

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL WITNESS POLICY (ACSWP)

Agency Summary from General Assembly 2014 to General Assembly 2016

1. *Assigned Responsibilities: Strengthening Presbyterian Social Witness*

Social witness is part of what it means for the church to be “salt” and “light” in the world today. Coming from Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:13–14, the images of Salt & Light also give name to the ACSWP on-line newsletter. They undergird the committee’s faithfulness to its mission statement:

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) serves the prophetic calling of the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) by providing the General Assembly with careful studies of pressing moral challenges, media for discussion and discernment of Christian responsibilities, and policy recommendations for faithful action.

This brief narrative summarizes the committee’s responsibilities, its procedures and personnel, its accomplishments and activities. [The Committee’s minutes for the two years are also submitted to the Assembly and are reviewed by designated members of the Social Justice Committee.]

The term, social witness, is a shorthand way to combine evangelism and social justice. Witness is bigger than advocacy, but it has the moral purpose of pointing to God’s intention for some part of the world, and often drawing attention to people in need or who are suffering. The key point of the mission statement is that everybody has a conscience where the Holy Spirit speaks, what John Calvin called, the “inner forum.” Yet the sense of moral concern is not just our individual “social righteousness,” to use the name of one of the six “Great Ends” of the church. The Confession of 1967 makes clear that just as individuals and congregations have prophetic responsibilities, so does the whole church, to demonstrate the “kingdom of God” to the world. As expressed notably by Martin Luther King Jr., the church is to be a “moral conscience” to the nation.

Jesus asks whether his disciples can discern “the signs of the times” of their particular time and place. The work of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) is to help the church discern what it means to proclaim and embody the Gospel in relation to contemporary society. In this work, the ACSWP and its task forces are directed to draw upon a wealth of resources:

- the voices of the biblical text;
- the wisdom of theological discourse;
- the guidance of the Reformed confessions;
- the tradition of past policy statements;
- the insights of sociopolitical disciplines;
- the advice of members and all governing bodies of the church;
- the insights of people who are poor, victims of existing policies, and those who have not had a voice in councils of the church; and
- the counsel of ecumenical partners. (*Minutes*, 1993, Part I, p. 769).

Social witness can occur at many different points: in a church session, in a presbytery, in an advocacy group, in the participation of Christians in mission, in a meeting of the ecumenical church, in an individual Christian's brave refusal to "go along" with injustice. At this General Assembly, one of the study teams is bringing in a handbook for pastoral and educational treatment of "end-of-life" issues—this is a new model for helping support Christian conscience on a very personal level, but with it is a brief statement of the kind of public and corporate policies needed to give patients and their families the space and information they need.

For Presbyterians, decisions about the church's social witness are made by persons elected to serve in mid councils (session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly). As councils of the church meet, the elected persons are commissioned "... not simply to reflect the will of the people, but rather to seek together to find and represent the will of Christ" (*Book of Order*, F-3.0204). The advisory committee's structure and function go back to 1936 when "consecrated" and justice-oriented persons from the Boards of Christian Education and National Missions were elected to a Social Education and Action Committee.

In providing service and resources to meet the needs of congregations, mid councils, and the General Assembly, ACSWP members find guidance in the mission statement quoted above. Theologically grounded ethical reflection is part of the salt and light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The ACSWP engages with the "grassroots" in assisting the General Assembly to discern what it means to proclaim and embody the Gospel in a world that remains too grim for too many. Experience counts. At the same time, the committee's membership contains persons with expertise in theology, social ethics, and various other disciplines, most of whom hold advanced degrees. And on a matter like that "end-of-life" study, the committee called on Presbyterian doctors, a nurse, a hospice corporation executive, and several folks who wear multiple hats. All volunteers, we think they did a great job.

Making a personal social witness begins with very individual ways of growing and developing as a Christian—prayerfully studying the Scriptures, being inspired by Jesus, the prophets, and courageous stands of the church, gaining insight from past ethical witness, connecting one's faith with others in the Christian community, and then being faithful in the world beyond the church. The ACSWP seeks to be a partner in the ministry of reconciliation, for "each member [who] is the church in the world ..." (*Book of Confessions*, The Confession of 1967, 9.38).

