



SPRING 2021

## A Brief History of the Office of Public Witness

By Rev. Jimmie R. Hawkins



*Catherine Gordon, Annette Greer, the Rev. Christian Brook, and the Rev. Jimmie Hawkins are the full-time staff of the Office of Public Witness.*

The Presbyterian Office of Public Witness (OPW) is the public policy information and advocacy office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The church deemed that justice was a vital component of the mission of the Christian church. We justify OPW's existence based on our faith in a God of justice. OPW's primary mission is advocacy engagement and to encourage Presbyterians to be agents of advocacy. OPW does not determine the positions it advocates. Rather, it is guided by the social witness positions and policies of the

General Assembly. The church has a long history of applying biblically and theologically based foundations to issues that affect the most vulnerable, nationally and globally.

Presbyterians have a long history of serving as political advocates. Before it merged with the United Nations office, the history of the Office of Public Witness is quite extensive. According to our website: "In 1936, the former United Presbyterian Church in the USA developed the Department of Social Education and Action. This new Department created the first organized

national effort." Fern Coborn was hired as its first director in 1946. The church valued the work to be done and wanted to have a functioning staff, so it also supplied a secretary. The office was located on Eleventh Street NW in Washington, D.C. This became the first Presbyterian Washington Office. Since then, the Washington Office has been led by several directors and many dedicated issue staff. Past directors include Mary Jane Patterson, Elenora Giddings Ivory, J. Herbert Nelson, II and Jimmie R. Hawkins. Patterson came to Washington in 1971 as associate



*(Continued from page 1)*

director of the Washington Office of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA. In 1975, she became the office's director. The PC(USA) Communications Department wrote of Giddings Ivory in 2009, "During Giddings Ivory's tenure the office focused on civil rights, religious liberty and African debt relief. She was a fixture on Capitol Hill, pressing the church's case on such issues as peace, human rights, development assistance, food policy, support for the United Nations, and the entire range of foreign and domestic policy issues addressed by the PC(USA) General Assembly." She was actively involved in the fight against South African apartheid. Giddings Ivory was instrumental in the relief of African debt and stood beside President Bill Clinton as he announced it to the world. Nelson created a day

of advocacy training for Presbyterians, which continues to offer training for community activism and advocacy. Hawkins worked with the ecumenical community to successfully lobby the Biden-Harris administration to reinstate the Faith-Based & Neighborhood Engagement Office, which engages with the faith community on issues of policy. He has participated in several conversations with Josh Dickson and other Biden Transition Team members to share issues the faith community hopes the administration will promote.

OPW participates in two advocacy training conferences. CPJ Training Day is an event for Presbyterians. Ecumenical Advocacy Days is an interfaith/ecumenical gathering for people engaged and interested in doing effective advocacy. Office of Public Witness

staff members have conversations with federal policymakers and their staff. We issue and support sign-on letters, make phone calls and occasionally testify before Congress. We arrange meetings between Presbyterian constituents and their congressional representatives. We issue "Action Alerts," which inform Presbyterians and encourage engagement with members of Congress. We also have volunteers who work with the office on a variety of platforms. We have summer fellows who spend the summer working on international or domestic issues. We have Young Adult Volunteers who spend a year working with us. We provide field supervision for seminarians who are interested in public policy. This is of particular interest for OPW, as engagement with young adults is of great importance to OPW and the church.



## Welcoming the Stranger: Immigration, Root Causes, and the Search for Justice and Transformation

*A new webinar series from the PMA Migration Roundtable*

The PC(USA) Migration Roundtable will present a series of webinars to address issues related to forced displacement and U.S. policy. The reasons people are forced to leave their homes and their countries are frequently related to societal issues that are bigger than what any one family can address alone, such as:

- War and civil unrest,
- government human rights abuses with impunity,
- economic collapse and natural disasters.

A PC(USA) statement from 1999 reminds us that love of neighbor requires Christians to seek justice for refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants. This webinar series will address key questions around "When people feel compelled or pushed to leave, what kind of reception do they encounter?" "What does justice look like in U.S. policy to address root causes?" and "What does justice look like in the reception of asylum seekers and resettled refugees?"

Visit our Facebook page at [facebook.com/pcusawashington](https://facebook.com/pcusawashington) to find past episodes and information about upcoming episodes beginning this spring.



# Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations

by Sue Rheem

As with most events during the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2020 without much fanfare. It is, however, a remarkable milestone. When the U.N. was created in 1945, in the aftermath of World War II that brought unimaginable carnage and suffering, the world declared, "Never again!" The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and its predecessor denominations supported the formation of the United Nations, recognizing the need to honor the deep connections within our human family and awaken a new international spirit of community and cooperation.

The PC(USA)'s commitment to international peace and justice remains strong to this day. We have a presence at the United Nations. The Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations office is located right across the street from the United Nations, bearing witness in the name of Jesus Christ in the U.N. community. In 1989, the PC(USA) was granted special consultative status with the U.N. Economic Social Council. This designation allows our voice to be heard by a truly global audience and contributes to its agenda by attending international conferences and events, making written and oral statements, organizing parallel and side events, and taking part in advocacy and networking. The Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations advocates for peace and justice to the United Nations based on Presbyterian General Assemblies' policies.

Over the years, the church has advocated on issues of peace, nuclear disarmament, gender justice, HIV/

AIDS, migration and refugees, human rights, human trafficking, international religious freedom, climate change and countries throughout the world, such as the Korean peninsula, Israel Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, South Sudan, Venezuela, Colombia and Cuba, to name a few.

We also inspire and equip Presbyterians for global discipleship as followers of Christ through participation in U.N. forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women and congregational resources. On United Nations Day, Oct. 24, 2020, we launched "Engaging Our World," a Sunday school curriculum on the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals that highlights ways all of us can work together to live more sustainably. It is in recognition that we are all connected, and using the earth's resources responsibly can

lead to sustainable development for future generations. If the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us anything, it is that the world is interconnected and what affects one affects all.

A new international organization was created 75 years ago to promote peace and work for the betterment of the world. It began as a great experiment and continues assisting many of our siblings around the world who are suffering from violence, hunger and disease. Our church has been a moral voice in this experiment, proclaiming God's peace, justice and hope in the world.

In 2021, a new exciting chapter begins for Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations as we join with the Office of Public Witness Washington Office to advocate for international justice and peace here at the United Nations and on Capitol Hill.



*The Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations sits across the street from the U.N. campus in New York City.*



# Commission on the Status of Women

By Ivy Lopedito

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the United Nations' largest gathering on gender equality and is a working commission of the United Nations' Economic and Social Council. The commission formulates policies that promote gender equality and the empowerment of women worldwide and measures progress toward the accomplishment of those policies. Every year, representatives of Member States gather for two weeks to evaluate progress on gender equality, identify challenges, set global standards and formulate concrete policies to promote gender equality and women's empowerment worldwide. All of these things happen through intense dialogue, official meetings and side events.

This year, CSW65 took place from March 15–26. Due to COVID-19, the majority of the meetings were held virtually. This gave the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations an exciting opportunity to invite more delegates that might not have been able to go in the past due to travel and lodging. We were so thrilled to invite our delegation from last year and focus on inviting young adults to this commission, creating one of our church's most diverse delegations. The Presbyterian participants, guided by Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly policy, join our partners in Ecumenical Women to advocate with the Commission for God's justice and peace.

Each session of the commission focuses on a specific priority theme. The priority theme for 2021 was women's full and effective participation and decision-



*The U.N. Commission on the Status of Women was held virtually this year, and the Presbyterian delegation met numerous times on Zoom.*

making in public life and the elimination of violence for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. The fundamental outcome of the commission is the “agreed conclusions” document on the priority theme. The agreed conclusions contain an evaluation of progress, as well as the gaps and challenges. They also contain a set of concrete recommendations for “action by governments, intergovernmental bodies and other institutions, civil society actors and other relevant stakeholders, to be implemented at the international, national, regional and local level.”

Our heart at the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations is to create a space where our delegates can become inspired and feel more equipped to advocate for gender equality in their

own spheres. Through the sessions they attend, they will receive information that we hope will empower them to go back into their own communities and take the bold steps to empower others!

Overall, what is so powerful about CSW is that the agendas are brought forward to make women's rights a reality. It is a way forward, a place to come together from every corner of the world seeking change and the justice that all women so rightly deserve. Our church has been and will continue to be a part of this world-changing commission, leading to a better future for all who come after us.

