



Washington Report to Presbyterians

Fall 2015

From the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness

Raising A Prophetic Voice through the Social Justice Policy of Presbyterians since 1946

After the Waters (and the Cameras) are Gone: A Reflection on New Orleans, Systemic Poverty, and the Ongoing Struggle for Justice

by *Nora Leccese*

We welcome Nora Leccese in her new role as Interim Domestic Policy Director at the Office of Public Witness.



Courtesy of FEMA, Jocelyn Augustino

Let us look at New Orleans today, after the 10th Anniversary of Katrina when the fan-fair has subsided and the news cameras have gone home. The recent commemoration and celebration told the story of thousands of homes rebuilt, a thriving tourism industry, and a well publicized reorganization of the school system. The story was undergirded with an insistent message of hope. But, because we as Christians are empowered with a call to Public Witness, we must take more than just a cursory look; we want to know not just if order has been restored but if justice has been done in New Orleans. Jesus stands firmly in the tradition of Amos, Isaiah, and Hosea when he chastises those who neglect the weightier matters of justice and mercy, and we too must not turn away from difficult conversations in favor of heralding the neat repair of the “breach in our social fabric” caused by Katrina and generations of institutional racism.

Katrina was a turning point in our nations history when the U.S. was forced to reckon with the devastation of social and economic injustice compounded by the devastation of the storm. It catalyzed a national conversation about race and poverty that is as relevant today as it was ten years ago. Renewal and healing in New Orleans mean not just reconstruction, but dismantling the systemic racism and persistent inequality that exacerbated the disaster in the first place. Following the ten year anniversary of the storm, we at the Office of Public Witness take time to reflect on the decade since Katrina made landfall, the Church’s ongoing commitment to justice in New Orleans, and to celebrate the resilience of communities along the Gulf Coast.

I would like to begin my work here at the Office of Public Witness with a reflection on incarnational solidarity as it relates to our continued vigilance of and mourning with New Orleans. A General Assembly resolution entitled *Struck Down but Not Destroyed* recalled the aftermath of Katrina as a “time when most Presbyterians put aside theological differences to respond to God’s call to care for

Continued on page 7

Katrina was a turning point in our nations history when the U.S. was forced to reckon with the devastation of social and economic injustice compounded by the devastation of the storm. It catalyzed a national conversation about race and poverty that is as relevant today as it was ten years ago. Renewal and healing in New Orleans mean not just reconstruction, but dismantling the systemic racism and persistent inequality that exacerbated the disaster in the first place.

Celebrating Successes in 2015

Cuba Removed from List of State Sponsors of Terrorism

Last summer the 2014 General Assembly urged the United States government to take Cuba off the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. In spite of increasing cooperation between the US and Cuban governments on Counter narcotics and immigration issues, Cuba was on this list along with Iran, Syria, and South Yemen. This spring, thanks to the work of Presbyterians, our ecumenical and interfaith partners, and others, the Secretary of State announced that it would remove Cuba from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. This is a huge victory for those working for an end to the economic embargo of Cuba. While the administration has made huge steps forward in normalizing relations with Cuba, only Congress can vote to end the embargo. Taking Cuba off the State Sponsors of Terrorism list removes one of the last hurdles in convincing members of congress to vote to end the embargo. Stay tuned for updates and actions on legislation to finally end the economic embargo of Cuba! And thanks to all who contributed to this great success!



Diplomacy Prevails in Iran Agreement

After many years of advocating for a peaceful resolution to the conflict over nuclear issues with Iran, the Presbyterian Church (USA) could celebrate this summer with two historic victories. The first victory came in July with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran and China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany. Many of you took action to contact your members of congress as well as the administration to support this agreement and ask congress not to take any actions that would hinder the negotiations that achieved this historic agreement.

The agreement with Iran imposes unparalleled constraints on Iran's nuclear program and dramatically decreases any nuclear capability. In exchange, the international community has begun to lift sanctions on Iran. It also establishes the most robust monitoring and inspection regime ever negotiated to verify Iran's compliance with the restrictions on its nuclear program.

**Thank you for your
sustained advocacy!**

The second victory came in September when there was a move by Congress to try to block the agreement. Again, Presbyterians raised their voices for peace and diplomatic solutions rather than war, and 42 Senators voted in favor of the agreement, enough for the agreement to move forward. Thanks to your advocacy we now have an agreement that will move the world farther away from the possibility of war and another nuclear-armed nation and moves us one small step

Advocacy Training Weekend: Save the Dates



Save The Date

Ecumenical Advocacy Days and
Compassion Peace and Justice Training Day 2016

“Lift Every Voice! Racism, Class and Power”

**April 15-18, 2016
Washington, DC**

In a major U.S. election year when lives, votes and the global economy are at stake, followers of Christ ask,

“Who has a voice?”

The response is,

“Everyone!”