The churchwide work of the ACSWP is based on ethical guidance from the Scriptures, the *Book of Confessions*, and the *Book of Order*. The 1993 General Assembly policy statement, *Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness* (OGA-93-019), provides extensive documentation of key biblical passages and is a useful document in congregational interpretation of the ACSWP and its mission.

All of those biblical texts have a common theme. The Gospel says that to confess Jesus Christ as Lord is to believe that God can and has overcome the powers of sin in the world. Christians do not work alone, but join that Christ Jesus who is already at work in our world. John Calvin taught that social concern, expressed by action on behalf of our neighbors, is a central part of the faith. Our historic confessions, the work of theologians, and the actions of 220 General Assemblies

have reaffirmed that message. Our faithfulness as Reformed Christians is to be embodied in love and justice.

a. *New Developments*

The traditional way of transmitting the church's social witness was print. In addition to the *Minutes* of the General Assembly, since 1908 there were print journals that provided analysis and "how to" for congregations and individuals, agencies and councils of the church. ACSWP has migrated partly to the online world where many of our members live, as do many others we have not yet reached. We will say a word about our online journal and also point to two projects where we also tried different approaches.

In 2011, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy launched an internet justice journal, with the support of the Compassion, Peace and Justice ministries area and the larger General Assembly Mission Council, now Presbyterian Mission Agency. The new journal, *Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice*, was designed to strengthen the social witness of the whole church and to be an open forum on areas where new witness is needed. The url (internet address) for the journal is <http://justiceunbound.org/>; the name, "unbound," refers not only to the lack of binding, but to Jesus' words at the resurrection of Lazarus, "unbind him," and to images of prisoners freed. In September 2011, the then General Assembly Mission Council designated the journal to be the successor to *Church & Society* magazine, which itself continued the work of print journals going back to 1908 (*The Amethyst*, *Moral Welfare*, and *Social Progress*). Back issues of all of these journals have been made available through the American Theological Library Association.

A key goal has been to reach twenty- and thirty-something readers, using an intergenerational editorial staff. The current managing editor is the Reverend Ginna Bairby, a recent graduate of Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, Virginia. She follows the Reverend Patrick Heery, who in 2013 moved to become editor of *Presbyterians Today*, the denominational magazine. Recognizing Ginna Bairby's work as a form of ministry, the Presbytery of the James ordained her to serve *Unbound* and also to serve as associate for young adult social witness. She has also served the Education Initiative approved by the 221st General Assembly (2014) and smaller projects within the Compassion, Peace, and Justice ministries unit where ACSWP is located. (ACSWP had been in the Executive Director's Office until 2009.)

While the "metrics" Google provides on readership are very good for a denominational publication, and the contributor list is intentionally diverse and tilted toward younger folks, the committee is considering ways for this vehicle to help us interact more directly with presbyteries and congregations. Certainly there are other methods of general communication and fundraising in the church, but no common space for sharing stories and building allies for social justice and social teaching. We know from sales of print policy booklets—down to about \$2,800 last year (2015) from about \$4,000 in previous years—that accessing the policies is mainly by download (free), but it is also on the individual or congregational basis. We think our church would want that engagement broadened, and the younger demographic of *Unbound* brought more into conversations in their presbyteries and perhaps church-related colleges and universities.

In addition to the internet journal, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy maintains a website and distributes an e-newsletter, “Salt & Light.” *Unbound* links to these and to the various sites of other Compassion, Peace and Justice ministries.

Since the 221st General Assembly (2014) in Detroit, where the committee met briefly, the committee then met August 29–31, 2014, in St. Louis, Missouri, shortly after the death of Michael Brown; November 6–8, 2014, in Berkeley, California; March 15–21, 2015, in Tampa, Florida, and Havana and Matanzas, Cuba; June 14–17, 2015, in Washington, D.C.; November 10–12, 2015, in Elmhurst, Illinois, and (anticipated) April 8–9, 2016, in Louisville Kentucky. In all but the last location, the committee met with representatives of the presbyteries, related organizations, and congregations doing vital forms of social witness.

In St Louis, hosted by the presbytery and the Reverend Anita Hendrix, presbytery leader, the committee visited Ferguson and the site of a civic tragedy that crystallized racial justice concerns. The group also heard from presbytery committees active in racial reconciliation and antiracism work. In Berkeley, California, later that year, the committee heard from advocates and researchers on drug policy and criminal justice, hosted by St. Johns Presbyterian Church in that city.