**For more information on the Commission on the Status of Women, contact Ivy Lopedito at [ivy.lopedito@pcusa.org](mailto:ivy.lopedito@pcusa.org).**



# U.S. Sanctions

By Ailih Weeldreyer



For decades, economic sanctions were viewed as an acceptable substitute to armed conflict with countries not in line with U.S. global security interests, international law or international human rights standards. However, evidence is growing to show that sanctions are not the victimless, effective diplomatic tactic they are assumed to be. Since the end of World War II, the United States and many other countries have sought to maintain a world without international war by prioritizing diplomatic and other non-militaristic coercive tactics. States use sanctions as an alternative to use of force when opposing the decisions of another country to maintain the image of prioritizing “peaceful” solutions over war. Yet the use of sanctions is much more complicated

than “peaceful” versus “violent,” and economic pressure on an entire country can have consequences equally as dire as a war for a nation’s people.

This reality is made clear when looking at the human implications and lack of diplomatic results of current U.S. sanctions imposed on Iran, Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea and Syria. These countries have faced varying levels of sanctions and embargoes for decades. The sanctions historically limited trade with specific industries, including arms and oil, while exempting vital trading and imports such as medicine, food, and health-care resources. These exemptions are designed to ensure that civilians are not inhumanely impacted; however, the intensity of U.S. sanctions has increased over time as administrations attempt

to exert more pressure on these states that oppose U.S. interests and ideals. Now, American sanctions limit these economies to such an extent that even vital exempted industries face barriers.

As a result of increasingly strict sanctions regimes, food shortages in North Korea threaten the lives of an estimated 60,000 children.<sup>1</sup> In Syria, sweeping U.S. sanctions create fuel shortages, block international aid groups from providing food and medicine, and prevent access to building supplies needed to begin revitalizing the country.<sup>2</sup> According to a report released earlier this year, more than 300,000 people in Venezuela were denied access to the health care they needed due to sanctions.<sup>3</sup> This included people with HIV, diabetes, cancer and other



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chronic illnesses who could not access life-saving medicines and treatments. After the implementation of the most recent heightened sanctions regime, the mortality rate in Venezuela increased by an estimated 31%. Similarly, broad U.S. sanctions on Iranian banks limit the country's ability to fund humanitarian necessities that are technically exempted, such as chemotherapy and epilepsy medications.<sup>4</sup> The consequences of these medication shortages are potentially lethal to people facing chronic health concerns. Now, in the midst of a global pandemic, U.S. sanctions continue to restrict access to essential medical resources in all these countries, including Cuba, where PC(USA) partners call for an end to sanctions so that they can carry out their humanitarian missions and the Cuban people can live dignified and peaceful lives. The dire implications of these embargoes on civilian lives, would, if applied to an armed conflict, violate international humanitarian law.<sup>5</sup>

These facts are contrasted with the lack of progress on the diplomatic issues that sanctions were meant to affect. In Venezuela, the economic collapse has only resulted in societal disarray, causing those in power to tighten their grip. Iran responded to the reimplementing of sanctions by restarting their nuclear program and shows no signs of slowing their pace of weapons development. Syria's dictator has not relented in his campaign to regain control over the country, nor does he seem to be personally impacted by the economic limitations. The Syrian people, including PC(USA) partners, actively call for an end to sanctions, which only worsen the conditions of life in a failed state.

Long-term maximum pressure sanctions clearly fail as a diplomatic tool, and that alone is enough to question their continued use. But it is also important to consider the aim

of such policies, as many believe that their intended results are a violation of international norms. Are sanctions really being used as a tool to pressure movement toward a global society that is safer and more respectful of human rights, or simply to exert U.S. control? If the goal is to create a better environment for the people of a certain country, sanctions are counter to that end. If the goal is to force regime change or to force a decision to benefit U.S. economic or security interests, then their use becomes even more questionable. Economic sanctions can be an effective strategy for change when they are supported by the people impacted, as in the case of apartheid South Africa. But when the people suffering under an oppressive regime call for release from sanctions, as they do in Syria, Cuba and many other sanctioned states, U.S. officials must listen and realize that their strategy is causing vast harm.

