

## **Post-GA commentary from Rev. Laura M. Cheifetz, Co-Chair, Special Committee on Per Capita and Financial Sustainability**

This can also be found HERE:

<https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1546320576129679361.html>

This is a story about integrity.  
Non-Presbyterians can skip this.

Some of you made mistakes in your dealings with me, my co-moderator, and the Special Committee.

That was stupid. Here is why.

You are talking with a biracial woman of color who grew up in predominantly white areas as a person of color. I had to build my own racial and ethnic identity with very little guidance (my mother once apologized about that). I had to read voraciously, reach out to communities, consume media, build relationships.

I am someone who has spent at least 23 years of my life (my education, my work, my social circles) in such diverse groups of people of color that I am unable to rely upon stereotypes. I have lived with, worked with, learned with, socialized with, am family with people of color. "People of color" does not mean just Black people. I'm talking about Indigenous, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Latinx/Hispanic, and Black people. But it is not just diversity going for me. The deepest relationships I have with people of color are with those who have an explicitly antiracist lens and formation. We are not just friendly. We are IN THE WORK even when I'm not getting paid for it. Most of my work has been in diverse workplaces, or for communities of color, very explicitly. I have done this work and lived this sort of life in the West, Chicago, New York City, the Deep South, the Bible Belt, and the Mid South. Not only are my circles not allowing me to get away with very much, I have been doing my own interpersonal work and my internal work, as well as educating myself through books and other media, conversations, and in accountable relationships for 23 years (not including the years in high school I spent educating myself about being Japanese American and Jewish).

I was raised in, educated by, formed by, worshipped in, and socialized by white institutions with white people. I know white people. They are my family. They are my employers. They are my colleagues.

In addition, I am married to Jessica Vazquez Torres, a woman of color, an immigrant, who has been doing antiracism work since the 1990s. We first crossed paths in 2001 at the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Intolerance, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance, attending the same small planning meetings, before we met officially in 2004. She has been doing antiracism work, brilliantly so, for decades.

I am not stupid about race.

I am not stupid about systems. I got into sociology for my undergraduate and was mentored to go into a PhD program (I knew I shouldn't – I'm so proud of myself) because I think in systems terms. I have an MBA. I got my MDiv at McCormick during (one of its) heyday(s). I have been a program director, worked in theological education, handled HR and budgeting, and overseen staff for most of my career.

I am not stupid about church in general and this church specifically. By the time I was 30 I had served on an Administrative Commission for a Synod to oversee a presbytery. I have been around the national church for 23 years. I have been on a first name basis with at least 5 heads of communion of two different denominations. I have served on advisory committees. I have written resources. I have been an intern for what was the predecessor's predecessor of Presbyterian Mission Agency. I have represented the PC(USA) at ecumenical international gatherings. I have worked for Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. I have been on the board of Presbyterian Women. I have written, thought, worked with, and helped lead multiple efforts at the national level since I was 21 around antiracism, gender justice, the Asian American community, young adults. I was a minor part of the work that became the interreligious stance, a key player in the drafting of the report from a conversation on race that was approved by the 222nd General Assembly, and significant in the work that is Facing Racism: A Vision of the Community Churchwide Antiracism Policy approved by the same General Assembly. I am a featured speaker and helped the filmmaker with the series "Trouble the Waters," an antiracism series of video resources. I started attending General Assembly in 2000, have been a YAAD, a TSAD, a YAAD advisor, and staff at various General Assemblies since then. I am not new at the church.

I also have been surrounded by mentors who have done their work telling me when I'm being an idiot, when I've gotten it right, and sending my name on for further leadership development opportunities. I know to whom I am obligated, and to which communities I belong. Additionally, I am the daughter of people who have pastored in urban, rural, small town, yoked, suburban, large, people of color and white congregations. They have been interim pastors and called and installed pastors. I learned from them how to sniff out the fakes and I learned how to listen beneath almost everything to get to the anxiety and to the dysfunction in a system. My father has been an extremely effective interim pastor and my mother once told the pastor of a large white church that she refused to be their token Japanese American woman minister. You all think they are nice, but I know they can suss out an idiot a mile away.