Meeting in Tampa for a briefing beforehand, and then in Havana and Matanzas, ACSWP served as a study team and visited partners in that country, guided by the Cuba Partners. This was a unique cooperation that also involved World Mission and, of course, built on the strong relationship that has been maintained between the Presbyterian-Reformed Church of Cuba and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

In Washington, D.C., the committee was still focused on Cuba and had the great opportunity to meet with both National Security Council and State Department representatives. It was a very positive sign that both of the pastors from the Cuban church were welcomed in with us! The committee also met in Washington with experts on voting rights and electoral reform from “FairVote,” a nonpartisan group, with James Winkler, general secretary of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and with the Reverend Robert Wilson-Black, a Presbyterian minister who serves as CEO of *Sojourners*, known for its social justice magazine.

In Elmhurst, near Chicago and the offices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the committee was hosted by the First Presbyterian Church of Elmhurst. We met with the Presbyterian chaplain of Elmhurst College (a United Church of Christ school), and with the theological ethics policy director for the ELCA (some also visited the ELCA offices). The committee reviewed papers going to the General Assembly. It also reflected on the varying ecumenical methods of engaging members and congregations in social witness policy development, using contrasts with the Lutherans.

In Louisville, the committee concentrates on reviewing “advice & counsel” memoranda that address social witness related matters going to the General Assembly, consulting with a range of staff and elected leadership.

b. *Procedures and Personnel*

In support of the work of the assembly, the ACSWP is given direct access to the assembly as it meets biennially. Between sessions of the assembly, the ACSWP also assists the Presbyterian

Mission Agency Board (PMAB), the Office of the General Assembly (OGA), and other agencies of the church as their work involves the development and interpretation of social witness policy.

The committee carries out its responsibilities in five major ways. They are the

1. development and recommendation of new social witness and policy for approval by the General Assembly;
2. interpretation and communication of the General Assembly's social witness and policy, both to the church and the world at large;
3. provision of advice and counsel to the entities and mid councils of the church on matters of social witness policy when developments merit social-ethical attention;
4. provision of advice and counsel to the General Assembly when it meets as a governing body (in oral and memoranda form); and
5. monitoring of peace and justice concerns per mandates from the General Assembly.

The ACSWP develops and recommends new social witness policy primarily in response to referrals from the General Assembly (GA) and its entities, and in a manner consistent with the *Manual of the General Assembly*, "On Forming Social Policy." This section is based on the 1993 "Why and How" document cited at the beginning of this narrative. Both the more extensive policies and shorter resolutions require depth of theological reflection, breadth of input, and diversity of participation. In most cases, the presbyteries originating the General Assembly assignments remain connected to the work of the study teams, although teams are more representative and seek to meet in and receive input from people in other parts of the country.

The policy statements, *Risking Peace*, and *Prevention Not Harm* (on drug policy reform), represent different approaches to broadening the dialogue in policy development. In the former case, the policy includes five affirmations developed from sixty-five congregational and presbytery discernment groups that were later tested in thirty-four presbyteries. The committee had hoped for more participating congregations and presbyteries, but this six-year long process did get much good engagement (see that report). On the drug policy reform study, at each of four meetings that study team also held public hearings, partnering with local presbyteries and congregations and bringing in many community resource people. Those sites were Oakland/Richmond, California; Denver, Colorado; Charleston, West Virginia; and El Paso/Ciudad Juarez. While not entirely representative, these sites did bring in considerable diversity in areas of particular drug-related concern.

The committee's Advice and Counsel group carries out the task of providing advice and counsel at the meeting of the General Assembly (GA). This group of elected committee members, together with other staff and resource persons from several Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) and Office of the General Assembly (OGA) entities, advises commissioners in assembly committees and other entities about social policies applicable to issues before the assembly. It may also comment on the need or direction for future social policy. Such analysis and recommendations are provided through "Advice and Counsel Memoranda," by oral testimony by resource people before assembly committees, and informally. The ACSWP chair or a co-

chairperson is a corresponding member to both the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency, with voice but not vote, and can offer advice and counsel in those meetings.

