

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL WITNESS POLICY
SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT REPORT TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY COUNCIL 11.20.08

**Christian solidarity in a time of social crisis:
Reflections from Detroit on being Church in the 21st Century**

“These people have value,” summed up an inner-city pastor, when asked why she didn’t move on to a place that would pay her more adequately and give her more status. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, seeking to be eyes and ears for the General Assembly, met in Detroit from October 16-19 to listen to those who seek to be church and Presbyterian amid the violence of poverty, joblessness, a gutted public education system, and still rigid racial segregation. What better place to go to wrestle with the meaning of Christian ministry and leadership at a time when the gap between the richest folks and the poorest is the greatest in a century, when the middle class is beginning to feel the pain long endured by the working and non-working poor, when fear for our future and that of our children is spreading across class and race and city lines? It is also a time when the future of the auto industry hangs in the balance, symbolizing the difficulties of broader transformation that lie ahead for our larger economy.

The Presbyterian churches in the city of Detroit minister to residents who have been subjected to the loss of family-sustaining jobs since the 1950’s and whose opportunities have been constrained by an effective combination of residential, educational and employment barriers. In this context, our inner city churches, mostly African-American, bring alive the words of Jesus and his actions, living on hope where the foolish say, “There is no hope.” What can be learned here about constructing Christian ministry and leadership in this century? Perhaps Detroit, often seen as behind the times, has been ahead of them and can help us read their signs.

We also write this in the context of the widespread discussion of a paper, “Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment,” by Presbyterian sociologist William J. Weston. Weston’s paper raises important institutional and leadership questions. He believes that the church’s “natural leaders” have always been our tall steeple pastors and executive presbyters. However, due to the church’s turn in the 1960’s toward strategies for more diverse representation, these natural leaders have been in some ways exiled from our governing councils. Today, he argues, problems of racism and sexism are no longer major attitudinal problems among Church members. Therefore, Weston advocates eliminating two standing bodies of the General Assembly, the Advocacy Committees for Racial Ethnic and Women’s Concerns, as well as all committees on representation. This, he believes, would return the church to a natural process through which leaders emerge as they rise through service and experience to obtain administrative positions and ministries in large churches.

We believe that the witness of the church on the ground in the city of Detroit, and the history of Presbyterian social witness, suggest another way of understanding church leadership, one that emphasizes the continuing importance of including within leadership the voices of those representing diversities of race/ethnicity, gender, and economic location. The point of this is not mathematical equality but wholeness to the church’s theology and its social witness—its understanding of where and how and for what purposes God is at work through the discipleship of the whole range of Presbyterians. The goal is fuller knowledge of self and neighbor in order to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

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So, let's return to Detroit where we heard from black, white and Hispanic persons ministering in the shadows of huge, abandoned and crumbling factories, where long-term residents and recent immigrants create a spot of human decency alongside broken houses and empty lots in a city whose population has shrunk from 2 million in the 1950's to about 800,000 now. We listened to stories of armed ICE (Immigration & Customs Enforcement) raids into homes of Hispanic families, of mothers separated and deported while their citizen children are placed in U.S. foster care. We spoke with wise veterans in the struggle for justice: a longtime police detective, several activists, and teachers, as well as pastors and leaders of the presbytery. We also saw glittering high-rises near cultural monuments built in more prosperous times and now restored to their earlier grandeur.

The social reality of our country is complex. Equally complex must be the ministries of the church. Tall steeple churches require leadership skills. These may not be the same skills as those required to bring alive effectively the words and actions of Jesus on a glass-strewn sidewalk near the site of a drive-by shooting. Pastoral stress resides in both places. Compassionate pastoral care is essential everywhere. But the inner city pastor often faces inadequate compensation even as she and her congregation face enormous needs – and enormous opportunities - to make a significant difference in the lives of those in and around the church. Church growth or decline numbers reflect many factors, but we wonder at the possibilities of touching desperate lives with healing through adequately financed ministries to children, the elderly, the unemployed, the dislocated, the dispirited. We wonder at the miracles possible when the determined, the energetic, and the Spirit-filled residents of broken neighborhoods are supported institutionally.

