Join us April 20 for Compassion Peace & Justice Training Day

Gather with your fellow Presbyterians as we look at how our church and our partners are confronting white supremacy and nativism while supporting refugee and migrant populations in our country and abroad. In plenaries and workshops we will analyze our current context and offer concrete tools for members and their congregations to address these urgent issues. We will learn how we build a unified public witness of subversive love amidst the abuse and hatred running rampant in our country.

After Compassion Peace and Justice Training Day, join the ecumenical community for Ecumenical Advocacy Days, April 20–23. Almost one thousand Christian advocates join us every year for a weekend of workshops, lectures and concrete actions addressing the ills of our nation. The weekend culminates in “Lobby Day” on Monday, April 23, when we raise our voices in the halls of power for a more just, all-inclusive and equal society.

Visit presbyterianmission.org/OPW for registration information.

U.S. freezes support for UNRWA

UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, was established in 1948 specifically to provide relief and support for Palestinian refugees. The agency offers critical services to Palestinian refugees including: primary and vocational education, primary health care, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvement, microfinance and emergency response; it operates in situations of armed conflict. UNRWA currently serves over 500,000 Palestinian refugee children in its schools and provides 3.1 million refugees with access to health care. And they are involved in the emergency response in Syria serving over 400,000 Palestinian refugees affected by the conflict.

Unfortunately, the United States has taken steps that would critically harm the ability of this agency to continue providing much needed aid. After the announcement that the U.S. would be moving its embassy to Jerusalem, the Trump administration placed a freeze on over 80 percent of U.S. funding for UNRWA in order to pressure Palestinians back to the negotiating table. The organization is now facing the most severe funding crisis in its history, threatening its support to an estimated 5.3 million people.

U.S. support for UNRWA amounts to about one-third of the agency’s annual budget. Ending this assistance will have disastrous consequences for the Palestinian refugees who depend on it. UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness warned that half a million Palestinian children will suffer if UNRWA cannot deliver its services.

In a recent op-ed, Abby Smardon, director of UNRWA USA, describes the effects of the funding freeze, “The humanitarian situation is getting worse in the Gaza Strip and throughout the Middle East, as the United States continues to withhold critical assistance from Palestinian refugees by freezing funding to UNRWA. Families are running out of food, health clinics are in danger of closing, and UNRWA security officers are being laid off. The hundreds of thousands of young girls who attend UNRWA schools — a system that since the 1960s has achieved gender parity — are at risk of losing their education if there’s no money for teachers.”

It is imperative that we continue to advocate for continued full funding of UNRWA by the United States. Please contact your members of Congress and demand full funding of UNRWA.

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Gun violence is one of the most important issues facing this country and has created a health epidemic. According to scientific literature, American children face a substantial risk of exposure to firearm injury and death. In 2014, 3,702 young people ages 10–24 were victims of homicide, 68 percent of these victims were African-American males.¹ Gun violence is the intolerable by-product of a nation struggling with the essence of community building. Our congregations are essential to communities overcoming the need to choose guns over love. Let us use this tragic event for good and work toward the “peaceable Kingdom.”

Some facts about gun violence in the United States:

- Gun-related deaths were the 2nd highest cause of death for children and teenagers, 1–19.²
- Boys were six times more likely to be murdered with a gun than girls.²
- White teenagers and children accounted for 88 percent of gun-related, suicide deaths.²
- There were 36,252 gun-related homicides in 2015 (7.8 percent of total deaths in the United States).³

Some facts concerning school shootings in the United States (2012):

- One percent of student homicides and suicides happen at school or on the way to school.⁴
- Statistically, 80 percent of guns used in school-related homicides were brought from home, a friend, or a relative.⁴

There are several approaches to deal with this issue:

1. Become informed about the destruction gun violence is having on your local community and state. How many gun deaths are there annually? How do these deaths occur (suicide, murder, accidental gun shooting, etc.)

2. Identify organizations/non-profits which have been addressing the issue of gun violence and prevention to partner with.

3. Email our office to request post cards of this petition to use in your church and local community.

4. Encourage your pastor(s) to preach sermons, teach bible studies, and become involved in the efforts to eradicate gun violence in your local community.

5. Host a screening of Trigger, the PC(USA) documentary on eradicating gun violence. Hold congregational and community discussions in your house of worship.

Continued on next page
Gun violence

6. Write and/or call your Congresspersons and the President each week stating your support for federal legislation to reduce gun violence. Find contact information for your elected officials at capwiz.com/pcusa.

