

Report B.001
Justice Mission Committee
General Assembly Council
April 24, 2008

The Justice Mission Committee met on Thursday, April 24, 2008 in Louisville, KY and forwards the following to the General Assembly Council:

I. Consent Agenda

1. Approve the following comments to Overtures:

Overture 06 (Item B.105):

Several of our partner Christian and interfaith organizations and institutions in the Middle East have produced statements, resources and other materials that have been helpful in their own efforts to promote mutual understanding and to build healthy and cooperative relations between Christians and other faith communities in the Middle East. Such materials could be exceedingly helpful to our own congregations and members in reaching out in friendship to Jewish and Muslim neighbors, as they model both intentionality and commitment to build communities that seek justice and pursue peace.

The Office for the Middle East (World Mission) works collaboratively with various other GAC offices, along with constituency entities such as Mission Networks (for Egypt, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, etc.) and task groups to raise awareness of the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East, paying particular attention to the crisis of dwindling numbers of Christians and the increasing difficulties our partner churches are facing, due to a variety of causes. It is noteworthy that this alarming reality pervades the consciousness of our partners in the region as a primary challenge not only for themselves but also for many of their non-Christian neighbors, and certainly for the world's Christian community.

As one example of our church's response to this crisis, this office – in cooperation with colleagues offices of the General Assembly Council – worked closely with the Israel/Palestine Network for the production of the widely-circulated illustrated booklet, *The Cradle of Our Faith: The Enduring Witness of the Christians of the Middle East*. Now in its second printing, this resource was produced in partial response to an action overwhelmingly passed by the 217th General Assembly (2007) inviting all of our 11,000 congregations to join in “a Week of Prayer and Witness with Christians in the Middle East” during the season between Easter and Pentecost 2007. Many congregations did.

The Middle East Office, together with others, plans to continue to lift up and facilitate awareness of this issue through all available means (e.g., the church's website, mission to the USA opportunities, missionary itineration, etc.), and within the limitations of staff time and financial resources.

Overture 012 (Item B.106):

This overture builds on earlier actions of the General Assembly, and identifies work already being done by the church to build relations of understanding, respect, and mutual witness between Presbyterians and Muslims in the United States and other areas of the world. Most of the documents regarding interfaith relations cited in the overture are available for reference at <http://www.pcusa.org/interfaith/tools.htm>.

The overture does not detail the many efforts underway to build relations. It is not possible to include all that is being done internationally. Note work such as that of Presbyterian-founded institutions, including the Christian Study Center, Rawalpindi, Pakistan; the Henry Martyn Institute, Hyderabad, India, or the Institute for the Study of Religion and Culture at Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Presbyterians participate in and support activities of Middle Eastern partners building a culture of understanding and reconciliation between Christians and Muslims: the Arab Group on Christian-Muslim Relations, the Forum for Development, Culture and Dialogue, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services Department of Communications and Forum for Intercultural Dialogue (Egypt), the Middle East Council of Churches' Christian-Muslim Program, and the Near East School of Theology Annual Interfaith Lecture Series (Lebanon). The PC (USA) contributes toward the appointment of an Islamic professor at NEST.

Presbyterians support the work of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa and the Interfaith Resource and Research Center of Ghana. Through the Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, secular, Muslim, and Christian universities are co-sponsoring a new approach in doctoral education, in which sincere believers of Islam and Christianity study their religions together, with professors from three liberties and lives of Christians have been endangered.

In the U.S., the Presbyterian Church (USA) has established relationships with 7 national Muslim organizations (see <http://www.universities teaching in pairs>). Presbyterians are also engaged with church partners in interfaith efforts for peace and justice in conflict situations such as the work of the United Church of Christ of the Philippines in Mindanao, and in addressing inter-religious situations in which the religious pcusa.org/interfaith/initiative.htm), and is engaged in efforts of dialogue, social policy advocacy and education in particular with the Islamic Society of North America, the Muslim Public Affairs Council and the mosques affiliated with Imam Warith Deen Mohammed.

