

CITY CHURCHES: CONVICTIONS, CONVERSATIONS, AND CALL TO ACTION

The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy recommends that the 222nd General Assembly (2016) do the following:

1. Approve the following brief affirmation in partial fulfillment of the action of the 221st General Assembly (2014):

City Churches: Convictions, Conversations, and Call to Action

The Biblical Jerusalem is the archetypal city to which the people go up in joyful parade, for which they fight and pray and grieve, and upon which they build their hopes. In the New Testament it becomes a symbol of a shared dwelling of peace whose temple can be “a house of prayer for all nations.”

Our actual cities are not the New Jerusalem; they are more often like Detroit, places of suffering and abandonment, yet still grand, hopeful, and inviting. In 2014, when the Presbyterian Church’s General Assembly met in Detroit, the commissioners went out to worship in the churches of that city and responded to its realities by seeking to renew the church’s urban vision. We affirm that “Gospel from Detroit,” and pledge to seek Christ’s presence and message in each of the cities where we meet: Portland for our 222nd General Assembly, St. Louis for our 223rd General Assembly in 2018, and so forward.

The statement presented to the 2014 General Assembly, though called *The Gospel from Detroit*, listened to Detroit’s warnings, but was not only about Detroit. It was an invitation to those reentering our cities to re-enter them spiritually, to be welcome in our worshiping communities, and for our whole church to reaffirm our conviction to serve Christ in the city. Thus the booklet version of that report includes a chart of the Presbyterian congregations that have existed in Detroit, and a response by Michigan Black pastors, as a model for each urban area or presbytery to take its own inventory and develop its own strategy:

<https://www.pcusa.org/resource/gospel-detroit-renewing-churches-urban-vision/>

The urban ministry roundtable has only just begun its work, but has already shared wisdom and passion for the struggles in places that are both welcoming new residents and forcing older and poorer residents out. The urban roundtable points to the costs of inequality and poverty on the livability of cities for all people. The Roundtable is grimly aware of events since the Assembly’s meeting in Detroit: more gun violence, including unarmed African American young men killed by police; the grim lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan’s public water supply; public education funding and school re-segregation debates; and the struggle against homelessness that continues alongside glittering towers.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), as represented by the General Assembly, opposes the economics and practices of exclusion that restrict people from zones of privileged access, whether by law or custom. How long will patterns of separation and segregation be allowed to replicate fear and prejudice? Recalling the Confession of 1967 as we come to Portland, Oregon, in 2016, forty years after that Confession was sent to the presbyteries, we lift up the phrase, “with an urgency born of this hope.” May we share an urgency born of the hope that our cities may be places of healing more than violence, of love more than fear, of creativity more than desolation, and of community more than exploitation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. Affirming God's call to seek the welfare of the city and to organize God's people for the proclamation of the Gospel and the promotion of racial, economic, and social equity and justice for all citizens of Detroit, Portland, and other cities, take the following actions in both mission strategy and public witness:

a. In mission strategy:

(1) Commend the efforts of Presbyterians in city congregations and presbyteries that embody an urban Christian vision; who see the urban poor as clearly as the glittering skyscrapers; who seek to understand urban trends theologically and ethically; and who unite ministries of mercy and justice with evangelism, education, and cultural outreach, recalling our heritage of urban mission leadership and working to renew or build new worshiping communities grounded in a creative Reforming spirit.

(2) Strengthen the church's witness and outreach "on the ground" by encouraging presbyteries to (a) examine their own histories and statistics of city congregations and (b) renew their own urban strategies in response to existing racial and economic inequity and to new urban demographic, economic, and transportation dynamics, including the promising movement of more young people into cities.

(3) Strengthen the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s commitment to bear the gospel of Jesus Christ to the cities of this nation and to support mid-council efforts by renewing its urban mission strategy and coordinating resources related to metro/urban ministry, including ministries of racial and economic equity; and by continuing the work of the urban roundtable at least through 2018, using existing investments and resources to:

1. Work with presbyteries, congregations, and synods to organize local, regional, and national networks of metro/urban ministry practitioners.
2. Develop partnerships with other faith-based and community-based organizations, especially those creating multiracial and multiclass constituencies that support metro/urban ministry.
3. Coordinate and catalog resources available to support metro/urban congregations and ministries, such as grants, training, and volunteer opportunities.
4. Encourage the expansion of metro/urban ministries related to intentional communities of mission and worship, including communities of young adult volunteers and older volunteers, cooperative "tent-making" ministries, "co-housing" groups for mutual support, and other experiments;
5. Work with presbyteries, synods, seminaries, and other related metro/urban ministry organizations to develop training and networking opportunities, particularly with attention to racial and economic justice.
6. Explore the creation of non-profit economic development vehicles to help presbyteries and congregations transform, redevelop, consolidate, and otherwise manage church properties with a multi-racial strategy for mission, evangelism, and church building, operating ecumenically with Full Communion partners when feasible.

