



Salt and Light newsletter—June 2016

Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, Presbyterian Church

This issue of the e-newsletter of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) focuses on the upcoming General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the fate of our online justice journal, [Unbound](#).

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY AS A PLACE OF BLESSING; THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE AS ONE OF ITS SERVANTS

There are fights at the General Assembly. It is not all a love-fest. But it is a place where faithful ministries are lifted up, where Presbyterians strive to apply the truths of the Gospel, and where the Holy Spirit is present, not just in worship. Even in the rush of business on the Assembly's last, often late, night, the convention hall is filled with people who are called there to listen for and obey that Spirit as conscientiously as they can. The blessing is not only there when distinguished servant leaders are honored and prayed over, like knights returning heroic to the Round Table; the blessing is there in being part of the body, participating, sharing in the work, which is inevitably frustrating at times.

Certainly a feeling of blessing may come when one is recognized, paid attention to, given the floor, with the assumption that the Spirit may speak through you. And if the democratic sacrament of voting goes your way, fine, though everyone's conscience is valued equally, whatever the tallies. But it is to see the Assembly stage lit up as a giant chancel, with its customs designed to minimize ego; to see Presbyterianism as a conversation over time, with respectful disagreements expected; and to understand the Assembly as a ritual process, with first-time commissioners taking on time-honored roles: all these point to the wholeness of the church in God's sight. The blessing is to partake in some of that wholeness and holiness of purpose.

Will there be fights at *this* General Assembly? Yes. Will some of them be parts of long fights, like the 40 years of struggle over homosexuality? Actually, not so much of that this year, although there will be disagreement over whether and how the Assembly might apologize to those [excluded from ministry during those years](#). The struggle to end Israel's occupation of Palestine will be there—a 68-year exile if you are a Palestinian who lost your home in 1948—in the form of a [frank update on the feasibility of any "two-state" solution](#) at this point. And beyond the divestment of securities in key companies profiting from the settlements and other non-peaceful pursuits in the occupied territories, there is the question of divestment of securities in companies holding the largest amounts of fossil fuels, whose products directly cause climate change through hydrocarbons and other greenhouse gases. This struggle over "fossil free" investment may be both intense and relatively short, depending on whether the Assembly wants to send the clearest single signal (prompt [full divestment](#)), or maintain a multi-year advocacy within the energy companies as a form of mission responsibility through [continued investment](#).

Of those three "headline" issues, the Advisory Committee has produced a report on the prospects of a "two state" solution for Israel-Palestine, and in its role as advisor based on past social teaching, has produced "advice and counsel" memos on the other two matters. Not everyone will agree with our analysis. We list the line up of ACSWP reports on the next page.

But are those three and many other matters worth debating, much less “fighting” over? Isn’t the church so small and the world so secular and politics so gridlocked that we should give up our social witness? Well, maybe with \$10 billion plus in the Board of Pensions and Presbyterian Foundation, we need some ethical guidelines there, but who cares what we think in many other areas? And shouldn’t the church be a place where conflict is avoided, so that votes, which are inherently divisive, should not be taken, especially on social issues? Isn’t it too easy to put business before the Assembly via overtures from presbyteries, which currently need only one other presbytery to “concur” in an overture? Why not require thirty of them to get together first, communicating among themselves? And why not stop the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy from proposing new business or commenting based on prior Assembly decisions? Why not deal with “social righteousness” only once every six General Assemblies, since it is only one of the six “Great Ends of the Church?”

Well, actually, there are overtures originating in a single presbytery that propose most of those things. They imagine a profoundly different and much less active General Assembly, and we would say a different “moral location” for the church, one not reflected in our Confessions or the Reformed tradition in the main. ACSWP opposes those overtures, we hope not primarily because they would decommission the committee, but as a servant of a General Assembly that can claim moral authority and show leadership. There are two overtures close to our hearts: one on being a Matthew 25 church (scary as that can be!), and one celebrating the 80th anniversary of our predecessors in both “Northern” (more national) and “Southern” streams. Both of those denominations had traditions of social witness on certain issues but the crisis of the Great Depression prompted a more socially oriented ethic and involvement of more laypersons on deliberative committees.

This General Assembly is being held in Portland, Oregon, site of the adoption of the Confession of 1967 and the innovation of a Book of Confessions almost 40 years ago. It is a fitting place for the adoption of the Belhar Confession, already affirmed by a strong majority of the presbyteries. These theological statements include an ethics of public responsibility and, in Belhar, an element of liberation theology. On more than a dozen items before the General Assembly dealing with race and discussion or education about race, we recommend involving the Belhar Confession and propose that groups write their own US “accompanying letters,” modeled on the four paragraph accompanying letter from South Africa in 1986 that is printed with the Confession proper. How does Belhar actually apply to racial divisions in the US today— in 1120 words?