7. Read the gun violence policy statement of the PC(USA) General Assembly, and bring the bible study to an Adult Christian Education class. Gun Violence and Gospel Values: Mobilizing In Response to God’s Call

The Office of Public Witness (OPW) is working with Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence to press for common-sense measures to reduce gun violence in the United States. Recognizing the legitimate use of private firearms for protection and hunting, sensible steps remain that we can take, as a nation, to help prevent guns from falling into the hands of people with criminal intent. We are calling for:

1. **A ban on all assault weapons.** These high-capacity weapons are designed for war. There is no reason for common citizens to purchase or possess them. We do not use AK-47s to hunt — their only purpose is to kill a lot of people — quickly. We need to reinstate the assault weapons ban to ensure that high-capacity weapons are not sold to the public.

2. **Universal background checks.** Currently, there is no federal provision requiring a background check in order to purchase a gun and some states do not require them at all. Therefore, people who do not know how to properly handle a firearm or who have criminal records can make gun purchases.

3. **Make gun trafficking a federal crime.** Enforcement of gun trafficking and straw purchases, both inside and outside of the country, is weak. Many of these weapons end up in the hands of individuals who are focused on criminal intent. At present, the penalties for trafficking guns in the U.S. are on par with the trafficking of chickens or other livestock. The trafficking of guns and straw purchases should be federal crimes with commensurate penalties.

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1 Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2016  
2 Brady Center, The Truth About Kids & Guns, 2015  
3 Centers for Disease Control, Vital Statistics, 2017  
4 National Association of School Psychologists, Youth Gun Violence Fact Sheet, 2013
Legislative Update:

The DACA deadline passed; What’s next in the ongoing struggle to Choose Welcome?

On March 5, the final day that President Trump intended to honor the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, faith leaders again urged lawmakers to pass the Dream Act.

Congressional action to expand detention, deportation, and border militarization instead of protecting Dreamers and their families will weaken all U.S. communities — and is in diametric opposition to the example of welcome seen in scripture. Faith leaders from prominent faith traditions reiterated a shared commitment to Dreamers, and just immigration policy for all immigrants and U.S. communities.

Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, II, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), said about the events of March 5,

“This church stands with you. We hold you up in this very difficult time. I am praying for you. The PC(USA) is praying for you. But we know this fight does not end with this decision. You are true examples of active citizens advocating for their rights. We advocate with you. We raise our voices with you. I applaud the outstanding organizing, mobilizing, and public demonstrating coordinated by your leaders and by your supporters in the Dreamers/DACA networks who tirelessly fight for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and now for the DREAM Act. The public movement of solidarity and support of the DACA program and DREAMers is evidence of combined efforts. Those efforts offer other options, and we will coordinate with your many supporters to seek out ways to find a more just, permanent solution to the immigration limbo to which we, as a country, have been complacent. You have our support. Let us wake again to the struggle. Let us not be fearful of hate-filled discourse but offer an alternative path. “So, let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9, NRSV). We are committed to the long-term fight this may entail. God has called us to love each other, and that love propels us to action. And act we will do.”

Rev. Jimmie Hawkins, Director of the Office of Public Witness (OPW) added,

“Dreamers have fought tirelessly for their rights and lives to be respected and their voices to be heard. They have been caught in this limbo for far too long. This is not a question of politics, but rather the morality of the American people. We ask our nation’s leaders to act on the values that are foundational to our faith — to welcome the stranger, and love our neighbors.”

DREAMers and allies, including representatives from Muslim, Jewish and Christian communities, gathered March 5th at the Capitol to call for congressional action. Their banner read “They Tried to Bury Us…They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds.”

The struggle to stop deportations and demand just immigration policy is very personal to Presbyterians, as many of our members are themselves threatened by an immigration system that separates families and communities. Long-time member of First Presbyterian Church in Metuchen, New Jersey, Roby Sanger continues to be detained in an ICE detention center. Even though deportations of Indonesian Christians has halted in that region, Roby has been detained for over a month. You can read more about his story and the court case regarding Indonesian Christians online. We urge you to participate in a postcard writing campaign to several ICE officers asking for his release.

Take action!

Join the postcard campaign for Roby Sanger’s release today! More information here: oga.pcusa.org/section/mid-council-ministries/immigration/policy-immigration/

Although March 5th marked the day when DACA was to be terminated, a pending court case means that will not happen. However, Congress still needs to ACT! Visit presbyterianmission.org/opw for resources to aid you in contacting your congressional delegation and planning local actions in solidarity with migrant leaders.

