



## SYNOD OF THE MID-ATLANTIC (PCUSA)

### 257th Stated Meeting – Assembly Highlights

*March 9–10, 2026 | Richmond, Virginia*

## Theme: “Dismantling Barriers, Cultivating Opportunities”



### A Gathering Rooted in Faith, Purpose, and Possibility

The 257th Stated Meeting of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic brought together commissioners, corresponding members, guests, and leaders from across the Synod for two meaningful days of worship, reflection, learning, and action in Richmond, Virginia.

From the very beginning, the tone was clear: this would be more than a business meeting. It would be a time to gather in faith, confront hard truths, celebrate important milestones, and consider together what faithful leadership looks like in this season of the church’s life. The Assembly was convened by Moderator **Leah Epps**, with a Land Acknowledgement offered by Vice Moderator **Debbie Reese**, grounding the gathering in respect and remembrance.



Morning worship, led by **Rev. Bill Davis** of the Presbyterian Foundation, opened the Assembly with prayer, Communion, and a thoughtful message that helped center the room for the work ahead. Music was provided by Dr. Tony McNeil



A recorded message from Co-Moderator **Cece Armstrong**, who was unable to attend in person, reminded the Assembly of the larger work and witness of the church beyond this gathering. With a quorum declared and 12 presbyteries represented, the Synod officially moved into its work, balancing inspiration with the practical responsibilities of governance. The Assembly was structured in two parts: plenary sessions open to all participants, and business sessions focused on the formal work of the Synod. That format created space both for big-picture vision and for the careful work of decision-making.

### **A Powerful Start: Plenary Sessions That Challenged and Inspired**

One of the strongest threads throughout the Assembly was the depth and power of the plenary sessions.



Rev. Dr. **Frances Taylor Gench** opened the plenary experience with a memorable Bible study on *Matthew 15:21–28*, focusing on the story of the Canaanite woman. Her teaching invited participants into a deeper reading of the text and challenged the Assembly to think about courage, advocacy, and what it means to push past barriers in pursuit of justice and healing. It was the kind of teaching that stayed in the room long after the session ended.

Pastor **David Black** of First Presbyterian Church of Chicago followed with a compelling plenary on the church's public witness in times of social and political upheaval. Drawing on both history and lived experience, he reflected on the responsibility of the church to speak and act faithfully in the face of injustice. His message connected the church's historic role in resisting oppression with the present-day call to moral courage and public engagement.



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**This Assembly was more than a meeting—it was a reminder that faithful leadership requires both courage and community.**

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### **Looking Honestly at the Present, Imagining Faithfully Toward the Future**



Rev. **Larissa Kwong Abazia** of NEXT Church led another standout plenary session, guiding the Assembly through a thoughtful and challenging conversation about how the church engages its neighbors and responds to a changing world. Her presentation encouraged participants to consider the Synod's place in the broader community and to reflect honestly on the systems that shape church life.

The session included discussion of the many ways racism can show up in personal, institutional, and structural forms, along with an invitation to move beyond awareness into faithful response. Participants were encouraged to speak up, examine themselves and their systems, ask hard questions, and show up in solidarity. It was a session that aligned deeply with the Assembly's theme and offered practical spiritual direction for the work ahead.

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### **A Season of Leadership and Forward Movement**

The Assembly also marked an important chapter in the Synod's leadership story.

In her first Assembly report as **Synod Executive and Stated Clerk**, **Rev. Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins** offered a hopeful and practical overview of her first six months in the role. Since beginning in September 2025, her work has focused on building stronger relationships across the Synod's fourteen presbyteries, improving internal systems, supporting collaboration, and



helping the Synod become an even more resourceful, connected, and mission-minded body. Her report reflected both strong administrative leadership and a clear commitment to presence, partnership, and long-term sustainability.