In regard to the proposed study, the Offices of Interfaith Relations and Theology and Worship advise that this work will require at least two small consultations with Muslim colleagues, and call on the gifts of a small group of Presbyterians from a variety of perspectives and pursuits in the church. Such a study will have financial implications that have been separately identified, and will require funds development. Such a study may require time and commitment beyond the 219th General Assembly in 2010.

Overture 024 and 079 (Item B.107):

The General Assembly Council agrees with the concerns addressed in these overtures, and reaffirms the intention of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) policy statement "Restoring Creation for Ecology and Justice" that called for a dual focused strategy that would embody the church's commitment to caring for God's creation. This strategy recommended that the GAC develop new creative ministry initiatives for healing the environment and called upon the GAC to incorporate caring for God's creation into existing GAC ministries.

Recognizing that God's good creation is suffering from the impact of environmental degradation, climate change and significant loss of bio-diversity, the

General Assembly Council has determined that the 2009 and 2010 Mission Work Plan and budget includes significant emphasis, support and staffing for caring for God's creation as a vital part of the mission of the church.

This revitalized ministry will focus on equipping the whole church to care for creation and will serve as an entry point for church members, congregations and middle governing bodies seeking advice, resources and networking to nurture their faith and witness on behalf of God's creation. It will work with a re-energized network of Stewardship of Creation Enablers to foster networking, communication of effective ideas for congregational practices, and leadership development.

In addition, it will coordinate environmental ministries already underway in the General Assembly Council, including but not limited to environmental work being done by: the Hunger Program, Presbyterian World Mission area coordinators, Racial Justice ministries, Presbyterian Women, Peacemaking, the Presbyterian United Nations Office, Washington Office, Self Development of People, the Office of Theology, Worship and Education, and MRTI.

A staff project team will develop and implement a focused strategy to infuse environmental stewardship into "theological work, evangelism, education, justice and peacemaking, worship and liturgy, public witness, global mission and congregational service and action at the local community level" (1990 policy).

The General Assembly Council advises that the General Assembly prayerfully support this commitment to environmental stewardship and encourages the whole church to engage in ministry that heals and restores God's creation.

Overture 26 (Item B.108)

The General Assembly Council affirms the concern shown by the Presbytery of Chicago for the people of Israel and Palestine. The overture brings together two significant themes within General Assembly statements on Israel and Palestine.

General Assemblies have consistently affirmed the right of Israel to exist as a sovereign state within secure, internationally recognized borders and the right of the Palestinians to self-determination, including the right to the establishment of a neighboring independent, sovereign state, toward the end of establishing a just and durable peace in the region.

General Assemblies have also consistently expressed concern for the human rights of Palestinians and Israelis, affirming the role of the United Nations and international community as well as international documents and United Nations declarations, conventions, and resolutions in achieving that just peace.

In response to referral item 11-01 recommendation #5 by the 217th General Assembly (2006), the General Assembly Council is forwarding to the 218th General Assembly (2008), a report that includes a recommendation for a study that would address matters raised by this overture.

Overture 50 (Item B.110)

The action that the overture recommends to the Assembly is both consistent with General Assembly policy, and part of a stream of significant Christian responses to the invitation made in A Common Word.

In adopting the Study on Islam in 1987, the 199th General Assembly urged “the dissemination and use by local congregations and other groups of . . . materials in Islam and interfaith relations, which present a wide theological approach and viewpoint concerning Christian and Muslim relations” and recommended “coordinating the development and distribution of additional resources for study and reflection as they become available.” That Assembly also called on seminaries and church-related colleges and campus ministries to promote programs on Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, and suggested that “Presbyterians . . . take every opportunity to come to know and become friends with their Muslim neighbors” (Minutes of the 199th GA, 31.327). The Office of Interfaith Relations, created in part in response to the recommendations included in this study, has worked consistently since 1988 to provide resource materials and support such efforts.

