

## The General Assembly and the general election

by CHRISTIAN IOSSO

There were no voting booths in ancient Palestine. Yet prophets and popular movements did express their preferences, often at great risk. That risk intensified under the Romans. Sometimes today there seems to be almost as much discussion of St. Paul and empire in Biblical studies as there is about America and empire in political science. But we are blessed to be in a democracy derived in significant ways from the Reformed tradition's respect for the "inner forum" or individual conscience.

At our best, we have held that realm where the Holy Spirit speaks to each of us to be a coercion-free zone.

On Sept. 25, the conservative Alliance Defense Fund announced that 33 ministers planned to defy Internal Revenue Service law and endorse a particular candidate for president. Since 1954,

Hope, provides a holistic approach to ministry with the 750,000-plus people on the street even before the foreclosure crisis got seriously under way. We cannot be optimistic about this (or much else!), since some federal funding for affordable housing came from transactions of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. On the matter of the market not being, enough, the virtues of accountability and regulation, and the "moral hazard" of extreme differentials in compensa-

an amendment to the tax code for 501(c)(3) has ruled that organizations accepting tax-deductible contributions should, not be funnels for political speech or action. Theologically, our commitment to the separation of church and state (see Book of Order, Preliminary Principles) reflects a profound sense that it is unwise to seek to bond so closely to secular power. At the same time, our respect for God's claim in all of life helps us see how every governmental decision has a dimension of accountability to God's purposes — a dimension that is both ethical and political. Hence we can understand the temptation our conservative brothers face, even as we focus on policies rather than personalities and parties.

Because our every-two-year General Assembly schedule falls on even years, Assembly years are inevitably election years. This year's Assembly adopted a

tion, the General Assembly has spoken clearly, going back to the Great Depression — and to the doctrine of "complete depravity!" (no government or private checks and balances: indeed, no check balances ...)

On taxation, trade deficits, and the *national* debt: An overture from New Covenant Presbytery addressed the debt question most squarely; the Social Creed for the 21st Century addressed the overall picture both comprehensive-

number of resolutions that speak directly to choices behind the personalities on the ballot. I write not only to lift up those policy statements, but to lift up what is reasonably distinctive about our process: the Biblical, theological and empirical grounding we seek to put under our recommendations. Yes, it means length. But most commissioners recognize the complexity and importance of the subject matter. And at this past Assembly, most seem to have skipped over the executive summaries ACSWP provided and focused on the complete texts, both recommendations and background papers.

So can we imagine the mind of the GA in the voting booth? What concerns would we hear?

On the Wall Street or credit market disaster: what about the homeless and those in danger of losing their homes? The GA resolution, From Homelessness to

ly and succinctly (one page long!). After considerable debate and a minority report, the Social Creed was supported by 83% of the commissioners. It addresses the dual themes of globalization and sustainability, and calls for more progressive taxation and reducing the military buildup and war costs that have added so much to our debt.

On the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars: The General Assembly spoke most prophetically back in 2004, calling the war in Iraq "unwise, immoral, and illegal," and did not substantially change its position this past June. It did speak out against the dependence on military contractors for security, though it declined to call them "mercenaries." It called for prompt and orderly withdrawal from Iraq and for internationalizing security and real reconstruction going forward. The Assembly did not adopt the resolution brought by the Advisory Committee, but it did "commend for study" the background paper to that resolution, "To Repent, Re-build, Restore, and Reconcile." The not-approved resolution, *Costly Lessons of the Iraq War*, is available on the ACSWP Web site and we would appre-

ciate any comments on it!

On Energy and the Environment: The *Power to Change: US Energy Policy and Global Warming* (based on the title of the 1981 Energy policy, "The Power to Speak Truth to Power") calls for a massive re-direction and reduction of our energy use. Climate change is one of those issues where the Church has been ahead of the curve for 20 years, crying with John the Baptist for a baptism into more solar, wind, and water power (energetic repentance?!). It criticizes coal as well as oil, and underlines the ever-growing problem of nuclear fuel disposal and its link to nuclear proliferation. The implications of climate change were perhaps most graphically described in *Struck Down But Not Destroyed: From Hurricane Katrina to a More Equitable Future*, though this resolution also focused on prevention and preparation in other vulnerable places beyond the Gulf Coast.

On Immigration: The Assembly spoke well in 2004, calling for an orderly path to citizenship and recognizing the economic factors that push countries to export their own citizens. Many presbyteries have benefited from the fine work of Julia Thorne, the immigration attorney

employed on the basis of that policy in the Office of the General Assembly. The Assembly called for specific attention to the problem of detained undocumented immigrants, 15-20% minors, who are often put in for-profit private prisons — another idea the Assembly did not think was good (For the Abolition of For-Profit Prisons, 2003).

On voting abuses: The Assembly adopted a resolution, *Lift Every Voice: Democracy, Voting Rights and Electoral Reform*, that presents a range of alternatives to the often cumbersome, restrictive, or arbitrary voting practices used to disenfranchise or discourage millions of potential voters. From the basic Electoral College map, which makes "swing state" voters more equal than others, to District of Columbia residents and former felons whose votes are discounted in various ways, to working voters who would benefit from holiday or weekend voting, to all voters subjected to malfunctioning record-less machines, there remain many hanging chads in the system. This resolution also gives some of the Reformed ethos that underlies our sense of responsibility for public affairs.

On pay equity and workers rights:

Women still make about three-fourths what men make, for comparable work, even in the Church itself. What about worker's rights generally — the Assembly called for continued review of the struggle over union representation at the world's biggest hog processing factory, run by Smithfield Foods in Tar Heel, NC. Studies show that declines in unionization are a big part of the decline in wages for working Americans, and the minimum wage has also not kept up. God's Work in Women's Hands — another title echoing a previous policy, God's Work in Our Hands (1995) — documents pay inequities and provides tools for studying and changing our ways of valuing the vocations of all.

On human rights, terrorism, *torture*: The Assembly did address issues of human rights in several ways — this remains a place where the mainline church's witness has been important, even when controversial, as in Palestine. Specific statements were made about dangers in Colombia and the Philippines, countries that receive direct U.S. military aid. Is it idealism to push for human rights and religious freedom in places like Sudan, Zimbabwe, North

Korea, Burma ...?

Many other issues are mixed into every choice on the ballot, from councilperson to president. Check out the ACSWP Web site ([www.pcusa.org/acswp](http://www.pcusa.org/acswp)), or the Washington Office Web site ([www.pcusa.org/washington](http://www.pcusa.org/washington)), and pray to vote wisely!

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