipalities of the commonwealth adopt antidiscrimination laws to protect the civil rights of the LGBTQIA community. While Kentucky is the place where [Rowan County](#)

[clerk Kim Davis](#) defied a U.S. federal court order to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples in 2015, all six of the Kentucky couples who were plaintiffs in [Obergefell v. Hodges](#), the Supreme Court case that legalized same-sex marriage nationally, live within the bounds of Mid-Kentucky Presbytery. The two largest cities in our commonwealth, Louisville and Lexington, have each earned a 100+ rating on the Human Rights Campaign's [Municipal Equality Index](#), which measures how well cities are embodying LGBTQ+ inclusion in their laws, policies, and services. More and more of the work-places, neighborhoods, families, churches, civic groups, and social settings within our presbytery are modeling equity and inclusion of LGBTQIA individuals, couples, and families.

We find hope in the innovations that have allowed us to continue being the church during this time, including the technology that has kept us connected. Though we may have initially fumbled with its use, and may still, we recognize that technology in many ways has strengthened us as a church. The crisis we continue to live through has forced us to reconsider the nature of being and doing church, causing us to reexamine our congregational norms, customs, and priorities. We will never be the church that we were before the pandemic, and in some ways, that is a good thing. In some ways, the pandemic has brought out the worst in us, but paradoxically, in other ways it has brought out the best in us.

Mostly, the members of our presbytery offer witness to the hope found in the eternal truth that there is nothing—not disease, not death, not social or political unrest, not economic or environmental turmoil—that can ever separate us from the love of God. God is still with us, caring for us, upholding us, guiding us, comforting us, and inspiring us, as we continue to rediscover what “the church reformed, and always being reformed” means for us in these times.

We do not offer this witness in the sense that we have moved out of our time of lament and are now living in a time of hope. These issues are neither exclusive nor linear. Rather, we continue to hold both together in a simultaneous and tenuous balance, within which we witness not only to the laments and hopes, but to Christ Jesus himself, in whom we place our faith and trust in the midst of these tumultuous times.

Summary

Joining our voices with those of the hosts of previous General Assemblies in Detroit, Portland, St. Louis, and Baltimore, we offer this Witness from the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky as an outcome of our intentional reflection upon lament and hope in our particular time and place. We encourage every community within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to engage in similar reflection upon lament and hope in their own way, and in their own particular context. In doing so, we encourage Presbyterians to utilize the significant and important body of social witness policy adopted by previous General Assemblies as a guide. May the combined written, video, musical, and liturgical elements of this report be a helpful resource for the collective witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to the laments and hopes of our time.

Resources:

- Hymn, “Come Bear Witness,” composed by members of the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky as part of this *Witness of Lament and Hope*. Music score is available online:

[Come Bear Witness SATB - Score 2.pdf](#)

Come Bear Witness Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky, 2022

This song of witness is inspired by Kentucky folk music, as well as spirituals and protest songs. A leader may sing/act alternate words for "bear witness" as the song is repeated, adapting it for a variety of contexts in worship and beyond. At the heart of the song is a deep silence—a space for listening to God, hearing the prayers of people who are oppressed, opening our hearts in confusion and lament, and joining the intercession of the Spirit in sighs too deep for words.

- Video recording of members of the Presbytery of Mid-Kentucky playing & singing “Come Bear Witness.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wc-rjdfdpBs>

*“You will be my witnesses
in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”*
— Acts 1:8

A witness participates fully
in the present reality of human experience,
while also giving testimony to the larger reality
of abundant life in Christ.

