

# Stewardship of Public Life

## Biblical & Theological Perspectives

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

January 2007

The Presbyterian Washington Office is the public policy information and advocacy office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Its task is to advance the social witness perspectives and policies of the General Assembly, and to recommend specific legislative and administrative remedies to Congress and the White House.

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*Leader-PC(USA)*'s ministries in the US and over 80 nations in areas of evangelism, education, health, world service, and development; pastor and administrator for over 1000 missionaries; leader for the PC(USA) ecumenical and interfaith relations and partnerships.

*Wider Church Service*—National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA; World Council of Churches; World Alliance of Reformed Churches; Council of Presidents, US Chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. He is co-author with William Hopper of "What Unites Presbyterians: Common Ground for Troubled Times"

*The 2007 Biblical & Theological Perspective reflection has been written by Dr. Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This reflection is produced each year by the Washington Office as a way of providing background information to advocates regarding why we take the time as citizen Christians to speak to our elected and appointed officials.*

### FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD!

*"justice will roll down like water and  
righteousness like an everflowing stream."  
(Amos 5: 24)*

There are many reasons to be concerned over the conflicts and polarization in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) these days. At core this acrimonious spirit is just what the Apostle Paul was concerned about when he wrote the church in Corinth, and he reminded them that they were indeed "the body of Christ and individually members of it." (I Corinthians 12:27) He made it clear to the Corinthians that their diversity was not for conflict and division but in order that the various gifts of the community might work together under Christ who is the head of the church to build the body up in love. The same is true for the PC(USA) today!

In addition to modeling the body of Christ, we are called to unity "so that the world might believe (John 17:21). Too often I

fear that the conflicts in the life of the church have captured our time and energy to such an extent that we have failed to be faithful to the fundamental calling of God, who came into the world not because God so loved the *church* but because God so loved the *world*. (John 3: 16) What is important for all of us, in the midst of deeply held differences about issues in the life of the church, is not to forget the primary calling we have to be people concerned about God's world.

Karl Barth had a wonderful saying that a Christian is one who has the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. I have had the Bible in my hands a lot recently, but I have also had the newspaper, and I am very deeply concerned at the kinds of things that seem to be emerging in the world in which we live—a world

in which it seems okay to be involved in preemptive violence against other nations; a world in which day after day we experience terror and violence and respond in kind; a world in which the gap between the rich and the poor is growing to unprecedented levels. Not too long ago I was in South Africa. Did you know that forty percent of the people in South Africa are HIV positive and millions are in the process of dying?

The justice and peace and community that God intends seem to be slipping further and further away from us. However important our issues are within the life of the church, I believe there is a clarion call from our Savior to all of us is to be the church of Jesus Christ—to not only preach, but also to live the Beatitudes; to find Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters; to proclaim release to the captives, liberty to the oppressed, and the acceptable year of the Lord; to work for a world in which swords can be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; so that this world can know peace.

As Presbyterians we have many gifts and resources to aid us in being faithful to this calling:

- We have a biblical mandate that calls us to go into all the world and work for justice, for mercy and for peace.
- We have a *Book of Confessions* that reminds us of the sovereignty of God over all creation. [http://](http://www.pcusa.org/oga/constitution.htm)

### ***The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church***

*The Constitution of the PC(U.S.A.) consists of several parts. The first volume is the Book of Confessions, the second (consisting of the Form of Government, Directory for Worship, and Rules of Discipline) is called the Book of Order.*

*The Book of Confessions*

*The book of Confessions, containing historical statements of what we as a church believe, is available in several forms.*

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*Items marked with are in Adobe acrobat PDF format. For best results, right-click the link (or click and hold for Macintosh), select "save target as" and save the document to your desktop for viewing and printing.*

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[www.pcusa.org/oga/constitution.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/oga/constitution.htm)

- We have a *Book of Order* that tells us we are called to work for justice and peace, even at the risk of losing our own lives.
- We have a set of Assembly policies that stand up second to none in God's call for justice and peace in this world.

But I fear that among us Presbyterians we often lack the passion in our lives and in our church to have as our first calling the transformation of the world into the realm of Christ. With my colleagues in the General Assembly Council, I have been involved in consultations with many of our presbyteries. I have often been

deeply moved at the passions we have seen. There are passions to renew our churches; to reach out to racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups; to renew our ministries with young people; to be a church that nurtures and emphasizes Christian education. But what has struck me is that our Reformed distinctive of being prophetic witnesses in the world because of the sovereignty of God has been somewhat on the back burner. In the midst of all the crises we have faced, we have often lost that passion to be a force for justice and peace, a force for the redemption of the world in which we live.

We are at an interesting turning point in human history, and many of the dynamics of globalization present a frightening future for the world. I hope this Presbyterian Church will claim and reclaim the

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mantle that has been at its heart and soul—to be a community that exists to transform the world for the values of Christ. In this kind of society there is no way to be about this task without a deep and sustained commitment to public policy advocacy for a society and a world that will reflect Amos’ vision that “justice will roll down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream.” (Amos 5: 24)

Next year we will celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the *Confession of 1967*. What a statement that confession was thirty-five years ago to a world in crisis, a world in racial divide, a world in great difficulty! The clarion call that the church offered to itself and the world was the message that our fundamental calling is to be agents of God’s reconciliation in the world. We need to claim that vision anew in our time! We need not to forget the difficult issues of justice within the life of our own church; but I hope we can all find some fresh ways to join together and also lift up the cause of Christ and the commitment to justice that the world needs so much these days.

As we work together around difficult issues in the church, may we also make this a time to call this church to a renewal of its first calling—to know that God loves the world and that we are called to be agents of God’s transformation of this world!

*Citizenship is a trust...*

*Citizenship is a trust in the exercise of which we are called on to be faithful stewards. Too often churchmen (and churchwomen) have been silent on political issues when they should have spoken courageously. Too often they have been aloof and indifferent when they should have taken resourceful leadership. The price of liberty under law is a devoted and intelligent people prepared to act with conviction.*

*(1952 Statement - PCUSA, minutes p. 205)*

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## Witness in Washington

### Previous Statements

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Presbyterian position on social issues from the 1958 Statement of the PCUA, p. 537:

The General Assembly:

- Affirms its conviction that neither the Church as the body of Christ, nor Christians as individuals, can be neutral or indifferent toward evil in the world;
- Affirms its responsibility to speak on social and moral issues for the encouragement and instruction of the Church and its members, seeking earnestly both to know the mind of Christ and to speak always in humility and love;
- Reminds the churches that their duty is not only to encourage and train their members in daily obedience to God's will, but corporately to reveal God's grace in places of suffering and need, to resist the forces that tyrannize, and to support the forces that restore the dignity of all men as the children of God, for only so is the gospel most fully proclaimed.



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