

ACSWP Holds Fall Meeting in Detroit, Michigan

*Committee Focuses on Inner City Concerns
Related to Referrals Received from the 218th General Assembly (2008)*

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November 2008

In mid-October 2008, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) held its fall meeting in the inner city of Detroit, Michigan. This city is the home of some of the finest cultural attractions in the nation such as the Henry Ford Museum (<http://www.thehenryford.org/>), the Detroit Science Center (<http://www.detroitsciencecenter.org/>), and the Motown Historical Museum (<http://www.motownmuseum.com/>). These magnificent attractions, however, were not the driving force behind ACSWP's decision to meet in this location.

ACSWP selected Detroit as its meeting site because the inner city residents and societal institutions are wrestling with similar social justice concerns the committee will address in studies assigned for submission to the 219th General Assembly (2010). These concerns include the widespread detention of immigrants, specifically women and children; gun violence; public education; and HIV/AIDS. In addition, the committee selected this meeting location because the members wanted to learn about concerns and joys of the Presbytery of Detroit. The committee, therefore, asked ACSWP Co-Chair, the Reverend Dr. Gloria Albrecht, and members of the Detroit Presbytery to invite representatives of the presbytery (staff, elders, and pastors), public officials, and community advocates to come and share their perspectives on these and other related topics.

The testimonies ACSWP heard were heartbreaking and inspiring. The committee heard challenges related to long-standing inequalities in the city's public housing, public schools, healthcare, and criminal justice institutions, as well as pay equity concerns in the church. These social justice challenges have affected the well being of the residents in the inner city of Detroit for decades. For example, data released in August 2008 indicated that among the U.S. cities with a population of 65,000 or more residents, Detroit's poverty rate ranks 8th in the nation. (Source: State of Michigan, "Overview and Analysis of 2007 Income and Poverty Data," http://www.michigan.gov/printerFriendly/0,1687,7-160-17451_18668_41233-198994--,00.html) The U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 Detroit population data indicated that Blacks/African Americans represent over 81.6% of the population; Caucasians represent 12.3% of the population; and, women represent about 52.9% of the population. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "State and County Quick Facts," Detroit, MI, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html>) These data confirm that poverty affects the largest population groups living in inner city Detroit and affects Blacks/African Americans, and women, disproportionately. A paper by the Reverend Dr. Gloria Albrecht entitled, "Detroit: Still the "Other" America," which will appear in the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* in 2009, provides an ethical analysis of historical factors that have contributed to the concerns described here.

The concerns brought to the attention of ACSWP in Detroit were similar to challenges the committee heard last October in New Orleans, Louisiana. During that 2007 gathering, ACSWP listened to testimonies through panel presentations and toured areas of the city devastated the hardest by recent hurricanes in late summer 2005 through late summer 2007. These testimonies included: patterns of resegregation in public schools; irresponsible funding decisions of governmental officials in regard to levees and other infrastructure; and the lack of access to quality community healthcare services, especially for the most vulnerable low-income populations (the elderly, women and children, and people of color). In addition, the committee heard testimonies about the outpouring of compassionate support the residents in this region had received and still were receiving from religious and secular organizations from across this nation. Presbyterians and many others were working side by side to help the residents of New Orleans and the U.S. Gulf Coast to rebuild their homes and churches.

The Advocacy Committee for Racial Ethnic Concerns (ACREC) and ACSWP addressed many of these issues through a joint report approved by the 218th General Assembly (2008) entitled, *Struck Down, But Not Destroyed: From Hurricane Katrina to a More Equitable Future*. On the one hand, these policy recommendations affirm the constructive and compassionate response of the members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). On the other hand, however, the recommendations challenge both church bodies and societal institutions to do more to address the structural issues related to race and poverty and gender and poverty. (To download a complimentary copy of this full report, visit <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/pdf/ga218/katrina-struck-down.pdf>.)

Turning from the New Orleans context to Detroit 2008, the following comments are samples of the testimonies ACSWP listened to over the course of 3½ days in this region. These testimonies were shared in plenary sessions and a journey through numerous poverty stricken inner city areas. Data cited earlier in this article describe the condition of poverty that influences the context of these heartbreaking stories. The inspiring stories that follow provide a perspective about the unwavering faith of the members of the Presbytery of Detroit in the Risen Lord in the midst of their trials and tribulations.