(4) Equip new ministries and worshiping communities by organizing regional conversations on "Race, Class, and the Current Challenges of Urban Ministry," gathering the resources of those who have

significant experience in urban ministry, particularly the rich resources of people of color who have worked with the poor; that the collective wisdom of such conversations be edited, organized, and published periodically in the print, video, and digital media of the PC(USA) for wide availability;

b. In Public Witness:

(1) Faced with the application of bankruptcy law to Detroit and other cities, to state its concern that democratic governance not be over-ridden by measures more appropriate to corporate receivership; to urge that state laws recognize the mutual dependence of healthy cities and suburbs and rural areas and seek measures to reduce tax competition; to require rigorous cost/benefit analysis of all tax giveaways to distinguish between units of civil government and private/for-profit enterprises; to provide transparent and objective analysis and comparative data on the performance of city and state investment agencies; to support policies that share benefits and burdens fairly across metropolitan areas; and to prevent the dismantling of public assets, infrastructure, and social protections.

(2) In view of court decisions and legislation that could allow public employee pension benefit programs to be considered as unsecured creditors (rather than deferred compensation contracts), to state its concern that such precedents tend to weaken rather than strengthen public trust, to devalue public employees and their collective bargaining rights, and to add to problems of economic inequality and therefore urges federal and state lawmakers to improve statutory protections for all public employee pensions and to improve the oversight, disclosure, and administration of public pension funds.

(3) In view of the need to protect both retirees and taxpayers from poor pension fund administration, to recommend that governments be legally required to make pension contributions every year, that state and municipal employees be included in the Social Security system for efficiency and fairness, that any cuts in current salaries and benefits be distributed with intergenerational equity, and that when public and corporate pension benefits must be adjusted to ensure viability, they not be converted to 401(k)s, which substantially increase market risk for workers.

(4) To support stronger environmental and public health protection in areas such as clean water, sanitation, waste disposal, reclamation, zoning to prevent “environmental racism” (a named concern of the General Assembly since 1996), and in the use of “green” energy resources and renewables. Further, recognizing the particularly acute lead poisoning and infrastructure deterioration in Flint, MI, the Assembly supports churches and communities as they strive to ensure full protection by regulators, oversight of state level officials, and planning for the educational and other impacts of long-term toxics exposure;

(5) To support national and state urban policies that favor redevelopment rather than sprawl; regional efficiency in transportation and energy use; holistic, sustainable, and accountable approaches to “promise zones;” and other targeted strategies to assist abandoned or distressed areas;

(6) To include consideration of these urban concerns alongside Assembly affirmations of anti-racism, stronger measures of police accountability and community policing, as well as reforms of drug laws that emphasize public health and prevention over punishment and the selective violence of the drug wars that affect parts of our cities;

(7) To direct the Stated Clerk to post the full text of this resolution and its link to *The Gospel from Detroit* on-line, that it be part of the resources for urban ministry and mission, available for communication and public witness to state, city, and federal lawmakers and regulatory agencies.

RATIONALE

Background

These recommendations are in response to the following referral: Item 08-08. The Gospel from Detroit: Renewing the Church's Urban Vision—From the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy. (*Minutes*, 2014, Part I, pp. 40, 42, 503ff).

Item 08-08 was referred “to the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) to convene an urban ministry roundtable with groups and individuals engaged in urban ministry including, but not limited to, ACSWP, ACWC, ACREC, and racial ethnic caucuses for the purpose of developing a method of fulfilling the goals of Item 08-08 and to report to the 222nd General Assembly (2016)” (*Minutes*, 2014, Part I, p. 503).

Further, in the recommendation section of Item 08-08, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy was requested to provide a “resource of theological and practical experience-based guidance for all engaged in metro/urban ministry, and that this guide be made available to the 222nd General Assembly (2016)” (*Minutes*, 2014, Part I, p. 504). This brief affirmation and practical recommendations are part of that guidance.

