

ITEM H.206
FOR INFORMATION

A Report on Current Social Witness Policy studies and the relation of 2014 General Assembly decisions to the Presbyterian Mission Agency (from ACSWP)

The 221st General Assembly (2014) delegated the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to conduct six studies and to contribute to several other policy updates and projects:

1. A Study of Reforming Drug Policies (largest study, including 4 hearings alongside meetings of a study team, a website, an issue of Unbound, and a provisional study guide)
2. Developing a comprehensive policy on human trafficking, working with the Advocacy Committee on Women's Concerns (ACWC) and the staff table.
3. A report on the application of the "precautionary principle" to emerging technologies and the interaction of toxins in a changing environment.
4. A handbook on pastoral care and ethical choices at the end-of-life, with a related set of public policy recommendations
5. A report on the feasibility of a "two-state" solution in Israel/Palestine and its relation to Presbyterian General Assembly opposition to the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem.
6. A report on Cuba-related mission strategy and public policy in light of current changes, working with the Cuba Mission Partners Network and the Presbyterian Reformed Church of Cuba.

All of the above projects came at the initiative of presbyteries and reflect important social questions, particularly as the Assembly meets in Portland, OR, where drug policies and end-of-life practices are changing more rapidly than in much of the rest of the US.

The ACSWP is also contributing in various ways to the urban mission roundtable set up to develop the goals of The Gospel from Detroit (a report on urban ministry renewal), the updating of anti-racism policy, and the updating of voting rights and electoral reform policy in light of the avalanche of money in US politics since Citizen's United (which also reduces the influence of all non-profit advocacy organizations).

ACSWP has been working with the Peacemaking Program on the Five Affirmations for Peace Discernment mailed to presbyteries for their discussion, voting, and possible suggestions for amendment. The Office of the General Assembly devised an on-line response process, though presbyteries responding often choose to send in the written form. A four page summary of the longer report to the 2014 GA is also customarily used, though the longer study provides background for those leading discussions. A report on the findings of this stage of the process (begun in 2010) will be made to the 2016 General Assembly.

While this work is on-going, some question the value of the church's public voice and the provision of resources for ethical reflection. ACSWP annually consults with ethics professors at the PCUSA seminaries, colleges, and universities, who represent some of the users of the social

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witness reports and serve on the study teams (which are composed of volunteers, sometimes with a paid consultant writer/editor). Along with the steady work of on-going public witness and social teaching by ministries of the PMA and larger church, particular GA positions get lifted up, often without an understanding of their practical grounding and theological bases.

How do these efforts contribute to the vision-casting, leadership, and institutional roles recommended to the PMA Board in the ACSWP Advice & Counsel memorandum of this past July? As the PMAB reflects on the nature of its voice and its relation to the General Assembly, ACSWP's co-chair would present several ideas for reflection.