Highlights from the report included:

- Visits with multiple presbyteries and leadership teams
- Redesigned commissioner orientation and training materials
- Continued leadership transition work and administrative process review
- Increased Synod presence in denominational leadership spaces
- Ongoing conversations around financial sustainability and future planning

The Assembly also received important updates that reflect thoughtful stewardship and strategic progress. The Synod office has been relocated to **Union Presbyterian Theological Seminary**, creating secure office space while reducing annual expenses. Administrative and financial protocols continue to be reviewed and strengthened, and commissioner preparation remains a high priority heading into the year ahead.

Those assembled had the opportunity to enjoy Dr. Flo's "[Out and About in the Synod](#)" Video. Click on it to enjoy as well.

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### **A Well-Deserved Recognition**

The Assembly also took time to honor **Rev. Jan Edmiston**, former Executive Presbyter for Charlotte Presbytery, in recognition of her service and retirement. It was a meaningful moment of gratitude and celebration—one that reminded everyone in the room of the lasting impact faithful leaders have on the church across generations.



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**The Synod's work is not only about managing today—it is also about preparing faithfully for tomorrow.**

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## Investing in Ministry, Innovation, and the Future of the Church

The business of the Assembly made one thing clear: the Synod continues to invest in ministry, leadership, and new possibilities.

One of the most encouraging highlights was the approval of **\$56,460 in grants and scholarships** through the Grants Committee. Even though the committee was unable to meet with a quorum between Assemblies, the Synod still moved forward to support students, congregations, and presbyteries through scholarships, small church grants, and presbytery initiatives. The Assembly approved support for scholarship recipients, congregational ministries, and mission-focused local efforts—demonstrating a strong commitment to nurturing both present ministry and future leadership.

The **Jubilee Fund Committee** also awarded **\$10,000 in grants**, including support for **Freedom East PC** in Coastal Carolina and leadership development in Western North Carolina. Together, these actions reflect a Synod that is intentionally directing resources toward vitality, service, and community impact.



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## Innovation and Emerging Work

The **Emerging Ideas Committee** shared its continued passion for supporting innovation, healthy risk-taking, and new possibilities across the Synod. The committee described itself as a group committed to exploring beyond traditional structures and encouraging dreamers throughout the church. Its current partnership with **NEXT Church** is one example of that commitment in action.

The **Next Generation Initiative (NGI)** also reported meaningful progress in its work to support historically Black congregations and ministries within the PC(USA). The committee highlighted its ongoing focus on congregational vitality, leadership, communication, and strategic planning, along with a significant restructuring of its work into two major areas:

- **African American Church Ministry Revitalization**
- **Healing, Repair, and Reparations for Historical Harm**

These reports underscored that the Synod is not only responding to current needs, but also building frameworks for deeper healing and long-term transformation.

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### **Important Business Actions and Helpful Updates**

The Assembly also completed important business, including:

- Approval of the **Omnibus Motion** with amendments
- Approval of updated language in **Personnel Policies** and **Standing Rules**
- Approval of a **\$6,500 increase to the 2026 travel expense line item**
- Approval of nominations for several Synod committees and designated roles

Participants also received encouraging updates from **Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center** and the **Presbyterian Board of Pensions**, including upcoming accessibility improvements, new support for dependent child coverage, and a developing childcare assistance grant program for lower-paid pastors.

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### **A Powerful Closing and a New Chapter**

The Assembly concluded with closing worship and the **installation of Rev. Dr. Flo Barbee-Watkins as Synod Executive and Stated Clerk**, marking a significant and celebratory moment in the life of the Synod.



The closing message, delivered by **Rev. Tawnya Denise Anderson**, was described as “fiery, powerful, and moving,” drawing once again from the story of the Canaanite woman and bringing the Assembly full circle. It was a fitting conclusion to an Assembly that consistently invited the Synod to lead with courage, honesty, and faith.



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### **Closing Reflection**

The 257th Stated Meeting of the Synod of the Mid-Atlantic was not simply a gathering to conduct business. It was a time of worship, challenge, celebration, discernment, and recommitment.

It reminded all who attended that the church is still being called to do brave work: to dismantle barriers, cultivate opportunity, invest in ministry, and show up faithfully for the communities God has called us to serve.