Many thanks to the PC(USA) Office of Immigration Issues for their partnership on this work.
The crisis in Syria continues

As the crisis in Syria enters its seventh year, civilians are bearing the brunt of a war that has included extreme suffering, destruction and a total disregard for human life. Currently, over 13 million people require humanitarian assistance, including close to 3 million people who are trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, like Ghouta, where they continue to face daily military bombardments. Over half of the population of Syria has had to flee from their homes, and many have been forced to move multiple times.

The war and humanitarian crisis in Yemen also continues. The United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees recently reported that, “Conflict in Yemen has left 22.2 million people — 75 percent of the population — in need of humanitarian assistance and has created a severe protection crisis in which millions face risks to their safety and are struggling to survive. As of early 2018, Yemenis are facing multiple crises, including armed conflict, displacement, risk of famine and the outbreaks of diseases including cholera, creating the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.” The World Health Organization warned recently that the cholera epidemic that killed more than 2,000 people could flare up again.

If there is not a political and diplomatic solution to these conflicts, the widespread brutality inflicted on the civilian populations is likely to continue. Unfortunately, these are not the only conflicts in the Middle East. Long-term conflicts also persist in Iraq, Palestine and Israel and Libya. Basic infrastructure like roads, water, and electrical systems have been destroyed across the region and children are growing up with instability trauma and fear. The effects of these conflicts will last for generations to come.

Our partners on the ground across the Middle East have asked us to press for non-violent diplomatic solutions as a way out of the morass of violence and inhumanity. But the United States continues to export arms to the region, further fueling the violence. A recent study by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) stated that the Middle East accounted for over 30 percent of all global imports of weapons. And while the United States exports nearly a third of all global arms, nearly half of U.S. arms exports over the past five years have gone to the war-stricken Middle East. A recent report from Congressional Research Service stated that “the United States is the single largest arms supplier to the Middle East and has been for decades.”

Recently, the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) joined 15 heads of communion and faith-based organizations, including the United Methodists, the United Church of the Christ and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, in a letter to Congress expressing concern over the increasing U.S. arms sales and military aid to the Middle East. In the letter, they stated, “We firmly believe that stability and long-term security in the Middle East will only come about when the United States and other countries move away from a militarized approach and the profits that come from perpetual conflict . . . The continued provision of military aid and arms to the countries of the Middle East, it has been clear, does not result in greater peace, but rather greater conflict, casualties, and loss of life. The U.S. has not advanced its own security or interests through military aid or arms sales.” They asked that Congress, at a minimum, take the following steps toward reversing the current influx of weapons:

- Immediately suspend U.S. arms sales to those countries not in compliance with international humanitarian law.
- Fully enforce existing human rights conditions (“Leahy law”) for U.S. military assistance to all recipient governments.
- Strengthen and expand end-use monitoring. The Foreign Assistance Act requires nations receiving defense articles and defense services to “permit continuous observation and review by, and furnish necessary information to, representatives of the United States Government with regard to the use of such articles or related training or other defense service.”
- Ratify and fully abide by the terms of the Arms Trade Treaty. The treaty, which entered into force in 2014, establishes international standards for regulation of trade in conventional weapons. It is vital that the United States, as the world’s largest arms exporter, join the treaty.

As people of faith and followers of the Prince of Peace, we must continue to advocate for peaceful resolutions to these conflicts. And, in particular, we must acknowledge our own country’s culpability in the current suffering and advocate for a de-militarized and humane approach by our government toward the region.
Work requirements don’t work

By Ben Pistora, Fellow for Public Witness

This Spring, advocates must be aware of the potential risks to the health and wellbeing of economically marginalized Americans as Congress and the Administration shift their focus from taxes to the federal budget. One of the biggest threats we face is the establishment of work requirements on programs that provide basic access to a dignified life. Over recent decades, there have been numerous efforts in states to impose work requirements and lifetime limits on entitlement programs such as SNAP and Medicaid. We as Presbyterians must be vigilant to ensure further limitations do not become federal law.

To understand the dangers associated with work requirements, one must only turn to the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) requirements already in place. SNAP is a program administered through the USDA and was formerly known as “food stamps.” It provides critical nutritional assistance to working families and individuals whose conditions make it difficult to find work. SNAP is a highly effective program that targets households that need it to meet their basic food needs. With a small average benefit of just $1.40 per person per meal, it is by no means luxurious, but it has demonstrated long-term benefits for children who participate, including better health and education outcomes. While SNAP’s overall enrollment and spending have dropped as the economy improves, it provides vital assistance to over 40 million low-income Americans.

