

## DRAFT

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## Item \_\_\_ - \_\_\_

### *Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy Agency Summary*

#### 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.

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), as a servant of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), develops, interprets, and monitors policies that encourage and challenge the Church and society to reflect and act in faithful response to God’s call to do justice. (Mission Statement, approved October 2002 in El Paso, Texas)

In every age, the Spirit calls on the church to discern afresh God’s redemptive purpose in our particular time and place in history. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP)’s work is to discern what it means to proclaim and embody the Gospel in relation to contemporary society. In this work, the ACSWP and its task forces draw upon a great 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.

For Presbyterians, however, decisions about the church’s social witness are made by persons elected to serve in governing bodies (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*, G-4.0301d). 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, middle governing bodies, 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. At the same time, the committee’s membership contains persons with expertise in theology, social ethics, and various other disciplines, approximately half of whom hold Ph.D.s.

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...” (*The 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 the Lord Jesus Christ who is already at work in our world. John Calvin said 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 217 General Assemblies have reaffirmed that message. Our faithfulness as Reformed Christians means action.

### *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 General Assembly Council (GAC), 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. rendering of advice and counsel to the entities and governing bodies of the church on matters of social witness policy throughout the year;
4. rendering of advice and counsel to the General Assembly when it meets as a governing body; and
5. monitoring peace and justice concerns per mandates from the General Assembly.

The ACSWP develops and recommends new social witness and policies primarily in response to referrals from the General Assembly and its entities, and in a manner consistent with the *Manual of the General Assembly*, “On Forming Social Policy.” This policy development requires depth of theological reflection, breadth of input, and diversity of participation. Before a policy statement is approved, extensive consultation is mandated at all stages of development. Thus, the committee’s work is connected to the concerns of Presbyterians gathered in worshiping and serving communities across the land.

The committee’s advice and counsel group carries out the task of providing advice and counsel at the meeting of the General Assembly. This group of elected committee members, together with other staff and resource persons from several General Assembly Council 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. Advice and counsel is provided throughout the meeting, through “Advice and Counsel Memoranda,” by oral testimony before assembly committees, and informally.

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 General Assembly Council members. Members are: Gloria Albrecht, Detroit, Michigan; Donna C. Bradley, Tucson, Arizona; Dianne L. Briscoe (vice-chair), Denver, Colorado; Charles F. Easley Sr., Atlanta, Georgia; B. Gordon Edwards (chair), Stillwater, Oklahoma; Esperanza Guajardo, San Antonio, Texas; Ronald J. Kernaghan, Pasadena, California; Lewis S. Mudge, Berkeley, California; William Saint, Fairfax, Virginia; and Jack M. Terry, Minneapolis, Minnesota. In the fall of 2006, Nile Harper, an at-large member from Fridley, Minnesota, resigned from the committee. The following spring,

Larry I. Palmer, an at-large member from Louisville, Kentucky, resigned from the committee. In the fall of 2007, the Moderator of the 217th General Assembly (2006) appointed Marsha Fowler, Altadena, California, and John C. Knapp, Atlanta, Georgia, to fill the positions vacated by Harper and Palmer. Staffing for the committee includes Christian Iosso, coordinator; Belinda M. Curry, associate; and Bonnie M. Hoff, senior administrative assistant.

## 2. Accomplishments

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) members and staff make themselves available for interpretive events as requested and as time allows. The committee welcomes inquiries through its office in Louisville. All governing bodies, 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 ([www.pcusa.org/acswp](http://www.pcusa.org/acswp)).

The ACSWP meets 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 one new policy statement, an ecumenical statement, and seven resolutions to strengthen current social witness policies.

- Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness
- A Social Creed for the Twenty-First Century
- Costly Lessons of the Iraq War
- From Homelessness to Hope: Constructing Just, Sustainable Communities For All God’s People
- God’s Work in Women’s Hands: Pay Equity and Just Compensation
- Lift Every Voice: Democracy, Voting Rights and Electoral Reform
- Struck Down, But Not Destroyed: From Hurricane Katrina To a More Equitable Future
- The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming
- Resolution on Human Rights in Colombia

In preparation of this year’s major proposed policy statement, the Task Force on “Serious Mental Illness” completed its work in the spring of 2007. This task force developed the proposed new policy and recommendations for the church to work for justice with persons living with mental illness, within both the church and the wider social order. The ACSWP took ownership of the task force’s report, “Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness,” at its summer 2007 meeting. A synod consultation on this report was held in the fall of 2007. Fifteen of the sixteen synods were represented at this event. Most of the synod consultation recommendations were incorporated into the mental illness report.

The committee’s work on updating “The Nature and Value of Human Life,” a 1981 study paper developed by the Presbyterian Church in the United States, is progressing forward. At its winter 2008 meeting, the committee discussed holding consultations across the church to obtain a diversity of theological and ethical viewpoints on the complex issues concerning this topic. The committee will submit a report to the 219th General Assembly (2010).

The ACSWP continues to explore ways to use the new web technologies to enhance the communal conversation and consensus-building that strengthens our shared social witness.

In 2006, with a preface by the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, the ACSWP published and sent to all congregations the resolution against torture entitled, *Human Rights in a Time of Terrorism* (PDS 68-600-06-002). In addition, the committee assisted the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) in the publication of four other reports: the policy statement on *Living into the Body of Christ: Towards Full Inclusion of People with Disabilities* (PDS OGA-06-091), *A Reformed Understanding of Usury for the Twenty-First Century* (PDS OGA-06-088), *A Report on Economic Security for Older Adult* (PDS OGA-06-089), and *a Resolution on Just Globalization: Justice, Ownership, and Accountability* (PDS OGA-06-090). These resources can be downloaded at <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications> or <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/>.

ACSWP sponsored globalization consultations in Illinois in May 2007 and New York in January 2008. These will contribute to the development of study material with diverse viewpoints on globalization to go with the 2006 policy

and with our study, as members of WARC, of the ACCRA Confession. The committee also convened a consultation on the Iraq War and Muslim-Christian peacemaking work at Stony Point in September of 2007.

The committee has developed a DVD to promote the new ecumenical “social creed” for the 21st Century—an action item before this General Assembly and other resources, including a prayer book, scholarly essays, and an interpretive booklet.

The ACSWP works collaboratively with the six Mission and Ministry areas of the General Assembly Council (GAC), other entities of the GAC, and the Office of the General Assembly (OGA). ACSWP has liaisons from the Peace and Justice 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, relevant presbytery committees, and with ecumenical members during its meetings. Such opportunities occurred in 2006 and 2007. One of the committee’s meetings was held at the Presbyterian UN Office, for example, and included both hearing on human rights and genocide, and a reception later with thirty local pastors and church members. In addition, the committee seeks creative ways to support the ministries of the Presbyterian theological institutions and colleges. Last year, the committee made available 100 complimentary copies of the *Resolution on Just Globalization* to Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS) in Decatur, Georgia, to distribute to the 2007 CTS Colloquium participants. Issues concerning the ecological crisis were the focus of this event.

The committee assists in organizing an annual gathering of 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 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Since the last General Assembly, the committee assisted with two such gatherings. In the fall of 2006, the TEPSW met at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey. The fall 2007 meeting was held on the campus of Union Theological Seminary & Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia. The location of the 2008 meeting will be the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.

ACSWP will focus on emerging social witness issues and future priorities at its summer meeting. Other responses by the committee to General Assembly work may be found in the responses to referrals report.