I worked with a committee composed of people with extensive experience with financials and church systems over 3.25 years and we came up with a final report. The outcome is actually good, but before the General Assembly even voted on it, I was absolutely disgusted. I have learned from social science that contempt means a relationship will not last, and I'm feeling it right now.

I am not stupid about systems or church.

I will not tell you any specific stories of the absolute idiot that this committee faced. I'm petty, so I remember them in great detail. But I'm going to sit on them because I believe revealing them would be detrimental to the coming work of the church. I, like a stupid idiot, actually love this church. And I might need these stories one day.

But I can tell you this.

In this committee process, it became clear that some of the powers that be who did not enjoy their system being examined, despite the 223rd General Assembly voting that the system be examined. (Like, do these people even Presbyterian??? This is literally how this system works. But they were, in a word, terrified. And they acted like it.)

And it was clear to me that the vast majority of the people we worked with are really good. I mean, GOOD. This rant is not about them.

This rant is about people who abused their power in desperate attempts to get us to change our ultimate conclusions, or derail the work with the General Assembly based something other than the merits of our report. I would have been fine if our recommendations failed on their own merits. But the people who decided to oppose our recommendations did so based on false accusations, assumptions that most Presbyterians are stupid and easily frightened about race, and desperate attempts that charm would prevail over substance.

We did this because we love the church. Our whole committee did this because we love the church.

You threatened us with the fabricated fear of the elimination of Matthew 25 (there are 65 other books in the Bible we use, you know, and it's not like that initiative is going away anytime soon), or that the committee operated out of white supremacy culture. I mean, yes, most white institutions do. But I once halted the work of the committee because some of the language coming out of folks' mouths and out of the mouths of PMA people was classic white supremacy culture. My spouse is literally a consultant on this, you idiots.

A feature of white dominant institutions is misdirection. The efforts to frame this as a conspiracy to eliminate the positions of one or two Black executives were exactly this. These efforts attempted to interrupt the system of discernment we have. Misdirection tries to obfuscate the ways white control remains hidden under such symbolic actions as hiring equipped and able leaders of color.

Members of the special committee never framed or approached our task as the evaluation of black leadership or as the determination of which leader should remain. If anything, we were seeking more equity between the two agencies regardless of who leads them.

Moreover, this presumption is disrespectful to the seven people of color who served on this committee, and to all the people of color who contributed to the data that resulted in our recommendations and report. Worrying about one person losing a job, pitting two Black executives against each other, and insinuating that the people of color in this committee sought to harm leadership of color amounts to fear-mongering and presumes OGA and PMA are in competition, which is a mark of a system formed by racism and white supremacy.

It is also white supremacy culture to presume that leaders of color should be venerated and are above critical assessment and accountability.

I would in fact encourage you to remember that when the precedents to this work that resulted in the recommendation for unification took place, leadership of both agencies was white. If you look at the current layer of upper management below both Black executives, it is 100% white and cisgender (and newly created this year, by the way) at PMA, and mostly white and cis at OGA. The faces do not match the structure. And the structure has never been restructured out of its original white supremacy.

White supremacy culture protects the status quo at all costs. In the case of our committee the protection included using race-baiting, white guilt, “emergency” consultations and conversations where we were talked at with condescension, tone policing – “can you say nicer things”, misdirection – “a person of color might lose their job”, flattery, pleas to “trust the Spirit” and “trust” the existing system and culture to fix itself without accountability to the General Assembly (which is literally how we Presbyterian), and fear. This is ironic, considering we are a church that is Reformed and always being Reformed, a group of people who say we worship the Risen Lord, a savior who was resurrected from the dead. What have we to fear? Not even death itself. Surely we can handle some restructuring.

I am really disgusted and disappointed by the efforts of our colleagues. And I’m proud of the Assembly for not falling for it.

FIN