But in our neighborhoods, cities, and around the world, the voices of too many people are silenced.

For generations in this country, social, economic, corporate and political powers have colluded to reduce and eliminate access to voting. Historically, systemic injustice has been carried out through poll taxes, unreasonable and egregious voter requirements and violent opposition to calls for justice and change. Today, we are experiencing injustice through not only an attempt for voter suppression, but police brutality, detention and mass incarceration. In the U.S. and around the world, communities whose health, water, air and land are threatened by corporate greed, voices for justice are often curbed through extreme violence, intimidation and murder.

In this country, communities of color are under siege: named and unnamed black lives are killed each year by police; immigrants are detained and scapegoated; and public displays of discontent and calls for solidarity have too often been met with disregard, suppression or violence. Around the world, decisions that affect the well-being of lives and the entire global economy – one based on continued growth despite the limits to earth’s natural resources and capacity to absorb such growth – are often made in closed boardrooms and in great secrecy.

Like the persistent widow who demands that the judge hear her plea (Luke 18:1-8), at EAD 2016, we will bring our petitions for justice to Capitol Hill. Like the persistent widow, we will not be silenced.

Come to “Lift Every Voice” on April 15-18, 2016 where people of faith will speak truth to power concerning the suppression of political and economic rights, and the corporate undermining of the local voice of ordinary people in the U.S. and around the world. Through prayer, worship, advocacy training, networking and mobilization with other Christians, we will face the reality of racism, class and power impacting politics and policies and advocate for the liberty of “Every Voice!” – all culminating with EAD’s Congressional Lobby Day on Capitol Hill.

OPW Hosts Faith Leader from South Sudan

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; 2 Corinthians 5:18 (NRSV)

In mid-October, the Office of Public Witness was honored to host the President of the South Sudan Council of Churches, Rev. Peter Gai. Rev. Gai also serves at the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan.

Rev. Gai brought a message of peace and a pledge from the churches of South Sudan to be a vehicle for peace in that war torn country. Rev. Gai participated in a congressional briefing and met with high-level officials in the State Department, USAID, and the National Security Council. He also met with the Sudan

Working Group of the United States Institute of Peace and briefed the Washington Interfaith Staff Community. In all of these meetings, Rev. Gai emphasized that the churches in South Sudan were ready to work for peace and that the church in South Sudan is the only institution that has the trust of the people and can reach them on a grassroots level. He stressed that the church stands as one, that it is not part of the current crisis and it is willing to help to solve the crisis.

Since the conflict in South Sudan began in 2013, over 1.6 million people have been displaced and over 600,000 more have become refugees fleeing in neighboring countries. The number of severely food insecure people has increased to 3.9 million. In a United Nations rights report released earlier this year, the agency warned of widespread human rights abuses, including gangrape and torture. The report was based on 115 victims and eyewitnesses from the northern state of Unity, scene of some of the heaviest recent fighting in the 18-month-long civil war notable for its new brutality and intensity.

The escalating violence has forced many aid agencies to relocate staff and suspend programs in South Sudan's Unity State. Aid agencies have been forced to stop their life-saving interventions. As a result, the United Nations has reported that an estimated 40,000 people in southern and central Unity may be facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity and malnutrition from October to December 2015. Humanitarian partners have alerted that, unless unrestricted humanitarian access is urgently granted, food insecurity could deteriorate to famine in parts of Unity State, such as Leer, Guit, Koch and Mayendit.

The Greater Upper Nile area is the area of South Sudan in which the Presbyterian Church of South Sudan is predominant and the area of South Sudan on which Presbyterian Ministry has focused for over 100 years.

While the church can help with reconciliation, it can only begin once the fighting has stopped and aid can be sent to the hardest hit regions of South Sudan. The United States can help by urging full and unhindered humanitarian access to the most vulnerable, including in hard-to-reach areas. Factions in the conflict have blocked access to humanitarian aid, leaving millions of people food insecure, some on the brink of starvation. The United States should do everything in its power to pressure both sides of the conflict to allow aid to reach those who need it most.



Advent of Justice for Palestine

During this time when we turn our attention and our hope toward Bethlehem and the Holy Land where the Prince of Peace was born, we cannot ignore the continuing and escalating violence in Palestine and Israel.

We know that the “little town of Bethlehem” of which we sing is now surrounded by a separation wall with checkpoints that are sites of daily degradation and violence against Palestinians. We know that this town where Jesus was born is now also surrounded by illegal Israeli settlements that the Presbyterian Church (USA) has called “illegitimate, illegal under international law, and an enduring threat to peace in the region.” We know that the land that was home to the Prince of Peace is one of the places in the world that most cries out for peace.

