

**ITEM P.203
FOR INFORMATION**

Theology, Vision, Witness, and Structure in the Presbyterian Mission Agency (from ACSWP)

Dear Members of the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board:

We write you in a time of testing: a time of anxiety about budgets, institutional decline and concern about the effectiveness of our mission in a rapidly changing culture. We write first to encourage: in the midst of this massive cultural and ecclesiastical change, the heavens still declare God's glory, Jesus Christ is good news for all who are "heavy-laden," and the Holy Spirit is making all things new. As the body tasked to address specific matters of Christian conscience and the church's capacity for social witness,¹ we affirm the Board's engagement in a transition that goes beyond the capabilities of any individual. We trust that Board members are familiar with a number of the points below. Our purpose is not to second guess the Board's resolute work, but to lift up key directions, matters of ethos as much as budget, without presuming to frame particular decisions that are for the Board's own discernment.

At this moment our advice and counsel to the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) is to: 1) Offer theological leadership; 2) Cast a vision of what God can do through our congregations for the glory of God and the reconciliation of the world; 3) Unify the church as the Body of Christ; 4) Renew the church as a distinctive community; and 5) Structure its administration to reflect priorities, accountability and sources of funding.

1. Theological Leadership. We are not a secular non-profit, but a church. Leadership in the Presbyterian system involves a continuing conversation about who is God and who is our neighbor. It requires an in-depth understanding of the church, its theology, and its ethical commitments, as well as organizational skills. Such conversation clarifies direction and commitment. It honors the relational covenant that holds our church together and is not afraid of open debate. Leadership in this conversation has a moral dimension, especially for younger adults who want Jesus and justice strongly connected.

We believe that major proposals going to the Board and General Assembly would be helped by stronger theological preparation, which in the Reformed tradition always includes ethical and practical analysis. Shouldn't the PMA Board hear from and lift up significant thinkers, pastors, theologians and other scholars, from the PCUSA and partner churches, and not primarily management consultants? Whether or not a new or interim director has advanced theological education, the top level of the organization needs to be composed of experienced Presbyterian ministers and people running mission programs, not simply specialized administrators, and often non-Presbyterians. We believe this would strengthen the PMA in its mission to "inspire, equip, and connect" Presbyterians with opportunities for mission across the church and world.

2. Vision for the Church. We believe that the PCUSA cries out for a compelling vision of what God is doing and can do in and through the church. Casting a vision is more than telling stories, however touching. Guided by the Spirit, a theologically informed vision includes pastoral, prophetic and evangelical dimensions. It is holistic, not dividing the church or showing favoritism among parts of the body or pitting aspects of Christ's mission against each other. It is counter-cultural, reminding the church and the world what treasure we hold in earthen vessels and why it matters. It generates urgency. Like Moses on Mt. Nebo, the vision must be far-sighted in time frame, yet timely in giving assignments to future leaders. And as with Moses on Mt. Nebo, failures must be admitted, within a context of fierce and not fearful loyalty to God and God's people.²

Today congregations and presbyteries are tempted to shrink their mission horizons to their own communities and a limited set of tasks. The gift and task of a national body is to allow the church to come together and discern a larger vision to deepen the ethos of its congregations. A compelling vision can guide our councils to face hard questions with grace, enabling peace-making rather than conflict-avoidance, and giving our church a distinctive voice in an increasingly cynical and materialistic culture. PMA campaigns and initiatives need to keep evangelism and justice ministries connected and to test ideas particularly with mid-council, seminary, and ecumenical leaders, using the committees designed for this purpose. With the decline of traditions like church college identification and the rise of multiple entertainment platforms, the PMA needs to convene new conversations about how we form faith and nurture prophetic community.

3. Unify the church around its identity as the body of Christ. Without combining with the Office of the General Assembly (OGA), the PMA should not distance itself from the General Assembly but rather seek ways to strengthen the value and wisdom of that participatory body. It may be wise for the PMA to return to the Biblical concept of council, to be closer in ethos and structure to sessions and the other councils of the church.³ The Stated Clerk, for example, could become an ex-officio member of the Executive Committee, as in the past. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) already has specialized and semi-autonomous agencies for investment, pensions, church construction, and publishing. Whatever its name, the PMA should serve the mission of the whole church, working closely with the more specialized bodies. In turn, even if those bodies retain more money, they were not intended to be mission agencies in competition with the PMA, but co-stewards of tasks accountable to the whole church through the GA.

