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This is the newsletter of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), the body that serves the prophetic calling of all Presbyterians by preparing studies, resources, and policy recommendations for action by the General Assembly.

## New Year Greetings from ACSWP The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy

Dear Friends of Presbyterian Social Witness and ACSWP:

This is a beginning of 2016 update on social witness reports going to the General Assembly. It is also a description of how the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) does its work—and that means a bit of detail. We do not write frequently, but do communicate through [www.justiceUnbound.org](http://www.justiceUnbound.org) on a regular basis—that online justice journal is a forum for discussion of key issues that call to the Christian conscience and to the prophetic responsibilities we share.

The year 2015 was busy, and for Christians who follow justice issues, a challenging year. As longtime friends know, we provide resources to help meet some of those challenges to “the Gospel of Peace” as the book of Ephesians sums up the Gospel. Some of you may have signed up for our email at last year’s Presbyterian Women’s Gathering in Minneapolis, others at one of the hearings held by the study team on reform of drug policies, in Richmond, CA; El Paso, TX; Denver, CO; or Charleston, WVA.

Some of you may have seen us this past year at our full committee meetings in Washington, DC, Elmhurst, IL, or Havana and Matanzas, Cuba! This brief newsletter will describe the study processes underway and recent resources available, with a bit of introduction at first.

## Cuba, Drug Legalization, End-of-Life Issues, and more...

*“Ripped from the headlines”* is actually a fair summary of assignments that were given to the Advisory Committee by the 2014 General Assembly (“GA”). Each will be described below, and in each case at least one of the Committee’s 12 members was put on a team of volunteers chosen for a diversity of experience and depth of expertise, within the constraints of tight budgets. The Committee, in fact, has a staff of two, the coordinator and the Unbound managing editor, with administrative assistance from within the Compassion, Peace, & Justice ministries area of the Presbyterian Mission Agency. For both the full committee meetings (3x per year) and its study teams, we seek out nonprofit, usually church-related places to stay, and we try to hear from local people involved in mission projects and outreach programs. (We meet in Louisville once per two year cycle between Assemblies). One of our co-chairs also meets with the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board, which provides three members who serve on ACSWP as well as that Board. (See our [website](#) for more information, noting that this website is being upgraded.)

This year the Cuba assignment most affected the work of the Committee since—following the overture that shaped the Assembly’s referral—ACSWP took the task as a study team of the whole. In other words, working with the Presbyterian Cuba Connection as agent for the Cuba Partners Network (which includes over 80 congregations partnered with Cuban congregations and presbyteries),



the Committee went to Cuba as a group to meet with church leaders and thinkers there. The Committee then hosted a small team from Cuba at a consultation in Washington, DC, that included meetings with representatives of the State Department and the National Security Council. Both trips could be done well within the Committee's normal travel budget, but the Cuba Partners raised about \$10,000 to cover the cost of a writer and to help with the participation of Network members and the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba.

Almost all of the church consultation arrangements were made before President Barack Obama and President Raul Castro's joint December 2014 announcement of re-opening diplomatic ties. Of course, relations between our two churches had never been broken. This was one reason why the Partners network and World Mission staff anticipated the changes that will affect our relationship and the future of the Presbyterian Church in Cuba.



After the Cuba and Washington, DC, meetings, ACSWP's third meeting was held in Elmhurst, Illinois, hosted by the Elmhurst Presbyterian Church, whose senior pastor, Cliff Lyda, was a great observer. Some of the Committee members met beforehand with

representatives from the Chicago Presbytery's Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations Committee. The Committee also heard from the social ethics director of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), headquartered nearby, who described their process for public witness studies and statements. In all three ACSWP meetings, liaison persons are present from the Advocacy Committees on Racial Ethnic and Women's Concerns, the Office of the General Assembly (the Stated Clerk's office), and one or two program staff from the Compassion, Peace, and Justice ministries area.

## Reports going to the General Assembly

Here are brief descriptions of reports authorized by last year's General Assembly in response to presbytery overtures (all titles subject to modification):

1. *Cuban and United States Relations: For a New and Better Chapter*

Based on overtures from presbyteries with some of the many congregations partnered with Cuban congregations, the Assembly's referral requested the Cuba Partners and ACSWP to draw on lessons from the prolonged Cold War stand-off with Cuba and lift up values needed during the coming period of political and economic change, putting both in the broader Caribbean context.

2. *Abiding Presence: Living Faithfully in End of Life Decisions*

This is a report in the form of a handbook for advance directive planning and bedside decision-making, plus recommendations for congregational use and public policies to support the deliberations and care-giving encouraged. Five states have some form of "assisted suicide" or "aid-in-dying" laws, and new medical options for palliative care are available across the US.

3. *Healing Before Punishment: Why Presbyterians Seek to End the War on Drugs*

In the place of the punitive strategies and violence that have led to mass imprisonment, narco-state corruption, and an underground drug economy, this report advocates a basic shift in how Christians should approach a drug-abundant society and its addictive appetites. Among goals recommended would be legal regulation of marijuana with intensive monitoring and research, widely available treatment with the goal of reducing harm and encouraging recovery, and theological attention to the meaning of widespread use and abuse of drugs (including alcohol and, decreasingly, tobacco).

4. *Prospects for a Just Peace in Israel and Palestine:*

A "two-state solution" continues to reflect the hopes of past treaties. Yet the

profound and—in the current period—politically insurmountable obstacles to a feasible Palestinian state require approaches that increase human rights for all in the absence of state-level solutions. This report focuses on the ethical values of our faith in assessing what are acceptable behaviors toward a highly disadvantaged population living without full citizenship under a military occupation since 1967. Security concerns for both populations are critical, as are applications of international law.

