

## **ACSWP At The 2014 General Assembly: Reports Approved, And One Person In Particular Thanked** by ACSWP Co-Chairs and Staff

(A shorter version of the thank you to Ms. Bonnie Hoff appeared via Presbyterian News Service: <http://www.pcusa.org/news/2014/7/17/person-behind-papers/> )

Midway through the General Assembly, almost thirty people gathered for an emotional dinner in one of the conventional center backrooms. Appropriately enough, there was no alcohol but the toasts and farewell speeches were heartfelt. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy—ACSWP—A-Cee—SWAP—the body that produced the largest number of reports to the General Assembly (8), plus numerous “Advice & Counsel” memos on social witness related matters, was gathered to say thank you to a Southern Baptist woman who had worked for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for almost 21 years as an administrative assistant.

Ms. Bonnie Hoff was accompanied by her son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter, who had come up with her to see one last General Assembly. Bonnie’s service had helped her son become a church-based graphic artist and her daughter become a professor of mission at Golden Gate Baptist Seminary, and she herself earned her BA going to night school over many years. Like Bonnie, many of the Louisville support staff are not Presbyterians, yet serve our church with great dedication.

Normally Bonnie would have made the arrangements for a smaller dinner that would have recognized members finishing their service and perhaps welcoming new members elected. In this case, that was also part of the dinner: Gloria Albrecht, an ethics professor, and Raafat Zaki, a Synod Executive, were finishing their terms. Like many minister members of the committee and its coordinator, they have been pastors as well. Two newly elected members, Noelle Royer, an employee of Amazon, and Linda Eastwood, a scientist currently serving as adjunct professor at McCormick Seminary, were welcomed to the Committee.

Normally, too, the mid-Assembly ACSWP dinner would also assess how its reports—sent to four different committees—had been received, and how other matters were proceeding. In this case, the Committee’s largest report, on **Tax Justice**, had been ably presented by study task force chair, Ken Grant, a Boston finance executive who had formerly led the Presbyterian Investment and Loan Program and several other Assembly assignments. The Social Justice Committee leadership had wisely allowed for a day to pass between the initial powerpoint by Grant and action on the 40 page treatment of an essential, if complicated, subject, so that commissioners could reflect more on the material. Not all liked it, but a strong majority did.

Gloria Albrecht and Kevin Johnson, pastor of Calvary Presbyterian in Detroit, had presented a report on urban ministry and mission, **The Gospel from Detroit**, which was seen as a key response to the city where the Assembly itself was held. While receiving strong affirmation overall, the recommendation concerning a staff person for renewing urban witness had been scaled back to a roundtable for experts and

practitioners to report to the next Assembly. Albrecht had also presented a response to two referrals on compensation for pastors of small congregations and for women and racial ethnic ministers, **Fairness in Ministerial Compensation**, that had been approved for distribution after some debate. Economic inequality, which has intensified pressures on all institutions sustained by the middle class, has undeniable impacts on the church's own life and challenges Reformed theology, which is (in ACSWP's view!) stubbornly anti-hierarchical and pro-solidarity.

The report from the steering team on Peace Discernment, **Risking Peace in a Violent World**, had been changed at certain points in Committee. The chair of that team, Mark Davidson, members of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, and members of the Presbyterian Council on Military Chaplains had all contributed thoughts to the Peacemaking and International Affairs Committee. The report's five affirmations for presbytery debate were still strongly supported, but now reflected even more Presbyterians than the 73 focus groups and two previous Assembly's that had worked on what new steps the church should take in Peacemaking. In past years, it would have been Bonnie Hoff who would have re-edited and re-formatted the amended report, working with similar behind-the-scenes staff in the Office of the General Assembly.

Two other ACSWP members presented reports to the Peacemaking Committee. Ray Roberts, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Westfield, NJ, introduced the report on **Drones, War, and Surveillance**. The committee took its four sections separately and amended three of the four. Yet Roberts believed the Committee understood the issues at stake and that this would be appreciated by the whole Assembly. Kathryn Poethig, a professor of global studies, was there to support a report on **Sexual Violence in the US Military**, along with a representative of the Advocacy Committee on Women's Concerns. Poethig, who grew up partly in the mission field (like Davidson of the Peace Discernment team), had been concerned that this short resolution would be resisted, but found the committee very willing to act on this matter. Three Youth Advisory Delegates, in fact, presented it on the General Assembly floor.

A fourth ACSWP report before the Peacemaking & International Affairs Committee, **Western Sahara: Occupied, Non-Self-Governing Territory** (<http://pc-biz.org/Explorer.aspx?id=4733>), was presented by ACSWP Coordinator Chris Iosso. This was a referral from the 2012 Peacemaking Committee and had been approved by the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board as well, with contributions from the Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations and the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment.

Raafat Zaki and Rob Trawick, a volunteer from the Social Ethics Network, presented the resolution on **Equal Rights in Israel and Palestine** that is designed to support interfaith conversations in congregations. Compared with other matters before the Middle East Committee, it was relatively non-controversial, though it affirms voting and other citizenship rights most Palestinians do not have. ACSWP member Marsha

Fowler, a nurse and professor of nursing and medical ethics, reported on developments in the Immigration and Environmental issues committee. Christine Darden, co-chair of ACSWP, noted changes in mission funding and inclusion that affect previous church policy on peacemaking and anti-racism, among other matters.

Keeping these and other reports and volunteers in order was another task that Bonnie Hoff performed for the Committee. At each Assembly the Committee provides copies of policy statements, studies, and back issues of *Church & Society* magazine at its table in the Exhibition hall. This year, two young pastors from Michigan, Sara Dorrien and Will Christians, volunteered there. Ginna Bairby, the managing editor of *Unbound*, the online journal for ACSWP and the Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministries part of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, saluted Bonnie from her position as a new member of the ACSWP staff.

In addition to the Committee, Sara Lisherness, director of Compassion, Peace, and Justice Ministry conveyed thanks on behalf of the Mission Agency as a whole. Bill Somplatsky-Jarman of Mission Responsibility Through Investment and Vernon Broyles of the Office of the General Assembly also stated their appreciation for Bonnie's work. Patrick Heery, editor of *Presbyterians Today* and former managing editor of *Unbound*, also thanked his former colleague. And Chris Iosso, ACSWP Coordinator, noted how much he and his predecessors were indebted to Bonnie for all her years of caring for the Committee, and gave a closing prayer.

At this point the Assembly was called back into session and participants needed to head back. But most managed to stay for the photo that accompanies this article. The moral of the story? There is much joy in serving the church, and also much unsung work. That evening was a time for one good chorus to sing of that work behind pages, and of the friendships and dedication between the lines.

NOTE: Each of the links to the reports on PC-BIZ.org also gives the results of the votes on them. Each of the 8 noted above received strong approval. The July "Salt & Light" e-newsletter contains notices of the new studies authorized. In addition, there are several other studies assigned directly to the Advisory Committee to perform without specially designated study teams or task forces.