This year, let us wait and hope for the Prince of Peace by working for justice. Rev. J. Herbert Nelson, director of the PC(USA) Office of Public Witness, [has issued a call for Presbyterians to make this an “Advent of Justice”](#) and to resolve to “actively support the boycott” of products made in Israeli settlements. Presbyteries, congregations, and individuals can do this by:

- [Signing the boycott pledge](http://bit.ly/1NPk9hX); <http://bit.ly/1NPk9hX>
- Committing to study the reality of the Occupation of Palestine through preaching, an adult education class, a minute-for-mission, or including information about the boycott in your bulletin (example paragraph given below);
- Joining a webinar on January 13 at 3 p.m. to learn more about the Presbyterian Church’s decision and commitment to support the boycott (more information will be available soon).

As our Advent texts point us toward the star over Bethlehem and the birth of the Christ child, we invite Presbyterians to also focus our hearts and minds toward the reality of Palestine today. We hope that you and members of your congregation and Presbytery will sign the boycott pledge and commit to learning more about how we as Presbyterians in the United States can work for justice in the Holy Land.



Support Peace in the Middle East

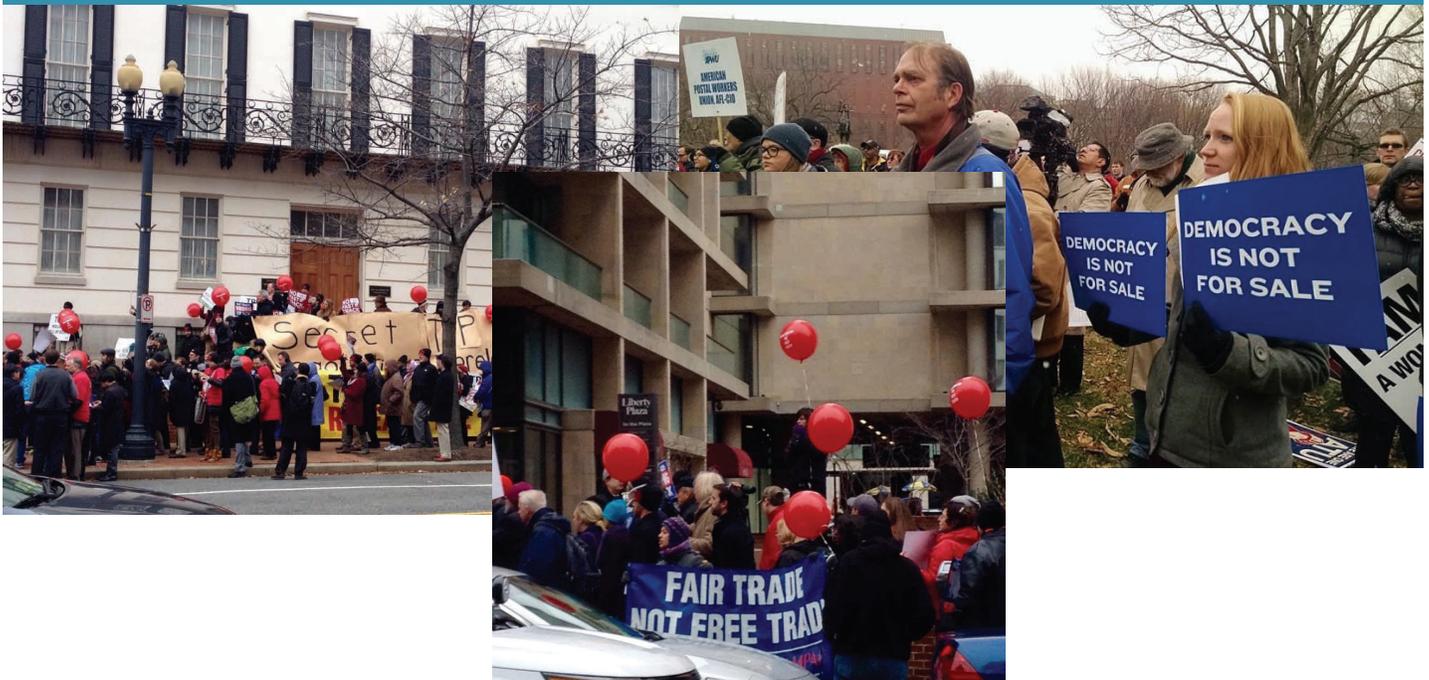
Welcoming Mara Sawdy, Young Adult Volunteer

Mara Sawdy is a Young Adult Volunteer from West Newton, Pennsylvania. Mara is a recent graduate of Westminster College where she majored in environmental science with a minor in peace studies. Growing up, she attended West Newton United Presbyterian Church, where her grandfather served as a minister for 25 years. While at school she was involved in model United Nations, served as a member of the Alliance for Aquatic Resource Monitoring, and interned at the Silk Road Fair Trade Market. Mara enjoys reading Agatha Christie novels, Downton Abbey, and visiting the various museums in D.C.