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) consists of twelve members, nine of whom are at-large members elected by the General Assembly from the whole church and three who are Presbyterian Mission Agency Board (PMAB) members confirmed by the assembly. The members are: Christine M. Darden, Hampton, Virginia (co-chair); Jean Demmler, Denver, Colorado; Linda Eastwood, Chicago, Illinois; Rachael Eggebeen, Tucson, Arizona; Marsha Fowler, Altadena, California; Kevin R. Johnson, Detroit, Michigan; Mary C. Jorgenson, Kansas City, Missouri; Eric Mount, Danville, Kentucky; Kathryn Poethig, Watsonville, California; Raymond R. Roberts, Westfield, New Jersey/Richmond, Virginia, (co-chair); Noelle Royer, Seattle, Washington; Steven Webb, Fairfax, Virginia. Staffing for the committee includes Christian T. Iosso, coordinator; Virginia “Ginna” Bairby, managing editor, *Unbound* journal; and Peggy Dahmer, part-time senior administrative assistant.

b. *Accomplishments*

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) members and staff make themselves available for interpretive events and preaching as requested and as time allows. Such events included presentations in presbyteries and congregations and consultations with a number more. Staff represented ACSWP and *Unbound* at the Company of New Pastors meeting in Louisville (October 2015), introducing participants to the committee’s work and the social witness policy of the PC(USA), and led workshops at the Montreat College Conference on the theory and practice of social witness and its role in the church.

As part of the Peace Discernment process, the committee helped the Steering Team convene a team in Louisville in December of 2015 to review responses to the Five Affirmations.

The committee welcomes inquiries through its office in Louisville. All mid councils, churches, and members are encouraged to use the “Presbyterian Social Witness Policy Compilation,” which contains the core of the assemblies’ social policy statements since 1946. It is revised regularly to meet the needs of the church and can be downloaded from the worldwide web at ([http://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll?f=templates\\$fn=default.htm](http://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll?f=templates$fn=default.htm)).

The ACSWP holds a stated meeting following each General Assembly to discern and prioritize its work; periodically between the assemblies, to review progress on papers and projects; and in January before an assembly, to edit and approve final drafts for submission to the assembly. This year the committee has prepared the following reports to strengthen current social witness policies:

- *Abiding Presence: Living Faithfully in End of Life Decisions*: This is a report in the form of a handbook for advance directive planning and bedside decision-making, plus recommendations for congregational use and public policies to support the deliberations and care-giving encouraged.
- *Healing Before Punishment: Why Presbyterians Seek to End the War on Drugs*: In the place of the punitive strategies and violence that have led to mass imprisonment, narco-state corruption, and an underground drug economy, this report advocates a basic shift in how Christians should approach a drug-abundant society and its addictive appetites.

- *Prospects for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine*: The idea of a “two-state solution” continues to reflect the hopes of international treaties, yet the profound and—in the current period—politically insurmountable obstacles to feasibility require approaches that increase human rights for all in the absence of state-level solutions.
- *Trafficking and Forced Labor: Next Steps for Concerned Churches*: Across-border prostitution receives much attention, but there are many other ways that adults and children, men and women, are exploited in a globalized economy also marked by wars, climate related migration, and nations with weakened powers to protect their citizens.
- *New Hopes and Realities in Cuban-American Relations*: Based on overtures from presbyteries with some of the many congregations partnered with Cuban congregations, the assembly’s referral requested the Cuba Partners and ACSWP to draw on the lessons from throughout the prolonged Cold War with Cuba and lift up values needed during the coming period of political and economic change, and in the broader Caribbean context.

Shorter resolutions requested by the General Assembly:

- *Election Protection and Integrity in Campaign Finance: An Update to “Lift Every Voice: Voting Rights and Electoral Reform”*: This update covers impacts of the Supreme Court decisions removing limits on money in campaigns and the many efforts to make voting more difficult, some by states once covered by “pre-clearance review” under the Voting Rights Act, a provision also ended by the Court.
- *City Churches: Convictions, Conversations, and Call to Action*: The 221st General Assembly (2014) referred The Gospel from Detroit, a call for renewing urban mission in Detroit and other cities, to an “urban ministry roundtable,” and requested the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy to prepare resources to strengthen both congregations and their communities. This brief resolution draws on last year’s report and looks toward the next two cities where General Assemblies will be held, following suggestions from urban roundtable members. See: <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/gospel-detroit-renewing-churches-urban-vision/>. (Ethicist: Gloria Albrecht was a primary author.)