The General Assembly is the church's central public arena for worship and for lifting up, praying for, and blessing all parts of the church. As such, it has a vital democratic and representative policy-setting function, integrated within its oversight of church-wide programs. The relation of the PMA to the whole church might be strengthened if its Director were elected at alternate General Assemblies to those when the Stated Clerk is elected, with the PMA Nominating Committee presenting two candidates based on clear plans for the next four years. A two-term limit may be advisable. In these ways the church might better understand the choices before it and assess its leadership needs.

4. Show the church is distinctive. The clearest sign of servant leadership by the Presbyterian Mission Agency would be to reduce its higher salaries and be a "mission" body closer to the

lived struggles of most congregations. ACSWP has proposed a return to the five- or four-to-one ratio of highest to lowest salaries in the executive staff, ratios that obtained in both predecessor denominations. Certainly we need expertise and accomplishment, but the church should not mimic the pervasive inequality or competitive mentality of our society. The PMA compensation structure should be closer to that of our overseas mission personnel than to the salaries found in the Foundation or Board of Pensions (model for ending the ratio). This is not a call to voluntary poverty or depriving children of college, but a call to shared discipleship. This might change the ethos of the PMA at a basic level, but could help rebuild respect and solidarity across the church.

5. Structure to reflect priorities, accountability, and funding sources. Currently, the PMA is the most centralized and hierarchical program board the church has had since national boards began to be created in the early 20th Century. What proportions of administrators (finance, legal, personnel...) and program staff (mission, education, worship, evangelism...) are needed? In addition to elevating the Executive Director position, centralized common services were intended to cut duplication among divisions. Along with this, the articulation of mission purpose was shifted from units doing program to communications and fund-raising specialists. Given new technologies, this need not be a mistake, but holistic theology and familiarity with the church become yet more crucial.

Similarly, special offerings are being unified and general mission de-emphasized in favor of marketing projects for designated giving, sometimes neglecting the financial support built over years of memory and relationship for specific programs. These decisions assume (and may reinforce) a decline in loyalty-based giving and reflect stress throughout a denominational system that is adjusting the size and program of synods and presbyteries. The proportions of program and administration need to be assessed quantitatively and qualitatively, taking into account shifts in church demographics and identity and focusing on the primary motivations for Christian and congregational giving.

Conclusion: ACSWP respectfully offers these recommendations to the PMA Board, seeking to fulfill its responsibility and contribute to our shared service to the PCUSA, with the conviction that God is working, even now, to redeem this time.

¹ See PMA Manual, p. 33, for 8 tasks that ACSWP (including 3 PMAB members) may take on its own initiative, including: "Identify facets of the church's social witness that enable or obstruct effective action. Analyze, in cooperation with the General Assembly Ministries, the effectiveness of social witness in councils, institutions, and the Presbyterian Mission Agency."
http://www.presbyterianmission.org/site_media/media/uploads/presbyterian_mission_agency/pdf/manuals/pma_manual_of_operations_april_2015.pdf

² For the PMA and its Board, learnings from the last year may be helped by reflection on the almost inevitable tension between professional obligations (whether of auditors or ministers) and management goals in corporate settings. *Beleaguered Rulers: The Public Obligations of the Professional* (2001) by Presbyterian ethicist, William F. May, examines the impact of organizational life on lawyers, doctors, business managers, politicians, professors, ministers, reporters, and others, all within an understanding of market pressures on all organizations, profit and nonprofit. A short reflection on this book is available from acswp@pcusa.org.

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³ There was a General Assembly Council or Mission Board in both primary predecessor denominations from before the 1970's, working with more diversity of boards inherited from less centralized times. On the other hand, more name changes may be unhelpful, whatever re-organizations are likely in coming years.