“A Common Word Between Us and You” is an invitation to such understanding from a remarkably diverse group of Muslims worldwide, including 16 notable Muslim leaders in the United States. In welcoming the document, Stated Clerk Clifton Kilpatrick said, “I urge Presbyterians to read this letter from the Muslim community, to continue to build honest, searching, and respectful relations with Muslims in our local communities and in our nation, and to seek opportunities for common action where compatible means and ends exist.” Responses to it have also been made by a wide variety of Christian leaders and institutions (see <http://www.acommonword.com/index.php?lang=en&page=responses>). The Presbyterian Church (USA) is actively involved in the process of crafting an ecumenical theological response to “A Common Word” through the Interfaith Relations and Faith and Order Commissions of the National Council of Churches of Christ (USA). This response, after appropriate review by the churches, will be issued by the NCCCUSA at its fall meeting in 2008, and will then be available for study along with A Common Word. The Office of Interfaith Relations will ensure that a guide for use of the two documents will also be ready by that time.

Overture 55 (Item B.111)

The General Assembly Council recognizes that abortion is a highly sensitive issue that needs to be approached with prayerful consideration. The General Assembly has acknowledged that within our church there is a wide range of deeply held convictions about the matter. The 204th General Assembly (1992) reflected this diversity of opinion, in its adoption of the report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion.

Clearly there is both agreement and disagreement in our use and interpretation of Scripture. There is also agreement and disagreement on the basic issue of abortion. The committee agreed that there are no biblical texts that speak expressly to the topic of abortion, but that taken in their totality the Holy Scriptures are filled with messages that advocate respect for the woman and child before and after birth. Therefore the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) encourages an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect for a variety of opinions

concerning the issues related to problem pregnancies and abortion. [*Minutes of the 204th General Assembly (1992), p. 367-368, 372-374*]

Consequently, as the policies of the General Assembly regarding abortion and related issues have developed, they do not fit neatly into the frequently used forced-choice between “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” There are several points in the rationale of this overture that need to be clarified to accurately reflect General Assembly Council’s role as it fulfills the directives of this policy. The overture expresses concern that General Assembly Council ministries “*produce material and advocate specifically and diligently only for the “pro-choice” position.*” This concern is not accurate. The 217th General Assembly (2006) affirmed the monitoring report from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), which reviews the implementation of problem pregnancies and abortion policies. General Assembly Council ministries preparing resources on problem pregnancies and abortion strive to reflect a diversity of opinion in the resources that are produced. Resources prepared by ministries of the General Assembly Council cover the range of faithful responses in these difficult situations. Examples include: *Problem Pregnancy: When No Choice is Easy, There's Always a Father - Does the Father Have a Problem, Too?*, *When Pregnancy Involves Loss, When You Need the Wisdom of Solomon – Helping Others Face Problem Pregnancies*, *Life Abundant: Values, Choices and Health Care*, and *Nurturing the Children of God: The Call to Foster Parenting and Adoption*.

One concern raised in the overture is about the role of the Presbyterian Washington Office as it reflects General Assembly policy when legislation about abortion is before Congress or is deliberated upon in the Supreme Court. The Washington Office is mandated to express the policy of the General Assembly, and the General Assembly has been very clear on the issue of abortion legislation which states, “We do not wish to see laws enacted that would attach criminal penalties to those who seek abortions or to appropriately qualified and licensed persons who perform abortions in medically approved facilities.” [*Minutes of the 204th General Assembly (1992), p. 368*]

The overture also questions the Presbyterian Church (USA)’s membership in several organizations that do not, from the overture’s perspective, reflect the comprehensive nature of the denomination’s 1992 statement on abortion. As a matter of clarification, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is not a member of Clergy for Choice and Progressive Religious Partnership, two organizations which were listed in the overture. The PCUSA is a member of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) but does not provide any financial support to this organization. RCRC literature, which cites Presbyterian policy, is in line with the 1992 policy statement. The Religious Coalition appends to all of its documents the following reminder: “Coalition membership does not require or imply conformity to all the actions and initiatives of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.”

