

**PRESBYTERIAN MISSION AGENCY BOARD**  
**April 23-25, 2014**  
**Racial Ethnic & Women’s Ministries/PW Ministry Area**

**ITEM B.108**  
**FOR ACTION**

<i>FOR PRESBYTERIAN MISSION AGENCY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR’S OFFICE USE ONLY</i>			
	A. Finance	E. Corporate Property, Legal, Finance	J. Board Nominating & Governance Subcommittee
X	B. Justice	F. PC(USA), A Corporation	P. Plenary
	C. Leadership	G. Audit	
	D. Worshiping Communities	H. Executive Committee	

**Subject: Comment to the 221st General Assembly (2014)**

**Recommendation:**

**That the Presbyterian Mission Agency Board approve the following comment on Overture 15, *On Entering a Two-Year Season of Reflection on the Plight of Unwanted Children, and Appointing a Special Committee on Abortion Review-From the Presbytery of South Alabama.***

Comment:

The Presbyterian Mission Agency recognizes that abortion is a highly sensitive issue that needs to be approached with prayerful consideration. The General Assembly has acknowledged that within our church there is a wide range of deeply held convictions about the matter. The 204th General Assembly (1992) reflected this diversity of opinion, in its adoption of the report of the Special Committee on Problem Pregnancies and Abortion.

Clearly there is both agreement and disagreement in our use and interpretation of Scripture. There is also agreement and disagreement on the basic issue of abortion. The committee agreed that there are no biblical texts that speak expressly to the topic of abortion, but that taken in their totality the Holy Scriptures are filled with messages that advocate respect for the woman and child before and after birth. Therefore the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) encourages an atmosphere of open debate and mutual respect for a variety of opinions concerning the issues related to problem pregnancies and abortion. [*Minutes of the 204th General Assembly (1992), p. 367*].

Consequently, as the policies of the General Assembly regarding abortion and related issues have developed, they do not fit neatly into the frequently used forced-choice between “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” It is a freedom of conscience position. The church ought to be able to maintain within its community those who, on the basis of a study of Scripture and prayerful decision, come to diverse conclusions and actions.

There are several points in recommendation 3 of this overture that need to be clarified. The overture asks that a special committee on abortion review be appointed to “conduct a thorough assessment of the financial, in-kind, lodgment, publicity, and staff support that the PC(USA) provides to organizations such as Planned Parenthood, Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and other abortion providers or pro-choice organizations.”

In 2014, there were no funds from the Presbyterian Mission Agency to Planned Parenthood or to any of

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the ten networks of PHEWA, including Presbyterians Affirming Reproductive Options (PARO), or the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC).

Recommendation 3.b. asks that existing policies be reviewed and if needed “Propose new policies that will more accurately represent the PC(USA) in its breath of conviction about abortion . . .” The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), a committee elected by the Assembly, advises the Assembly in the creation of General Assembly social witness policy. The traditions of both predecessor churches are reflected in the approach defined in *Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness* (adopted by the 205<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (1993) and part of the Manual of the General Assembly), a careful process involving Biblical, theological, scientific, historical, and other analysis specific to the area. Extensive reports were made in 1976, 1983 (both denominations), 1992, and 2002, with a range of shorter resolutions and resources based on those policies since then, including a reaffirmation of key sections of 1992 in 2012.

In recommendation 3 the overture states, “Most, if not all, of the Special Committee meetings should be conducted in virtual conferences using appropriate audio-visual technology.” The serious subject matter on problem pregnancies and abortion would require Presbyterians appointed who have medical and theological/ethical expertise. Past studies of policy of this significance have usually taken 3-4 years, at a time when the General Assembly met every year. This is not the kind of matter that could be easily done through virtual conferences, as it would require deep engagement, at considerable cost.

The 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly (2006) affirmed the monitoring report from the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), which reviews the implementation of problem pregnancies and abortion policies. Presbyterian Mission Agency ministries preparing resources on problem pregnancies and abortion strive to reflect a diversity of opinion in the resources that are produced. Resources revised in 2010 prepared by Racial Ethnic & Women's Ministries cover the range of faithful responses in these difficult situations, and they include: *Problem Pregnancy: When No Choice Is Easy – For the Pregnant Woman; There's Always A Father – Does the Father Have a Problem, Too?; When Pregnancy Involves Loss - Helping Others Face Pregnancy Loss; When You Need Wisdom – Helping Others Face Problem Pregnancy.*

In 2006, the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly reiterated the role of the church in individual and families' lives as they face problem pregnancy issues:

The church has a responsibility to provide public witness and to offer guidance, counsel, and support to those who make or interpret laws and public policies about abortion and problem pregnancies. Pastors have a duty to counsel with and pray for those who face decisions about problem pregnancies. Congregations have a duty to pray for and support those who face these choices, to offer support for women and families to help make unwanted pregnancies less likely to occur, and to provide practical support for those facing the birth of a child with medical anomalies, birth after rape or incest, or those who face health, economic, or other stresses. [*Minutes of the 217th General Assembly (2006), p. 905*].

The 1992 policy states,

Problem pregnancies are the result of, and influenced by, so many complicated and insolvable circumstances that we have neither the wisdom nor the authority to address or decide each situation. Christians seek the guidance of Scripture in the midst of relationships and circumstances of awesome proportions that affect their interpretation and decision making.

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We affirm the ability and responsibility of women, guided by the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, in the context of their communities of faith, to make good moral choices in regard to problem pregnancies.

We call upon Presbyterians to work for a decrease in the number of problem pregnancies, thereby decreasing the number of abortions.

The considered decision of a woman to terminate a pregnancy can be a morally acceptable, though certainly not the only or required, decision. Possible justifying circumstances would include medical indications of severe physical or mental deformity, conception as a result of rape or incest, or conditions under which the physical or mental health of either woman or child would be gravely threatened.

The Christian community must be concerned about and address the circumstances that bring a woman to consider abortion as the best available option. Poverty, unjust societal realities, sexism, racism, and inadequate supportive relationships may render a woman virtually powerless to choose freely [*Minutes* of the 204th General Assembly (1992), p. 368].

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) continues to be guided by the 204<sup>th</sup> General Assembly policy on abortion and problem pregnancies and encourages the church to continue to approach this challenging issue with the atmosphere of “open debate and mutual respect” for a variety of opinions (*Minutes*, 1992, Part I, p. 374).