This upcoming year, I am serving as a Young Adult Volunteer (YAV) in the exciting city of Washington, D.C.! I am currently living simply in the city with my fellow D.C. YAVs as I work at Miriam's Kitchen and the Office of Public Witness with the Presbyterian Church. The goal at Miriam's Kitchen is to end chronic homelessness. Miriam's provides guests with a meal, an art program, and access to various services. When I am there, I get to help people fill out paperwork to get vital records that they may need, help them search for jobs, and get to sit and listen to their stories. The job can be extremely challenging, but it is also immensely rewarding. One day, I helped a guest apply to various jobs on the computer. The next day I saw the same guest at a bus stop, and he gave me the biggest smile and thanked me yet again for all of my help. The Office of Public Witness is the public policy information and advocacy office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Its task is to advocate, and help the church to advocate, the social witness perspectives and policies of the Presbyterian General Assembly. I recently attended a strike of low-wage federal contract workers to protest poverty pay. The entire time I was present at the strike, I felt such a feeling of unity and strength. Hearing the stories of those striking brought me to tears. It has been in small moments like these, whether a smile and thank you from a guest or experiencing the unity of those suffering, where I see God at work.

A Photo Essay: Demonstrating Against the TPP



After the Waters (and the Cameras) Are Gone, *continued...*

one another, acknowledging that: “[when] one member suffers, all suffer together” (1 Cor. 12:26). Expressing a similar sentiment, Martin Luther King Jr. referred to solidarity in a 1968 speech in saying “in a real sense all life is inter-related. All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” Adding the concept of incarnation within this context means that God is also part of the inescapable network of mutuality and intertwined within this single garment. It is with this foundation that we strive to be in solidarity with communities in New Orleans by speaking the truth; the truth that much work remains to be done. *Continued from page 1*

When the levees protecting New Orleans failed in August 2005, approximately 80 percent of the city was flooded. The business district and main tourist centers were relatively undamaged, but vast expanses of many New Orleans neighborhoods were inundated. Those neighborhoods were largely home to working class people of color. It is well documented that the government response was inadequate and chaotic, and that human error and underestimation exacerbated a grave natural disaster. As the acute crisis passed and the flood waters receded, residents took stock of exactly why the levees failed. Reports emerged of gross mismanagement by the Army Corps of Engineers and [shoddy construction of levees](#). A well-designed levee system might not have held back the high waves and storm surges, but it would have minimized damage and allowed a swifter recovery.

Presbyterian Disaster Assistance swung into action immediately after the storm and has worked in solidarity with communities in New Orleans since that time. Thanks to tent communities and other logistical arrangements by PDA and the hospitality and coordination provided by Presbyteries and local congregations, an astonishing number of more than 35,000 volunteers have now pitched in to help reverse the effects of a combined natural, governmental, and cultural disaster.

Young Adult Service Learning

The Office of Public Witness believes that the formation of servant leaders and advocates is vital to the public policy ministry and witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Our fundraising efforts for service learning are ongoing. YAV Placements contribute a portion of Volunteers' living expenses to the Presbytery. In addition, each Summer Fellow receives a modest stipend to help defray the cost of living expenses, which are considerable in DC. We need your help to continue offering these opportunities! Your gift could make the difference between a vocational dream and a lived reality. Please give generously to support our YAVs, Interns, and Summer Fellows.

Give online at bit.ly/OPWgiveinterns



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Office of Public Witness
Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries
100 Maryland Avenue, NE Suite 410
Washington, DC 20002-5625

WASHINGTON REPORT TO PRESBYTERIANS (ISSN NO. 1093-5436) is published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness, 100 Maryland Ave. NE, Ste. 410, Washington, DC 20002 (202-543-1126). Periodicals postage paid Washington, DC. Postmaster: Send address changes to Washington Report to Presbyterians, 100 Maryland Ave., NE, Ste. 410, Washington, DC 20002. For subscription information, please contact that address or email ga_washington_office@pcusa.org.

**Periodicals Postage Paid
Washington DC and at
Additional offices**



Become our partners in ministry!

We offer two special giving opportunities that go directly to fund the public witness of the church and the formation and training of young adult leaders. Please designate:

Public Witness:
ECO# 865714

Internship/Fellowship:
ECO# 051422

Please send donations to:

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness
100 Maryland Avenue, NE, Ste. 410
Washington, DC 20002

Give online at bit.ly/OPWgive

Or bit.ly/OPWgiveinterns

Or Text PCUSA OPW to 20222 to give \$10

The Office of Public Witness wants to help you stay informed!



Scan the code to the left
or visit
www.capwiz.com/pcusa
to sign up for:

- action alerts
- legislative updates
- event notices
- *Advocacy as Discipleship*



Connect with us @PCUSAWashington
and officeofpublicwitness.blogspot.com