The General Assembly Council mission and ministries continue to be guided by the 1992 policy on abortion and problem pregnancies and encourages the church to continue to approach this challenging issue with the atmosphere of “open debate and mutual respect” for a variety of opinions [*Minutes of the 204th General Assembly (1992), p. 374*].

Overture 62 (Item B.112)

The General Assembly Council (GAC) affirms the deep concerns expressed by the Presbytery of Plains and Peaks for victims of human trafficking and is grateful that the presbytery is bringing this serious matter to the Assembly.

In response to previous General Assembly action on this matter, the GAC has created a coordination team made up of staff from across Mission Ministries of the General Assembly Council and from the Office of the General Assembly. This team has worked in the past two years specifically on the issue of sex trafficking and has included staff from Child Advocacy, Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI), Social Welfare Organizations/ PHEWA; the Presbyterian United Nations Office, the Hunger Program, (Compassion, Peace and Justice Ministries), Women's Advocacy (Racial Ethnic and Women's Ministries/ Presbyterian Women), International Health HIV/AIDS Initiative (World Mission Ministries); Sexual Misconduct Ombudsperson (Legal Service/ Risk Management); and Immigration Issues (Office of the General Assembly). Advocating on behalf of this issue in the public arena is facilitated through staff in the Washington Office.

Additionally, Mission Responsibility Through Investment is communicating with corporations in the tourism industry, asking them to sign the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism.

The GAC appreciates that education about human trafficking is critically important. Child Advocacy, MRTI and the United Nations Office have all provided workshops and seminars on this issue. The staff person from Child Advocacy has helped design the curriculum that is mentioned in the overture.

At this time funds are not available for additional educational resources. The GAC suggests that the General Assembly affirm the overall guidance of this overture but amend item 5 to read: *instructing the Executive Director of General Assembly Council to direct the appropriate entity with GAC's mission structure to ~~create~~ **[promote]** educational materials on the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children for use by presbyteries and congregations, and to ~~promote~~ **[encourage]** the use of the adult curriculum entitled *Sex Trafficking* by Martha Bettis-Gee. (available at <http://www.thethoughtfulchristian.com>)*

Overture 63 (Item B.113)

The General Assembly has often encouraged Presbyterians to travel to the Middle East, and especially to Israel/Palestine. In 2003, the 215th General assembly asked pastors, lay leaders, sessions and individual members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to:

“Travel to the region, as may be feasible and opportune, to visit with Christian partners and others, to gain firsthand experience in understanding of the issues and dynamics behind the conflict, as well as possibilities for peace and good will, making sure to take advantage of the contacts and travel resources produced by the PCUSA and its partners, as well as PCUSA mission workers and others in the region, who are able to introduce visitors to a wide spectrum of perspectives and opinions within the communities of people in the Holy Land.”

The 209th General Assembly (1997) had also adopted a recommendation that “urge[d] all Presbyterians who visit the region, whether for pilgrimage, business, or pleasure, to seek out the Christian communities, join with them in worship, and become acquainted with their human rights struggles, and to seek ways to express Christian love, peace and justice.”

In 2004, the 216th General Assembly urged conducting a feasibility study for compassionate economic development for the Palestinian people. That study’s recommendations, which were presented to and approved by the General Assembly Council, encouraged more travel by Presbyterians to Israel/Palestine on the premise that tourism (and, in this case, intentional travel and responsible tourism) is a major source of livelihood for Palestinians who work in travel agencies, hotels, restaurants, transport, art and craft production and merchandising, etc.

The GAC’s Middle East Office, Interfaith Relations Office and the Peacemaking Program have in the past offered annual travel seminar opportunities that helped Presbyterians gain insights into the area. Due to reductions in staff capabilities and budgets, such opportunities are now greatly diminished and would require staff time and financial allocations to be resumed. However, these offices, with the assistance of the Israel/Palestine Mission network, are now studying possibilities of offering training opportunities for would-be travel seminar leaders who can resource ways to fulfill the intent of the General Assembly’s urging.

