

ACSWP Agency Summary to the 212th General Assembly (2012)

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 Mt. 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 charge:

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.

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 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 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 ...” (2011–2013 *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. At the same time, the committee’s membership contains persons with expertise in theology, social ethics, and various other disciplines, more than half of whom hold advanced degrees.

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 219 General Assemblies have reaffirmed that message. Our faithfulness as Reformed Christians means action.

a. *New Developments*

In 2011, the Advisory Committee launched an internet justice journal, with the support of the Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries Area and the larger General Assembly Mission Council. The new journal, *Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice*, is 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.

A key goal has been to reach twenty and thirty-something readers, using an intergenerational editorial staff. Despite limitations in the committee’s budget, a recent seminary graduate, Patrick Heery, was hired as managing editor and has done an excellent job. In September 2011, the 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 are to be made available through the American Theological Library Association, and will provide depth to

go with the very current style of on-line engagement: for the history track, think of a mix-tape with church insights from the 1930s, '60s, as well as recent General Assemblies.

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. The emphasis on new technology and nurturing communities of people reflects the findings of the self-study ACSWP presented to and which was approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010).

Another new development has been the addition of a "Social Teaching" track to the inter-seminary course taught at the General Assembly by former Moderator Jack Rogers and David Tomlinson, both professors at San Francisco Theological Seminary. That course, "*Presbyterianism: Principles, Practice, and Social Teaching*," is designed for seminarians but also welcomes auditors and others seeking to understand the assembly in-depth and see it as a window into the church. The "Social Teaching" track will be taught by a social ethicist, Teresa Saucedo, and by former Stated Clerk Cliff Kirkpatrick, who will also augment the ecumenical dimension.

Since the 2010 General Assembly, the committee met at Stony Point, New York; San Diego, California; Big Tent, Indianapolis, Indiana; Denver, Colorado; Highland Presbyterian Center, Allenspark, Colorado; and Louisville, Kentucky. At each place, the committee met with representatives of the presbyteries and organizations and congregations doing vital forms of social witness, including:

- At Stony Point Conference Center, their residential program of the three Abrahamic Faiths, their expanded organic gardening initiative, their offerings of spiritual guidance and retreats as well as hospitality, their witness for peace.
- At First Presbyterian Church, San Diego; a panel of speakers on new social ministries in San Diego, including work in public high schools combining tutoring, mentoring, and an in-school food pantry, new church development with young people as leaders, outreach to and inclusion of homeless persons as members of the congregation, an overnight downtown shelter, and other outreach and social service ministries. In addition to orientation from the presbytery executive, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church, San Diego, described social ministries and witness intrinsically linked to witness to the Savior. The committee also heard from a mission co-worker based in Tijuana, a pastor involved in peace education, and a professor opening up moral discourse in adult education programming. The coordinator spoke in a local congregation twice on the near Sunday.
- At Big Tent, the co-chairs of the Economic Crisis study team presented a workshop, inviting input, and ACSWP saw the first prototype of the *Unbound* website, and many names were proposed. The committee also explored formats for the General Assembly "Social Teaching" class, revised its Manual, and heard from Middle East Christians on the impacts of the Iraq war and the beginning of the Arab Awakening.
- In Denver, the committee met with forty members of the presbytery for a hearing on the economic crisis and also held the formal "launch" of *Unbound* at the presbytery offices. A further discussion was held before a presbytery meeting, and a communications specialist from

one of the Denver churches also coached the committee on addressing controversial issues with the press.

- In Allenspark, Colorado, ACSWP met with leaders from the Presbytery of Plains and Peaks, discussing the history, situation of rural churches and environmental (especially water) issues in that large presbytery.

- In Louisville, on two occasions, the committee met with a range of staff members, including the deputy director of the General Assembly Mission Council.

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 General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC), 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:

- (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) providing advice and counsel to the entities and governing bodies of the church on matters of social witness policy when developments merit social-ethical attention;

- (4) providing advice and counsel to the General Assembly when it meets as a governing body (in oral and memoranda form); 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 (GA) 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 two main study teams active in 2010 and 2011 are those on the economic crisis and the discernment of new directions in peacemaking, thirty years after *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling*.