Someone described the Detroit Presbytery to us as a place of grief – grieving over past losses and current sufferings on both sides of Eight Mile Road – the famous dividing line between white and black, affluent and poor. Outside the city's boundaries the same forces that broke the city are now at work: job loss, rising unemployment, decline in property values, rising poverty rates, worry over health insurance and retirement security. Yet, we met a presbytery leadership that is struggling to serve all its churches and people and to develop new forms of ministry and evangelism. We share their conviction that it is not God's will that small city churches "go out of business." Here competent leadership requires deep understanding of vastly different lives in starkly different places, the forces that shape these lives, the distances that separate them, and the image of God in which we are united. Acquiring such knowledge requires learning from those whom secular society dismisses as unimportant. We need to ponder Jesus' words telling us that he himself is present in "the least of these."

On a Sunday morning in a small black Detroit congregation, a worshiper from ACSWP saw wonderful evidence of such border crossings as almost a dozen white worshipers from a suburban church joined their partner congregation in vibrant worship. Such moments should not be dismissed as "kumbayah." They provide a basis in shared faith and mutual affection to deal with very real differences in social experiences and knowledge. Such a basis of worship and fellowship can then mean honesty in facing together the realities of race/ethnicity, gender, and social class biases that have too long divided us as Americans and as Presbyterians.

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The vision and hope of the church we saw so clearly in Detroit is that of a people united in their faith and, therefore, courageous in their ministries; a leadership creative in bringing Christ to the economically poor and the struggling affluent; a body that understands its interconnectedness and embraces it in all its activities. Detroit helps us to see how important racial/ethnic and gender representations are in our church's leadership. By exposing the particular dynamics of structural racism and sexism, these Church leaders also expose the undemocratic forces of unequal opportunity that affect all Americans, despite the election of an African-American President. By a history of faithful resistance to such forces, both corporate and governmental, urban members and ministers point the way toward continuing faithful social witness. For example, the report on the impact of hurricanes upon the Gulf Coast, *Struck Down But Not Destroyed*, authored primarily by an African-American native of New Orleans and adopted by the General Assembly in 2008, identifies the ways that limitations on jobs, education, and housing mutually reinforce and limit the horizons of many citizens of color.

The economic and social abandonment of Detroit, New Orleans, and parts of every other major city has long been a concern of the church. The danger to faithfulness is an unwitting embrace of a theology of abandonment rather than one of Christian solidarity. The danger is an unwitting embrace of secular views of success, and status, and value rather than a biblically-based prophetic challenge to them. What is clear from Detroit is that secular values create harsh divisions of well-being among God's children that are too often reflected in church structures and relationships. Success for Christ's Church is aptly described in what we Presbyterians call "The Great Ends of the Church": proclaiming the gospel; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of God's children; preserving the truth; promoting social righteousness; and exhibiting the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Paul's words describe the unity of a Body of Christ that is organic and incarnate, a spiritual and material reality in which no congregation, no Christian, and no pastor is an island. How, then, shall we, as Body of Christ, fulfill this solidarity, not despite our diversity, but *through* our diversity? How shall we learn to live out this calling to share our burdens and benefits as different parts of one body? This reflection on our encounter with the realities of urban, smaller-for-now, congregations and their leaders in Detroit, this experience of leadership and ministry skills distinct from those needed in some other places, confirms for us the necessity of maintaining diversity at every level of Church governance as we struggle against the forces that would divide us. As Calvinists, this means setting in place structures of mutual accountability to ensure that diversity. The particular structures for this will always be in need of reform, guided by biblical and confessional principles. Yet, the faithful prophetic voice we heard from the Detroit Presbytery is that Gospel faith requires us to name, resist, and heal this brokenness. May we, all God's people, hear this Word of Life that always resounds in cries for justice—like those we heard in Detroit.