At the 2014 General Assembly (GA) in Detroit, its report - *The Gospel From Detroit: Renewing the Church's Urban Vision* - the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) recommended the reestablishment of an Urban Ministry Office at the GA level and to make urban (city) ministry a priority again in the PCUSA. Given financial limitations, the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) did not see it possible to reestablish an office for urban ministry, but instead developed the urban ministry network idea through the referral, which reflected the Assembly's overwhelmingly positive response to *The Gospel from Detroit*.¹ The Roundtable did not convene until October 26, 2015 due to the resolution of staffing issues in the Louisville office.

Chicago Roundtable

Eleven invitees gathered on the campus of the McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, IL., for a three day conversation in October. Members were identified partly through the Urban Presbytery Network (a network of about 35 Presbytery Executives whose presbyteries are located in metro/urban areas). The group met with representatives of Interfaith Worker Justice and the Gamaliel network for the development of faith based community organizing in the Chicago area. The group agreed to go back to their respective presbyteries and initiate the kind of conversations focused upon issues of race, class, and current trends in urban ministry, as recommended in *The Gospel from Detroit*.

Current Trends

The Chicago conversation and subsequent Roundtable conference calls have identified some flashpoint concerns/trends. First, the dynamic of a continued shrinking PCUSA presence in cities constituted by a significant population of people of color challenges the denomination's faithfulness in its discharge of the Great Commission (making disciples of all nations/peoples), and its requirement to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." Second, the PCUSA in particular and white America in general, need to engage in a deeper process of confession and reconciliation pertaining to the legacies of systemic racism in the cities. Third, along with this awareness of deeply rooted black/white and Hispanic/white discrimination (depending on region), our church is being called to understand and welcome other racial ethnic groups, among which Korean American Presbyterians may be the most influential. A fourth concern brought by the regulatory failures in Flint, Michigan, has to do with reversing years of underfunding and neglect in the infrastructure of cities, including the effects of environmental racism.

Whereas racial separation was part of the dynamic of white flight and suburban expansion that were primary challenges to urban ministry from the 1950's to the 1980's, gentrification has been posing new issues from the 1990's forward. Demographic studies project younger middle and upper class people moving back into the core city areas from the suburbs and often staying to raise families, with the subsequent displacement of the urban poor (more often people of color) and immigrants to inner ring suburbs. Unusually low oil prices and lack of public transportation and planning have allowed sprawl to continue, sometimes in ecologically unsustainable areas, posing other challenges, including to the definition of what is "urban."

The challenge to be addressed in resources for the church is how much we build up Christian congregations while also helping build up liveable neighborhoods and larger urban communities. This is where urban ministry and urban mission are joined and, we pray, new allies and members found in both service and justice. Just as there are massive infrastructure needs languishing from lack of public investment, condemning many urban residents to un- and under employment, massive spiritual infrastructure investments are needed to reverse the abandonment of whole lost communities. It is for this reason that we bring recommendations for both mission strategy and public responsibility.

Moving Forward

The Roundtable strongly believes that the urban initiative needs to be sustained, and its composition needs to be expanded. The group lacks any presence from the southeastern USA region, for example. It was also recognized that the origin of *The Gospel From Detroit* was ACSWP's hope to prepare the Assembly to engage with urban mission in Detroit (then facing bankruptcy and other issues). This recognition is not lost in preparing for the 222nd GA in Portland, OR., still burdened by the legacy of being the only state in America to incorporate into its articles of formation language explicitly denying blacks residency and property ownership. This recognition of urban contradictions is not lost as well in looking forward to the convening of the 223rd GA in St. Louis, MO. The St. Louis metropolitan area

gave much impetus to the formation of the Black Lives Matters movement following the racial discord in suburban Ferguson, MO., with the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. The Urban Roundtable believes that honest and searching conversation is much needed, can produce valuable fruit, and that God's providence may be seen in this succession of cities for our church's deliberative meetings. May God use our congregations and presbyteries in these host cities to help illuminate the hope of the Gospel for all of us!

ⁱ In terms of urban ministry history, it was Detroit Presbytery that originated the overture, adopted by the 1992 Assembly, "urging presbyteries to designate 80% of net proceeds... from the sale of inner-city Presbyterian church buildings...to be used for inner-city re-development, evangelism, and mission outreach... (and) urging that the remaining 20% be designated to establish a national urban ministry endowment fund.. *Minutes*, 1992, p. 868

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