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 General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) 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. Advice and counsel is provided throughout the meeting, through “Advice and Counsel Memoranda,” by oral testimony before assembly committees, and informally. The ACSWP chair or a co-chairperson is a corresponding member to both the GA and GAMC. This chair or co-chairperson can offer advice and counsel if called upon in these meetings. The ACSWP has also provided comment to the Committee on the Nature of the Church in the 21st Century, the GAMC Strategic Directions team, and the Committee on Review of Biennial Assemblies.

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 Mission Council (GAMC) members. The members are: Gloria Albrecht (co-chair), Detroit, Michigan; Arthur William Canada Sr., Charlotte, North Carolina; William W. Capel, Champaign, Illinois; David Cortés-Fuentes, Claremont, California; Christine M. Darden, Hampton, Virginia; Jean Demmler (co-chair), Denver, Colorado; Marsha Fowler, Altadena, California; Eric Mount, Danville, Kentucky; Kathryn Poethig, Watsonville, California; William Saint, Fairfax, Virginia; and Raafat Zaki, Maumee, Ohio. In the spring of 2011, Roger Gench, a member appointed by the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) resigned from the committee. The GAMC appointed William Capel to fill this vacated position. Also in 2011, Dianne Briscoe, Esq., resigned upon her appointment to a judgeship in Denver. Staffing for the committee includes Christian T. Iosso, coordinator; Patrick Heery, editor, *Unbound* journal; 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. Such events included preaching at Newton Presbyterian Church, Newtown, Pennsylvania; speaking at Christ Presbyterian, Carlsbad, California; a visit to Arcadia University’s Peace Studies program, and speaking at three conferences, one with peacemakers, one on the Middle East, and one with Evangelical Christian environmentalists. 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).

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.

- Human Rights Update 2012
- World of Hurt, Word of Life: Renewing God’s Communion in the Work of Economic Reconstruction

- Interim Report: Encountering the Gospel of Peace Anew: An Invitation to Discernment and Witness
- For Human Rights and Civic Freedom: Movements for Democratic Change in the Arab World
- ACSWP Agency Narrative

In preparing this year's General Assembly reports, ACSWP took into consideration the comments and reflections shared by individual Presbyterians and adult education classes, General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC) program ministry areas, and other bodies within our church. Staff also consulted with the Presbyterian Health, Education, and Welfare Association in developing a consultation on criminal justice for early 2012.

From 2010–2011, the committee assisted the Office of the General Assembly (OGA) in the publication of the following reports: *Gun Violence and Gospel Values: Mobilizing to Respond to God's Call*; *Becoming an HIV and AIDS Competent Church: Prophetic Witness and Compassionate Action*; *Living Through Economic Crisis: The Church's Witness in Troubled Times (A Social Involvement Report)*; *Loving Our Neighbors: For Equity and Quality in Public Education (K-12)*; *Neither Poverty nor Riches: Compensation, Equity, and the Unity of the Church*; and the *Human Rights Update 2010*. These resources can be downloaded at <http://oga.pcusa.org/documents-resources/list/publication/> or <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/resources.htm>. Committee members and staff also continued to support use of the gun violence and AIDS policy statements. A survey of compensation practices in comparable church and nonprofit groups remains an assignment from the Theology of Compensation policy; the committee revised a study guide on Just Globalization that complements a shorter resource on globalization done for high school and college mission trips.

The ACSWP works collaboratively with the six mission and ministry areas of the General Assembly Mission Council (GAMC), other entities of the GAMC, 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, relevant presbytery committees, and with ecumenical contacts during its stated meetings. Members of the committee have distributed policy statements and resources at meetings of the Denver and Eastern Virginia presbyteries and participated in the Ecumenical Advocacy Days cosponsored 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 Presbyterian 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 2010, the SEN met at Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS), Decatur, Georgia; and in the fall of 2011, the Social Ethics Network (SEN) led a Planning Consultation on Peace Teaching and Discernment in Presbyterian Seminaries, Colleges, and Universities at the San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS), San

Anselmo, California. The ACSWP also hosts a reception for Presbyterians at the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics; the January 2012 meeting was held at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington, D.C.

The ACSWP will focus on emerging social witness issues and future priorities at its summer 2012 stated meeting, including the guidance of the General Assembly. Other responses by the committee to General Assembly (GA) work may be found in the responses to referrals section of the reports to the 220th General Assembly (2012).