There is precedent for calling for the lifting of sanctions due to adverse humanitarian impacts and lack of diplomatic results. In 1998, the PC(USA) General Assembly called on the U.S. government to lift the crippling embargo on Iraq, which was

causing great economic devastation to the population. Similarly, in overtures to the 223rd and 224th Assemblies, Presbyterians called for relief for Syrians from the impoverishment caused by U.S. sanctions. It can be expected that similar overtures will be brought to upcoming General Assemblies, presenting the body an opportunity to condemn the use of maximum pressure sanctions as a foreign policy strategy.

As a faith community working in this world for peace and justice, we must interrogate long-held beliefs about the use of sanctions as a diplomatic source of pressure. We must look at the realities people face in sanctioned states and ask ourselves: Are sanctions truly peaceful? Can we condone the impoverishment of an entire people to bring a state into alignment with our interests? And as we engage in this interrogation, we must also ask ourselves how we define violence. For we can see the evidence in our own domestic struggles that peace does not equal the simple absence of war. If we believe in eradicating violence, we must consider the kinds of violence that are less visible, but cause equal amounts of human devastation.

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#### FOOTNOTES

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# Speaking out for Black maternal health

by Darla Carter | Presbyterian News Service

The way the Rev. Laura James sees it, caring for “the least of these,” as Jesus mentioned in the New Testament, includes advocating for Black maternal health.

James cited Matthew 25:35–40 during a Black maternal health webinar hosted by the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness and the General Board of Church & Society of the United Methodist Church.

“As a church, we cannot stand by and be silent as disparities and preventable deaths of Black mothers and their families grow,” said James, program coordinator for grassroots organizing for the General Board of Church & Society. “As people of faith, we must be a moral witness and stand for justice. We must educate, we must preach and teach our congregations that the sacredness of mothers’ lives, of Black mothers’ lives, matters.”

The pregnancy-related mortality rate for Black women is more than three times higher than the rate for white women (40.8 vs. 12.7 per 100,000 live births), according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Furthermore, “our bodies, as Black women, are being worn down more quickly because of the dual oppressions of sexism and racism,” James said.

She described “the least of these” as including not only the poor but those who are systemically oppressed, exploited, harmed and abused.

Racism and white supremacy are part of “a system of oppression that I believe that Christ is calling us to address

when he calls us to care for the least of these,” she said. “This is a context that as people of faith we must confront and acknowledge and advocate to justly transform as God has called us to.”

James highlighted UMC’s “Saving Mothers’ Lives” resource that includes articles on topics such as maternal health and COVID-19, maternal health as it relates to child separation at the border, and justice for incarcerated mothers. “I hope you will use them as you are cultivating your faith voice to advocate for Black maternal health,” she said.

Fellow speaker Aza Nedhari discussed reproductive justice, noting that it’s a human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, to have or not have children, and to parent one’s children in a safe and sustainable community.

A birthing person cannot make an individual decision about their body if they are part of a community where human rights are continually being violated through policies, laws, policing or environmental dangers, said Nedhari, executive director of Washington, D.C.’s Mamatoto Village, which provides perinatal support services, workforce development training and emergency resources for Black women and birthing people in vulnerable communities.

“I believe that it is our duty ... to cultivate and advocate for safety, for justice and for care,” she said.

Illinois Congresswoman Lauren Underwood appeared in a pre recorded video to promote the Black Maternal

Health Momnibus Act of 2021 and stress her commitment to advancing legislation to save moms’ lives.

Among other things, the bill would make critical investments in social determinants of health that influence maternal health outcomes; provide funding to community-based organizations that are working to improve maternal health outcomes and promote equity; and grow and diversify the perinatal workforce to ensure that every mom in America receives culturally congruent maternity care and support, according to the website of the Black Maternal Health Caucus.

The Momnibus Act also would support moms with maternal mental health conditions and substance use disorders and improve maternal health care and support for incarcerated moms.

“These are necessary investments that will save lives and support families,” Underwood said.

The event was hosted by Christian Brooks, Representative for Domestic Issues in the Office of Public Witness, who offered resources for people who want to take action. Those resources included “Applying Racial Equity Lens to U.S. Federal Nutrition Assistance Programs,” a paper co-authored by Brooks that discusses the importance of considering racism and discrimination when creating and implementing policy.

“The desire is to give people the resources that they need to achieve equal outcomes,” she said.

Watch the webinar at [bit.ly/3dE7eqk](https://bit.ly/3dE7eqk).



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