Heartbreaking Testimonies

- Racial tension between the city and its suburbs is deep;
- Exodus of the youth to nearby cities, such as Chicago, has contributed to an increase in the needs of the elderly population;
- Many residents seek medical care in emergency rooms because of the lack of access to community healthcare institutions;
- Some Black/African American inner city congregations are dying;
- Declining resources have contributed to tension between urban and suburban congregations;
- Some local urban congregations have experienced significant cuts in personnel, and we spoke with one extraordinary urban pastor who is serving a congregation full time without receiving a salary;

- Suburban congregations tend to have more resources than the struggling inner city congregations, although they also struggle with diminishing resources for mission, program and personnel;
- The deportation of more and more immigrant mothers, as well as fathers, has led to an increase in the number of children left behind and placed in U.S. foster care;
- The church has not been held accountable to its own policies, especially its compensation and lending policies;
- The church sometimes forms programs around the shoulders of a few people; and
- The HIV/AIDS statistics are startling. Detroit accounts for over 60% of those living with HIV in the entire state of Michigan.

Inspiring Testimonies

- Even in the midst of hard and uncertain times, inner city urban congregations are holding on to HOPE;
- Members of the various racial and ethnic groups have to participate in the whole governance of the church to bring about change;
- The presbytery is trying to help suburban churches partner with urban congregations;
- The presbytery is sponsoring events to help struggling congregations work through their grief;
- Anti-racism and multicultural training events have been held to address racial and ethnic tensions;
- The members of the PC(USA) have begun to work more in collaboration on healthcare concerns; healthcare is a social justice issue;
- Local groups are listening to the stories of immigrants and are pushing for better immigration practices and policies; and
- The presbytery is going green to help address some of the ecological concerns of the city.

The information the Detroit presenters shared was helpful to ACSWP as the committee considered its ongoing and new studies (e.g., HIV/AIDS, gun violence, and the Nature and Value of Human Life). For example, these presentations illustrated different methods by which Presbyterians do theology and ethics. The information shared by the Detroit presenters also was helpful to the committee as it reflected on its mission and communication role. The committee pondered this question: Does the committee develop its papers with contexts like Detroit in mind? Through a focused conversation led by ACSWP Interpretation and Communication Chair, Elder Dr. John Knapp, the committee affirmed that it needs to be more mindful of contexts like Detroit as it develops policy reports and study papers.

The committee identified five key reasons for seeking better ways to communicate with the whole church—rural, urban and suburban populations—as it performs its assigned policy witness function. They are:

- To enhance the policy development process;
- To enhance the policy deliberation process;
- To enhance the policy awareness process;
- To enhance the policy implementation process; and
- To enhance the policy evaluation process.

In the months ahead, the committee will continue to explore creative ways to strengthen its policy communication work.

OTHER BUSINESS

➤ A Newly Appointed GAC Member

–The committee announced the appointment of Elder Linda Scholl as a new General Assembly Council (GAC) liaison to ACSWP. She fills the position vacated by the resignation of the Reverend J. Michael Castronis from the GAC and ACSWP in late summer 2008.

➤ Follow-up on Projects Considered at the August Ghost Ranch Meeting

–The committee discussed draft prospectuses for studies approved by the 218th General Assembly (2008) on HIV/AIDS, gun violence, and on updating the 1983 *Theology of Compensation* paper. These documents were revised following the committee's August 2008 meeting at Ghost Ranch Conference Center in Abiquiu, New Mexico. The committee took final action on these reports as amended in Detroit. For more information about these projects, contact either ACSWP Coordinator Christian T. Iosso at christian.iosso@pcusa.org, 1-800-728-7228, ext. 5814; or ACSWP Associate Belinda M. Curry at belinda.curry@pcusa.org, 1-800-728-7228, ext. 5813.

