



RISKING FOR PEACE AT CHRISTMAS, NEWS FROM ACSWP, NEW THINKING AT *UNBOUND*, AND THE ROAD TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY

This is the bimonthly newsletter of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP, often pronounced A-cee-swap), the body that serves the prophetic calling of all Presbyterians by preparing studies and policy recommendations for the General Assembly. More on the Committee's work below.

Risking Peace in a Fearful World is the tentative title of the Peace Discernment steering team's report. While that title may change long before it gets to the General Assembly, it seems very appropriate for a time when three related peace processes wait in darkness for a light of hope: Peace with Iran, Peace in Syria, Peace for Israel and Palestine. We so want the angels' words to be true: "Peace on earth: Goodwill to all people!"

As we write before Thanksgiving, we commend the Administration for pursuing a trial agreement with Iran on its nuclear enrichment program. We note that no one has shown Iran to have a specific nuclear weapons program and that the same neoconservative groups and conservative Israeli and Saudi leadership that advocated our going to war with Iraq are pushing hard for us to maintain hostilities with Iran. These groups also favor greater US military involvement in Syria and in the case of Israel, an undeclared nuclear state that has never signed the nuclear proliferation treaty, seem more interested in more settlements on Christian and Muslim land than any viable Palestinian state. *Unbound*–ACSWP and Compassion Peace and Justice's online discussion forum–has [commented previously](#) on the Syria situation, supporting a verifiable cease-fire in that proxy war, peace talks, and intensified help for the internal and external refugees.

Because of the steady efforts of hardline groups to seek to punish Iran, partly for its defensive alliances with other Shi'ite groups in Syria and Lebanon that resist both fundamentalist Sunnis and Israeli incursions and occupation, it is in fact a risk for any US politician to support peace negotiations. This is not to idealize the Iranian government, but to call for realism and the application of justice standards to all parties. An Iranian détente would also help the situation in Afghanistan, since it now seems likely that US troops will remain there and elsewhere through our drone programs. Our troops will continue to be at risk in harm's way, and our credibility will continue to be at risk in support of an emotive ally and an arguably counterproductive strategy.



Clearly the US Administration is responding seriously to Iran's renewed initiative for peace. Social justice and peace advocates may remember that they sought an agreement with the US in 2003, only to be classed with an "axis of evil" by an administration bent on war in the Middle East. These previous Iran negotiating gambits were dismissed, despite their helping us go after Al Qaeda, their intense dislike of Saddam Hussein (for attacking them, with US support), and the surprisingly

positive view of American culture held by many Iranians. That positive view is reported to remain, despite hostility from hardliners like their past President Ahmadinejad and the widespread belief that they have a right to enrich uranium for energy purposes (and national pride). Their new President, Rouhani, elected in a real contest with hardliner opponents, is risking much in hopes of lessening or ending Western sanctions.

The supportive rationale for these actions and more analysis of the geopolitics and ethics is contained in a [statement by the Stated Clerk](#) advocating peace not war with Iran. Readers may also be interested to explore the text of the [General Assembly action](#) supporting the Administration and Western powers' agreement with Iran.

Thus, as ACSWP communicates every Advent, please pray for the peace of Jerusalem and for Bethlehem and other Palestinian territories surrounded by the ghetto wall or under siege as in Gaza. And please pray for the people of Iran and its neighbors, and Syria and its neighbors—hosting millions of refugees, and for the groups and governments who want us to increase rather than decrease our military engagements.

Now Accepting Nominations

ACSWP is currently receiving nominations for new committee members to fill two vacancies that will come open for General Assembly 2014. We invite any and all Presbyterians to submit nominations for the committee by submitting a [nomination form](#) by **January 2, 2014**. Nominations can be from ruling elders, teaching elders, or lay members of PC(USA) congregations. ACSWP is particularly seeking members who have experience with human rights law, economics, communications, and financial management.

Unbound Update

[Unbound](#), the online Christian justice journal of the PC(USA) and successor to Church & Society Magazine, has just finished a 10-week issue entitled [Amos' Plumbline: Whose Church? The Future of Social Witness](#), which explores the various grassroots forms of social witness taking place across the wider Church. This issue experiments with a new "rolling" format—releasing several articles a week over a period of time rather than releasing an entire issue at once—that has been well-received and will likely be adopted for future issues. Unbound's [current issue](#) will span the four weeks of Advent and will focus on various justice themes in the new Presbyterian hymnal Glory to God.



