



Work Archives

ACSWP and the 2018 General Assembly

A Social Witness Summary of the 2018 General Assembly (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/A-Social-Witness-Summary-of-the-2018-GA.doc>)

The Advisory Committee's members are elected by the General Assembly to advise its deliberations (and those of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board) on matters of Christian conscience and social witness.

ACSWP is mandated to resource these bodies in 5 ways, one of which is to study and prepare recommendations on key concerns. The Advisory Committee is sometimes given specific assignments and funding to assemble study teams of dedicated Presbyterian volunteers with experience and expertise on those particular subjects. The Committee is also supposed to contain capacity for theological and ethical analysis among its membership to address other matters on its own. This structure of a volunteer committee and trained staff goes back to 1936, as the goal has been for the church to think and pray first, before its representatives speak on public issues.

This year ACSWP is bringing reports to the General Assembly on the following matters:

1. **Honest Patriotism**, an examination of truth-telling in politics and the media, a project led by Robert Trawick, a theologian at St. Thomas Aquinas College and ACSWP member (and son of a newspaper editor);
2. **Precautionary Progress**, a report called for by the 2014 General Assembly on regulatory approaches to new technologies in light of climate change. There are a great number of new bio, genetic, and nano technologies which may have direct but hard to measure physical impacts on humans and the environment, plus communications and artificial intelligence products that may have psychic and social impacts. The Committee has been aided by several specialist writers in fulfilling this wide-ranging assignment, which originated in an overture from Southern New England Presbytery.
3. A **“Gospel from St. Louis”** that will contain reflections from pastors and others in St Louis congregations on the work of God's Spirit in struggles for greater racial justice, police accountability, and economic development.
4. **Healing Before Punishment: Why the Presbyterian Church seeks to end the War on Drugs**, This report was initiated by overtures from 7 presbyteries to the 2014 Assembly, was developed in a study and hearing process involving experts in Denver, El Paso, Huntington, WVA, and Oakland, CA, where the initiative originated. Received for study by the 2016 Assembly, it has been tested in a number of venues over the past 18 months.
5. **Religious Freedom and Non-Discrimination**: An affirmation of Presbyterian tradition in response to efforts to use claims of religious freedom by individuals and corporations to restrict provision of reproductive health coverage to employees and equal access to goods and services by business licensed to serve the public.
6. A Proposal for Study of **US National Purpose and Global Order**, to be done in cooperation with ecumenical partners. The Presbyterian Church and most other “mainline” Protestant churches were effective advocates of the

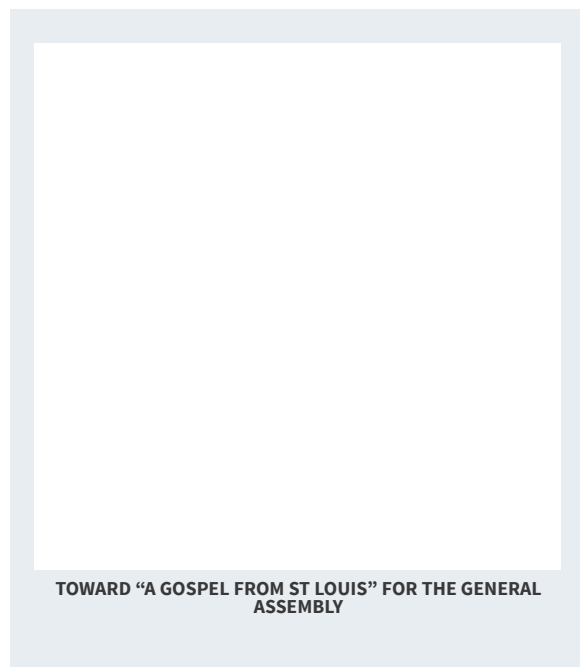
Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many subsequent international law, peacemaking, security, development, and ecological agreements which are now being called into question. The study would create public forums where concerned and knowledgeable Christian voices could be heard, using ecumenical partnerships in Washington, DC, and at the United Nations.