Individuals designated as “Able-Bodies Adults Without Dependents” (ABAWD’s), can only receive SNAP benefits for three-month period over the course of three years if they fail to meet the work requirement. This poses an enormous problem for people who would like to work but live in an area where employment is scarce. Such requirements do not create jobs when jobs are hard to find and therefore put people who count on entitlement benefits as part of their monthly budget in a difficult and sometimes dangerous position.

The threat extends to the 68 million Americans who receive life-saving health coverage from Medicaid. There have never been lifetime caps imposed on the program, but five states (Arizona, Kansas, Utah, Maine and Wisconsin) are requesting that President Trump provide federal waivers that might cap Medicaid. Such a move would disregard the reality that Medicaid has proven among the most efficient programs in American health insurance. For these states to follow the White House’s lead and cut accessibility to the program could only have terribly disastrous consequences. Medicaid is a core and fundamentally moral commitment to human wellbeing of which there should be no limitation. It is not — and never has been — a simple question of money, but rather, it has been driven by the most core human and moral values.

### Work status and reason for not working among non-SSI, nonelderly Medicaid adults, 2016

- **Working full time**: 42%
- **Not working due to caregiving**: 12%
- **Not working due to school attendance**: 6%
- **Not working due to illness or disability**: 18%
- **Working part time**: 14%
- **Not working for other reason**: 7%

*Notes: Not working for other reason includes retired, could not find work, or other reason. Working full time is based on total number of hours worked per week (at least 35). Full time workers may be simultaneously working more than one job. Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, analysis of March 2017 Current Population Survey.*

The 1976 PCUS Statement reminds us that, “The value of life gives persons the derivative right to acquire the therapy or care [needed] that they might enjoy the quality of life health makes possible … Because the right to acquire “adequate” health care springs out of our worth as living human beings, rather than out of any particular merit or achievement belonging to some but not to others, adequate health care should be defined equally for all people.”
Meet the Fellows at the OPW

Jalani Traxler is Seminary Fellow with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) Office of Public Witness. He joined the team in February, 2018 in Washington, D.C. where he is also spending the spring semester studying the intersection of politics and theology at Wesley Theological Seminary. He holds an undergraduate degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia where he received his Bachelors of Arts in Psychology. He was born and raised in the Twin cities (Minneapolis/St. Paul) to Charles and Cindy Traxler. Jalani hopes that his time as a Seminary Fellow will enrich his understanding of the faith community’s role in achieving justice and equality for those most vulnerable.

Jamila Cervantes is an Emerson National Hunger Fellow at the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Public Witness. For the first portion of their fellowship program, Jamila served as the Client Engagement Fellow at Oregon Food Bank in Portland, Oregon. They are a Gates Millennium Scholar and a recent graduate of the University of California, Berkeley with a combined degree in LGBTQ studies, Latin American studies, and Sociology. While at Berkeley, Jamila wrote their undergraduate thesis on the representations of queerness in Mexican film. Since graduating, Jamila has primarily focused their efforts on fighting hunger, poverty, and xenophobia.

U.S. freezes support for UNRWA

Sample message for members of Congress:
As a person of faith, I believe the United States should not hold hostage humanitarian funding to achieve political objectives. All humanitarian aid should be provided on the basis of need. In every other humanitarian and refugee context, the United States provides humanitarian assistance to those who are displaced from conflict on the basis of their need as civilians and never to achieve political gains. It should be no different with UNRWA. No American should be proud of holding hostage vulnerable refugees to extract concessions from the weaker party.

The following are some sample tweets provided by UNRWA USA:

Sample message for members of Congress:
If you care about the humanitarian situation in Gaza and Syria, tweet this:
In cutting @UNRWA funding by 83% the @WhiteHouse will cause untold additional trauma to Palestinian refugees in Gaza and Syria who depend on life-saving humanitarian assistance through emergency cash, food, and shelter support. unrwausa.org/fund-unrwa #fundUNRWA.

If you care about education for refugees, tweet this:
@UNRWA is one of the largest and most successful school systems in the Middle East, with Palestinians having one of the highest literacy rates in the world at 97%. And the @WhiteHouse just cut funding to UNRWA by 83%. unrwausa.org/fund-unrwa #fundUNRWA.

If you care about access to healthcare, tweet this:
@UNRWA operates 140+ health centers and delivers comprehensive primary healthcare services, handling more than 9 million Palestine refugee patient visits per year. As an American interested in human dignity and rights for all, I implore the @WhiteHouse to #fundUNRWA. unrwausa.org.
Become our partners in ministry!

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