Overture 25 (Item B.114)

The General Assembly Council affirms the Christian concern demonstrated by the Presbytery of Lake Huron for Iraqis who have fled their home country. The GAC commends the Presbytery of Lake Huron for bringing this issue before the General Assembly.

Groups working on refugee issues report that over 1 million displaced Iraqis are living in Jordan, and 1.5 million in Syria. The vast and still-growing numbers of Iraqis fleeing their home country with no permanent place to go has laid a growing burden on the governments, societies, and churches of neighboring countries in the region. For example, providing education for displaced Iraqi children poses a significant challenge.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), through the Office on the Middle East, the Iraq Partnership Network, and other programs, continues to lift up the plight of Iraqi refugees and displaced persons. Through the Peace Fund for Solidarity with the Churches of Iraq (Extra Commitment Opportunity account #E051722) and the Jinishian Memorial Program, the PC(USA) has also assisted the churches of the region, through the Middle East Council of Churches, as they address this crisis.

The GAC supports the call to the United States government to alleviate the suffering of Iraqi refugees. Part of that effort could involve working with other nations, particularly Iraq, and supporting the work of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other agencies.

II. For Action

That the General Assembly Council:

1. **Item B.102**

Approve this addition to the World Mission portion of the General Assembly Council report to the 218th GA (2008).

That the 218th General Assembly (2008) direct the General Assembly Council (GAC), working with the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), to prepare a comprehensive study, with recommendations, that is focused on Israel/Palestine within the complex context of the Middle East. The study should include a description of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s mission and relationships, including an assessment of the future for the Christian presence and witness in the Middle East, an overview of the complex interactions among religions, cultures and peoples that characterize the region, an analysis of US policies that impact the area and steps to be taken with our partners in the Middle East and the United States to foster justice, improve interfaith relations and nurture the building of peace toward a secure and viable future for all.

2. **New Business (B.115)**

Recommends that the 218th General Assembly (2008):

- a. Receive the report of the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) of its engagement with corporations involved in Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank.
 - b. Call upon all corporations doing business in the region to confine their business activity solely to peaceful pursuits, and refrain from allowing their products or services to support or facilitate violent acts by Israelis or Palestinians against innocent civilians, construction and maintenance of settlements or Israeli-only roads in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territory, and construction of the Separation Barrier as it extends beyond the 1967 "Green Line" into Palestinian territories.
 - c. Urge all corporations doing business in the region to seek pro-active ways to promote respect for human rights, peacebuilding and equal employment opportunity.
 - d. Direct the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment (MRTI) to continue the corporate engagement process, and report on its status with any recommendations to the 2010 General Assembly.
3. Recommend to modify the comment to the report "Struck Down, But Not Destroyed: From Hurricane Katrina to a More Equitable Future":

The General Assembly Council commends the Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) and the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) for its response to the affirmation of the 217th General Assembly (2006), which called for exploration of ways to address issues resulting from the Katrina disaster. "Struck Down, But Not Destroyed: From Hurricane Katrina to a More Equitable Future" reflects an even broader scope

than the devastation that afflicted the Gulf Coast region in 2005. It explores issues revealed by, not just resulting from, Katrina and looks at the economic, social, educational, cultural, and spiritual realities of race, class, and gender, not just in the Gulf Coast but across the nation, and decries these realities as sin.

Further, the GAC joins with ACREC and ACSWP in applauding those members and bodies within the PC(USA) that have modeled a constructive and compassionate response to the tragedies of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma, including, but certainly not limited to, the volunteers and Presbyterian Disaster Assistance (PDA).

III. For Information

The Committee reviewed and received for information the following reports:

1. Approve the February 2008 Minutes of the Justice and Compassion Goal Area Committee
2. Received and considered Status of Women; Gender, Power and Leadership; Women of Color Consultation Task Force Reports to the 218th General Assembly in concurrence with the Vocations Mission Committee to make no comments.
4. Recommend that no comment be made to the report “Costly Lessons of the Iraq War”.
5. Recommend that no comment be made to the report “Study Immigration Detention in the U.S.”.