In addition, ACSWP will be bringing several other items for consideration which are not policy statements:

7. A **Self-Study** report will be presented as part of the regular review process for all Assembly entities. This is being prepared by Jean Demmler, a sociologist and member of ACSWP, drawing on surveys by the Research Services office of the Presbyterian Mission Agency;
8. A **study guide for the 2016 GA policy, Israel-Palestine: For Human Values in the Absence of a Just Peace**, which also presents a 2014 resolution on “Equal Rights for Palestinians and Israelis.”
9. A coordinated response to a 2016 referral, **“On Being a Matthew 25 Church,”** shared with the range of Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries.

The Advisory Committee is also presenting a new resource at the Assembly, a thumb-drive containing a comprehensive set of General Assembly social witness policy statements and studies, showing the development of Presbyterian thinking in the wide range of areas (ecology, sexuality, nuclear war, economic justice, mental illness, etc.). The intent is to serve both those engaged in current acts of witness (immigration, tax policy, etc), and ethics and religion teachers in our colleges, universities, and seminaries. A number of those professors in fact help the Committee prepare the reports and meet regularly in a Social Ethics Network at the Society of Christian Ethics and American Academy of Religion meetings.

A Gospel from St. Louis for the General Assembly



What difference does it make for a Presbyterian General Assembly to meet in a given city? This is a question behind Stated Clerk, J. Herbert Nelson’s “Hands and Feet” initiative, which is partnering mission as well as meeting efforts with the host presbytery, Giddings-Lovejoy. The goal is to join in with Presbyterians in St Louis and the larger area to make a constructive witness, guided by on-going local engagement.

There is another question, however: What difference does the witness of congregations make to the General Assembly, and to the whole Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that the GA represents?

The answer is: the St Louis area congregations are doing important work on matters of race, class, and police accountability in a fairer justice system for the city and its surrounding suburbs. The work of five congregations was lifted up at the Big Tent gathering, July 6-8, 2017, on the grounds of Washington University. A report called, A Gospel

from St Louis, provides a way for the church listen to what God’s Spirit is saying in and through the St Louis churches.

ACSWP has worked with the Urban Ministry Network to help our larger church understand the issues challenging many of our city congregations. This goes back to the initiative of Rev. Kevin Johnson, a pastor from Detroit serving on ACSWP. He and Dr. Gloria Albrecht, an ethicist also based in Detroit and serving on the Committee. Together they drafted *The Gospel From Detroit*, https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-the_gospel_from_detroit-2014.pdf (https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-the_gospel_from_detroit-2014.pdf) back when the General

Assembly met in that city in 2014. Thus the St Louis churches are making their contribution to an on-going conversation about the shape of urban ministry and racial justice. (The Portland Assembly also adopted a statement about urban ministry that looked at the need for “gentrification with justice” and what that could mean.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/City-Churches-Conviction-Conversation-Call-to-Action.pdf>
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That conversation actually started back in December of 2016, when the Urban Ministry Network met with three pastors in St. Louis who spoke of how Third, Cote Brillante, and Curby Memorial Presbyterian Churches were facing the racial divide exposed in the demonstrations following the death of Michael Brown in the suburb of Ferguson. The Big Tent themes of “Race, Reconciliation, and Reformation” echoed a bit of that early conversation.

Unlike “A Gospel from Detroit,” “A Gospel from St Louis” will not be one story-line. Each of the five congregations has a different context and a different calling, within the larger city. And the role of the pastors cannot be underestimated in helping the congregations claim the prophetic dimensions of their communal life.

“A Gospel from St Louis” will also be unlike many ACSWP reports, though it will have recommendations for engagement with church and society. The role of the city pastor on ACSWP is also key in connecting a “national” body to the church “on the ground.” The General Assembly is a council of the church and as such should be an arena where ministries are lifted up and learnings are shared across the church. May that be so in this case.

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you...” — John 17:3

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