#### 5. *Trafficking and Forced Labor: Next Steps for Concerned Churches*

Across-border prostitution receives much attention, but there are many other ways that adults and children, men and women, are exploited in a globalized economy affected by wars, climate related migration, and nations with weakened powers to protect their citizens. The church has been involved in this issue from several angles; the task here is a comprehensive understanding and set of actions.

## Voting and Urban Concerns

In addition to the five reports, there are two shorter resolutions requested by the General Assembly:

#### 1. *Unrigging Elections: An Update to “Lift Every Voice: Voting Rights and Electoral Reform*

This update covers impacts of the Supreme Court decisions removing limits on money in campaigns and the many efforts to make voting more difficult, some by states once covered by “pre-clearance review” under the Voting Rights Act, a key law also reinterpreted by the Court. Literally billions of dollars from special interests make the voices of churches and other non-profits, much less ordinary citizens, much less important than those often-secret donors.

#### 2. *From Detroit to Portland and St. Louis: Recommendations to Support Urban Ministry*

The 2014 Assembly referred *The Gospel from Detroit*, a call for renewing urban mission in Detroit and other cities, to an “urban ministry roundtable,” and requested the Advisory Committee to prepare resources to strengthen both congregations and their communities. Clearly there are issues of race, police accountability, taxes, education, and public investment facing all communities. This brief resolution draws on last year’s report and looks toward the next two cities where General Assemblies will be held, following suggestions from urban roundtable members. See: <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/gospel-detroit-renewing-churchs-urban-vision/>

### **Peacemaking Discernment in the face of war and terrorism**

The final Report of the Peace Discernment process deserves particular treatment. This is a 6-year effort initiated by 8 overtures to the 2010 General Assembly that is summed up in the report: *Risking Peace in A Violent World: Despite War, Five Peacemaking Affirmations*. The discernment process was to take three stages. First, the 2012 General Assembly approved a congregational study for discerning new approaches to peacemaking, 32 years after *Peacemaking: The Believers’ Calling* created the Peacemaking Program and three-part Peacemaking Offering. Second, drawing on the congregational and individual responses and consultations with seminary and college/university faculty, chaplains, and students, a Steering Team appointed by Peacemaking Program and ACSWP developed the report, *Risking Peace in a Violent World*. The 2014 Assembly approved sending this out with Five Affirmations for advisory votes by the presbyteries. Of the approximately 40 presbyteries responding, more than 30 have approved all five, though with differing levels of support. The vote tallies, revisions, and comments have lead to some revisions of the Five Affirmations and the Risking Peace statement for the 2016 Assembly, while confirming most of the framework approved by the last Assembly. The title, *Risking Peace in a Violent World*, draws on phrases from the *Confession of 1967* and the *Brief Statement of Faith*. The revisions include references to the *Belhar Confession*.

Note: If your presbytery has not yet acted on the Five Affirmations, its vote would still



“count” in the overall tallies, though any suggested additions or changes in wording would not be reflected in the report. We encourage presbyteries busy with other vital matters to consider the Five Affirmations as part of their own discernment of their own peacemaking callings.

Along with these reports, there is one recommendation for study extension:

*The Precautionary Approach, New Technologies, and Sustainable Development:* The study approved by the 2014 General Assembly addresses the dangers of introducing new biological technologies, chemical agents, and nano-particles and machines into our changing environment. A group of Presbyterian scientists (both academic and corporate), ethicists, and experts in regulation has met to organize the very broad scope of the task and identify key roles for churches to play, given the original overture’s request for both an assessment of “the precautionary principle” itself and its application to new technologies in the context of increasing climate change. The team requests additional time to develop ecumenical partnerships familiar with the religion and science dimension and able to increase the public value of its analysis and recommendations. No additional funding is requested, but funds allotted by the Assembly for 2015 would be used in 2016. The scope of this concern, from antibiotic and hormone use and genetically modified organisms in food to geo-engineering to reduce climate volatility, has simply required more thinking and structuring of the tasks involved.

## Coming for Lenten or Future Study

A Five Session study for Congregations that want to talk about EQUAL RIGHTS IN PALESTINE AND ISRAEL—as recommended by the 2014 General Assembly. Based on the short resolution approved by the General Assembly, Equal Rights in Palestine and Israel, ACSWP will soon be making available as a free

## OTHER Resources requested by the General Assembly

Information from the Drug Policy Reform Task Force is posted on the [ACSWP website](#) and in the online journal, *Unbound* in fulfillment of some of the recommendations.

download a study guide for discussion of human rights in Israel and Palestine. [What would be required by this affirmation of equal rights?](#)

## Reports available from the 2014 General Assembly

Please consider studying the following policy booklets in your adult education planning. These are the product of recent study teams, and go first to ACSWP and then onto the General Assembly. Although we list them up in downloadable form, they are also available in hard copy from Presbyterian Distribution Services.

- [Tax Justice: A Christian Response to a New Gilded Age](#) (2014)

This builds upon the broader report on economic life: [World of Hurt, Word of Life: Renewing God's Communion in the Work of Economic Reconstruction](#) (2012)

- [Drones, War, and Surveillance](#) (2014)
- [The Gospel from Detroit: Renewing the Church's Urban Vision](#) (2014)
- [Fairness in Ministerial Compensation](#) (2014)

This builds on [Neither Poverty Nor Riches: Compensation, Equity, and the Unity of the Church](#) (2010)

## To close...

We welcome your visiting our [website](#), and corresponding with us if you wish at [acswp@pcusa.org](mailto:acswp@pcusa.org).

God's blessings for the year ahead,

The Co-Chairs and staff of ACSWP.

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