The final report of the six-year Peace Discernment process begun by the 2010 General Assembly:

- *Risking Peace in a Violent World: Despite War, Five Peacemaking Affirmations*: The 220th General Assembly (2012) approved a congregational study for discerning new approaches to peacemaking, thirty-two years after *Peacemaking: The Believers’ Calling* created the Peacemaking Program and three-part Peacemaking Offering. Drawing on congregational and individual responses and consultations with seminary and college/university faculty, chaplains, and students, a Steering Team appointed by Peacemaking Program and ACSWP developed the report, *Risking Peace in a Violent World*. The 221st General Assembly (2014) approved sending this out with Five Affirmations for advisory votes by the presbyteries. Of the thirty-four presbyteries responding, more than thirty have approved all five, though with differing levels of support. The vote tallies, revisions, and comments have led to revisions of the five and the *Risking Peace* statement for the 222nd General Assembly (2016), while confirming most of the framework approved by the last assembly.

Note: The title, *Risking Peace in a Violent World*, draws on phrases from the Confession of 1967 and the Brief Statement of Faith. The revisions include references to the Belhar Confession.

One recommendation for study extension:

- *The Precautionary Approach, New Technologies, and Sustainable Development*: The study approved by the 221st General Assembly (2014) addresses the dangers of introducing new biological technologies, chemical agents, and nano-particles and machines into our changing environment. A group of Presbyterian scientists (both academic and corporate), ethicists, and experts in regulation has met to organize the very broad scope of the task and identify key roles for churches to play, given the original overture's request for both an assessment of "the precautionary principle" itself and its application to new technologies in the context of increasing climate change. The team requests additional time to develop ecumenical partnerships familiar with the religion and science dimension and able to increase the public value of its analysis and recommendations. No additional funding is requested, but funds allotted by the assembly for 2015 would be used in 2016.

Resources requested by the General Assembly: In the cases of the Drug Policy Reform Task Force and Resolution for Equal Rights in Israel and Palestine, resources have been posted on the ACSWP website (<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/acswp/>) and in the online journal, *Unbound* (www.justiceUnbound.org) in fulfillment of some of the recommendations.

In preparing this year's General Assembly reports, ACSWP took into consideration the comments and reflections shared by individual Presbyterians and adult education classes, Presbyterian Mission Agency Board (PMAB) program ministry areas, and other bodies within our church.

From 2014, following their approval by the General Assembly, the committee assisted the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) in the publication of the following reports: *Tax Justice: A Christian Response to a New Gilded Age*; *Fairness in Ministerial Compensation*; *The Gospel from Detroit: Renewing a Vision for Urban Mission*; and *Drones, War, and Surveillance*. These resources can be downloaded at <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga/publications/> or <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/resources.htm>.

The ACSWP works collaboratively with the four mission and ministry areas of the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA), other General Assembly agencies, and the Office of the General Assembly (OGA). The ACSWP has liaisons from the Compassion Peace and Justice ministry area, and from the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) and the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns (ACWC). When possible, the committee spends time with local church members, with relevant presbytery committees, and with ecumenical contacts during its stated meetings. ACSWP members and staff have spoken at and distributed policy resources at several presbytery meetings and gave workshops at the Ecumenical Advocacy Days co-sponsored by the Office of Public Witness in Washington, D.C.

As invited, the committee assists in programming an annual gathering of the Social Ethics Network (SEN) (formerly known as the Theological Educators for Presbyterian Social Witness (TEPSW)). This group is composed primarily of Christian ethicists currently or formerly serving in seminaries and other educational institutions related to and/or in covenant relationship with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since the last General Assembly, the committee assisted with two

such gatherings. In the fall of 2014, the SEN met at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and in the fall of 2015 at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. The ACSWP also hosts a reception for Presbyterians at the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics. The January 2015 meeting was held in Denver; and the January 2016 meeting in Toronto, Canada, where the SEN also met with representatives of the Presbyterian Church of Canada.

Other responses by the committee to General Assembly (GA) assignments may be found in the responses to referrals section of the reports to the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

<https://www.pc-biz.org/#/committee/573/business>