–The committee received an update from ACSWP Co-Chair, the Reverend Dr. Ronald J. Kernaghan about this year's annual Peacemaking Colloquium held at the Stony Point Center in Stony Point, New York, September 15-17. This consultation focused on the effects of gun violence on the whole society. Co-Chair Kernaghan stated that the meeting was valuable. Some participants indicated that they were interested in serving on the gun violence team ACSWP will appoint. Members appointed to this group will receive data presented at this gathering.

The 2008 Peacemaking Colloquium sponsors included the:

- Presbyterian Peacemaking Program (PPC) <<http://www.pcusa.org/peacemaking/>>;
- Presbyterian Peace Fellowship (PPF) <<http://www.presbypeacefellowship.org/>>;
- Stony Point Center <<http://www.stonypointcenter.org/>>;
- Synod of the Northeast Public Policy Advocacy Network (SNPPAN) <<http://www.synodne.org/>>;
- Albany Presbytery <<http://www.albanypresbytery.org/>>;
- Monmouth Presbytery <<http://www.monmouthpresbytery.net/>>; and
- ACSWP.

For more information about this event, refer to the Presbyterian News Service report by Reporter Evan Silverstein entitled, *Freedom under fire: Gun violence jeopardizes American way of life in costly ways, speaker says* @ <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/2008/08680.htm>.

–The Detroit meeting site provided the committee with a different perspective on energy and environmental justice issues than its last meeting at the Ghost Ranch Conference Center. Ghost Ranch is located in an area of New Mexico surrounded by the

splendid beauty of Mother Nature. It is a place of peace and quietness. In addition, its facilities are constructed in a way that helps the center to preserve and protect energy and environmental resources. Detroit, on the other hand, is a fast paced city built as the industrial home of the major automobile companies (Ford, GM and Chrysler). Energy conservation and pollutions abatement have not had a strong history here. The report approved by the 218th General Assembly (2008) entitled, *The Power to Change: U.S. Energy Policy and Global Warming*, addresses energy and environmental justice realities ACSWP witnessed in Detroit and Abiquiu. That Assembly urged the members of the PC (USA) to “advocate for change and leadership within the church and in all forms of government regarding energy policy and global climate change.” A full copy of this report is available through the ACSWP’s Web site @ <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/pdf/ga218/energy-resolution-012007.pdf>.

At Ghost Ranch, the committee heard from Dr. Larry Rasmussen, an expert on energy ethics and the Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics, emeritus, Union Theological Seminary, New York, NY; and, Dr. Philip Wickeri, a scholar on globalization and the Flora Lamson Hewlett Professor of Evangelism and Mission, San Francisco Theological Seminary, San Francisco, CA.

➤ New Publications

–The committee reviewed covers for two new General Assembly policies: *Lift Every Voice: Democracy, Voting Rights, and Electoral Reform*; and, *Comfort My People: A Policy Statement on Serious Mental Illness*. The *Lift Every Voice* resource is available for downloading through ACSWP’s Web site @ <http://www.pcusa.org/acswp/pdf/votingrights.pdf>. Additional copies of this resource are available at \$3.00 each through the Presbyterian Distribution Services (PDS) by calling 1-800-524-2612. Please specify PDS order #02-052-08-003 when placing orders. The *Comfort My People* resource will be available by early December 2008.

➤ Paper on *Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment*

–The committee discussed the paper written by sociologist Dr. William J. Weston entitled, *Rebuilding the Presbyterian Establishment* <<http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry/papers/rebuilding.pdf>>. In light of fruitful conversations with members of the Detroit Presbytery and other invited guests, the committee expressed concern that this paper does not contain any data to support Dr. Weston’s claim that there is no longer a need for the church to have explicit policies of representation to develop racial and ethnic, and women’s leadership in the church. The committee, therefore, appointed a small group chaired by the Reverend Dr. Marsha Fowler to draft a statement reflecting on a vision of the church as we have experienced it in Detroit (and last fall in New Orleans). This vision emphasizes the importance of racial and ethnic, and women’s leadership in both the church and society. ACSWP will publish its reflection on this subject through an appropriate media source.

A Note to the Readers: To learn more about the ministries performed by ACSWP, visit us @ www.pcusa.org/acswp. *Shalom!*