Unbound continues to seek to stay current with social justice matters in politics and in popular culture. Along with the shutdown editorial mentioned below, Managing Editor Ginna Bairby wrote a [theological response](#) to Seth Adam Smith's viral blog post "[Marriage Isn't For You](#)," highlighting marriage as a covenant and other bases for considering overtures for marriage equality likely to come before the 221st Assembly. Recent features have also included a review and analysis of war and peace in the film [Ender's Game](#), a [sermon on immigration](#) coinciding with our Thanksgiving remembrance of European American immigration to North America, and a [theological reflection on wealth and grace](#) in the Gospels on Black Friday. Our goal is to create a community of informed, theological conversation around issues of culture and politics, and we encourage friends of ACSWP to subscribe to the journal, submit articles for publication, and join the conversation!

The Unbound staff, in collaboration with Rev. Cynthia Holder Rich and former Managing Editor Rev. Patrick Heery, are in the process of developing a working board of young adults to contribute regularly to writing, editing, and posting. Our current Advisory Board will be asked to remain as advisors and contributors, but with less expectation of a day-to-day investment. This team has a long list of potential candidates, but the staff welcomes any and all further suggestions. If you know someone who might be a good candidate, please email [Ginna Bairby](#).

Government Shutdown

Like most Americans, the members and staff of ACSWP watched with a mixture of anxiety and disillusionment as the US government hit yet another point of gridlock in October and shut down for 16 days. Reflecting on the political situation that got us to the point, Chris Iosso wrote the [following editorial for Unbound](#), pairing his viewpoint with a [selection of applicable General Assembly stances](#) and, for contrast, [a funeral meditation on the late Republican statesman, William Scranton](#). This essay approaches the government shutdown tactic not simply in relation to the Affordable Care Act, but as an extreme form of the distrust of government that is a long theme in US history. This tactic may re-appear early next year when the government debt limit reauthorization approaches.



Road to General Assembly



ACSWP met from October 17-19 at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico to share in good work and fellowship. The vast majority of this meeting was dedicated to reviewing reports and recommendations that will come before the 221st General Assembly in 2014. Among these is the report and proposal of the Peace Discernment Steering Team, established by the 219th Assembly (2010) to address the position of the PC(USA) in relation to war and nonviolence and to update current peacemaking policy.

As noted, the team has developed the first draft of its proposal to the 2014 Assembly, *Risking Peace in a Fearful World*, drawing on a range of focus groups. This draft has gone before members of the Social Ethics Network and ACSWP in their recent meetings, and the steering team is taking the suggestions and critiques of these entities into account as its members continue to develop their proposal. This proposal will come before the Assembly and, if approved, will be sent to the presbyteries for their input and advisory vote before the final proposal and recommendations are presented to the 222nd Assembly in 2016.

The Tax Reform team has been hard at work on the study they have been commissioned to bring to the Assembly this summer. The team continues to develop its recommendations, but it shared with ACSWP two important studies that will strongly inform its report: a Reformed theological analysis of taxation and a summary paper on the history of progressive taxation. ACSWP is also seeking ways to collaborate with ecumenical partners and councils on issues of tax justice.

A resolution on drones will also be important item on the table for GA. A paper on drone warfare has been developed into a study for *The Thoughtful Christian* entitled [Drones: Legitimate Weapons of War?](#) This study may prove helpful to Salt & Light readers as you seek to understand the issues and will serve as the basis for recommendations made to the Assembly. This represents another way to bring policy and witness into the educational life of those churches and individuals who use *The Thoughtful Christian*.

In conjunction with ACWC, ACSWP will bring a statement and recommendations on sexual violence in the military, pointing also to other areas where this danger exists. Other proposals and resolutions will address urban ministry, ministerial compensation, and issues of justice and human rights related to the Western Sahara and the Middle East. A commissioned paper on end-of-life issues posed by new technologies will also be reviewed by the Committee in January.

A last word: Detroit. At the coming General Assembly, the site itself cannot be taken for granted. While Detroit is not unique in kind, it is the largest city to be subjected to a bankruptcy process. The Committee is developing a resolution on this matter of urban abandonment/struggle, and one of our pastor members from Detroit is developing a Sunday worship experience for commissioners that will include some street-time and brief visits to two to three sites on the way to the sanctuary. Let us remember all those who seek God's sanctuary from harm, and pray for strength and humility in our own congregations and worshipping communities.

Grace, peace, and Justice,
ACSWP



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