For those concerned with the denomination’s own structure, there is a multi-sided fight over whether or not to merge the Office of the General Assembly and the Presbyterian Mission Agency. Some see a merger as a solution to vision and management problems in the Mission Agency, which used to be the General Assembly’s council or “mission council.” Others see the reorganization of a merger as a waste of time and money, and putting two key leaders in one basket, doubling down on centralization that has perhaps not worked so well for the Mission Agency. Because part of ACSWP’s mandate is to look at the Assembly’s capacity for social witness, this is an important debate for us. Traditionally the Advisory and Advocacy Committees on Racial Ethnic and on Women’s Concerns focus on policies that, if approved by Assemblies, guide both the form and process side of the General Assembly and the program work of the Mission Agency.

While ACSWP supports the separate functioning of the two agencies, the committee favors changes in the PMA, including greater equalization of salaries on a 5 (highest) to 1 (lowest) ratio. This measure is opposed by the PMA Board but would, in our view, help morale in Louisville and address other matters named in a somewhat critical [Review committee report on the Agency](#). One matter unaddressed by the Agency self-study and the Review is what critical mass of specifically Presbyterian staff are needed as the headcount shrinks and the proportion of Presbyterians engaged in PMA ministries declines.

The financial picture facing the Mission Agency is serious but not dire, and in fact the Agency is rebuilding reserves after writing down some uncollectable reimbursements. Nonetheless, each of the four program and four administrative areas was asked to reduce budget by a certain percentage. In the Compassion, Peace, and Justice ministries area, the internet journal, *Unbound* (www.justiceUNBOUND.org), ACSWP's vehicle for engaging discussion in the church, particularly with young adults, was not given budget for its entry-level ordained staff person beyond December 31, 2016.

To say this is a disappointment would understate the case considerably. *Unbound*, as the Justice Committee of the Mission Agency recognized in the minutes of the April 2016 Board meeting (see pg. 25-27) is quite cost effective with a single primary staff person, who is hired for a 2-3 year period (NOTE: Report is temporarily unavailable as the PMA website is under construction, to see a brief metrics report, go to: <http://justiceunbound.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Unbound-4-16-PMAB-Justice-Committee.pdf>). *Unbound* recently won 5 awards from the [Associated Church Press](#), maintaining its strong record (the journal has won 19 awards in its less than 5 years of existence). We have had excellent managing editors in Ginna Bairby, the current holder of the position, and Patrick Heery, who went on to edit *Presbyterians Today*. Both were recent seminary graduates ordained to the work, giving younger Presbyterians a sense of denominational ministry. Particularly in the recent issue on [Race, White Privilege, and the Church](#) we have seen readership for many articles in the several thousands with a high for one article at approximately 30,000 readers. And we anticipate strong readership for the current [General Assembly issue](#), which has been strong in the past. We link here a [statement by the full Advisory Committee](#). We also would invite people to fill out a [questionnaire on the journal](#), and welcome ideas as to how we may raise or redevelop funding. *Unbound* was in fact designated the successor to *Church & Society* magazine in 2011, part of a succession of social justice print publications going back to 1908. *Unbound* arranged for the digitization of past issues, such as the set of essays on the Confession of 1967 done at its 35th Anniversary in 2002 (and available at this 50th Anniversary Assembly).

Turning now to reports requested by the General Assembly, generally in response to overtures from presbyteries, ACSWP is presenting six longer and two short:

[New Realities and Hopes in Cuban US Relations](#)

[Healing Not Punishment: Why Presbyterians Should Help End the War on Drugs](#) (this is a study for final approval in 2018)

[Human Trafficking and Human Rights](#) (done with the Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns)

[Israel-Palestine: Human Rights in the Absence of Just Peace](#) (on the "two state" solution)

[Abiding Presence: Faithful Ministry in End of Life Situations](#)

[Risking Peace in a Violent World](#) (the culmination of a six year peace discernment process)

[City Churches: Convictions, Conversations, and Call to Action](#) (a follow-up to *The Gospel from Detroit* presented at the 2014 General Assembly)

[Election Protection & Integrity in Campaign Finance](#)

In the case of one study, ACSWP is continuing work on one dealing with the application of the "Precautionary Principle" to new bio, nano, and genetic technologies.

In all cases, the Advisory Committee works with volunteers, and in some cases we also have specialist consultant writers. Persons seeking to be on study teams may write to the Advisory Committee directly; persons seeking to serve on the Committee need to submit their nomination forms to the General Assembly Nominating Committee.

We thank you for your attention and welcome comments on any of the reports. Our prayers are that the church itself may be blessed with wisdom and courage,

Christine Darden, Co-Chair and Ray Roberts, Co-Chair