

No. 9517

(Operational Business Item)

**A STANCE ON THE PUBLIC WITNESS
OF THE DIVISION OF HOMELAND MINISTRIES**

ADOPTED by the General Assembly

A Commitment to Justice

Homeland Ministries views the church's commitment to justice as rooted in the Word of God and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church is called to live out its faith in the world, not as an option, but as an integral element of its commission. Public witness (speaking and working toward God's vision for creation and human society) is an essential response to the Spirit of God in our midst. God, who in Christ was reconciling the whole of creation, entrusted the continuing ministry of reconciliation to the church. At issue is not whether but how the church will speak and act on behalf of its faith. We believe that the church has an opportunity to find new ways of strengthening its public witness. "Public witness," as we use the term, includes speaking on behalf of the church and its faith, advocacy for persons and causes, and actions undertaken to effect changes in people's lives and in society.

A Need for Change

We believe that changes in the church and in culture call for a re-examination of our basic policies and strategies of social witness. One change in the culture, which the church has shared, is the loss of institutional credibility. This questioning has affected all national and international institutions, government and non-government alike. In the church, it has resulted in a "disestablishment" of mainline Protestantism which has undercut the effectiveness of denominational pronouncements and their representational character. Sometimes it is necessary for the church to speak out, whether its voice is effective or not. However, we believe the resolution process can be strengthened by gaining broader ownership in the church and that it can be augmented by new and more effective strategies. The loss of credibility can encourage the church's elected leaders to disown responsibility for the General Assembly's statements. It can relieve congregations from seeing any serious challenge for their life and ministry. It can allow government virtually to ignore them.

We have learned that, when the church's public witness is separated out from the church's whole life and ministry and seen as a segmented and specialized activity, it becomes vulnerable to serious flaws. This separation has led to the church making broad, sweeping pronouncements calling on the society to do what we have been unable or unwilling to do in our own life. The separation from congregational life has led to an over-emphasis on issues and systemic change from the top. At times we have depended too much on reactive, short-term policy changes through the legislative process which have had little effect on the systems and institutions we seek to change. Sometimes there has been more attention to secular allies than to the spiritual

voice of the church. Treating the church's ministry of witness as a separate and specialized activity weakens its spiritual power and moral authority.

A Stance on Witness and Justice

It is the stance of Homeland Ministries, first, that the ministry of witness and justice belongs to the whole church; and second, that this is an inseparable part of the church's whole ministry. The partners in this ministry include congregations, regions, general units and institutions, organized constituency groups and ecumenical partners. They include pastors and lay leaders. They include the church's elected leadership, the General Minister and President and the Council of Ministers. They include the elected representatives of congregations and regions in the General Board and General Assembly. Witness is inseparably linked with other varieties of ministry: worship, teaching, spiritual practices, evangelism and service. Our public witness has its greatest spiritual power and moral authority when it grows authentically out of the life and ministry of the whole church.

The church must first focus on its own community and then address the world. As a community of faith, the church must embody compassion, reconciliation and justice so that it can witness by its life as well as its words. Such a focus does not abandon social witness but serves to strengthen it. Such a witness does not give in to self-interest nor institutional survival, but serves to revitalize our life for the sake of the world. Such a witness does not avoid controversy per se, but rather seeks to eliminate battles which damage the church, yet do little to advance the cause of justice.

The Role of Homeland Ministries

Homeland Ministries believes that the church's elected leadership (the General Minister and President, regional ministers and presidents of general units) should speak on issues of conscience. Homeland Ministries will remain a leading partner with regions and general units, contributing its full resources to the development of such statements in close consultation with the church's elected representatives in the General Board and General Assembly.

Homeland Ministries will continue to provide leadership in a hopefully strengthened resolution process. When times of crisis or emergency call for a faithful response, we will articulate such for the General Board or General Assembly's consideration. In addition, we will continue to offer counsel and guidance to congregations, regions and other units in writing resolutions. We will continue to share actions of the General Assembly through our ecumenical partners and networks, and we will maintain our substantial involvement in the process of developing ecumenical advocacy. In times of crisis we will offer resources to congregations and others in the church, as we have done in the cases of the Los Angeles riots and the Oklahoma City tragedy.

The particular mission of Homeland Ministries is to strengthen congregations, to encourage and resource them as witnessing faith communities. This includes encouraging and supporting congregations in mission to their own communities. It also includes providing opportunities for them to engage in ministries of service, advocacy and action beyond their communities. Homeland Ministries will seek ways to involve congregations in selecting priority social issues

for study and action and to engage them as significant partners in public witness. We have heard from congregations that they want to be personally involved in mission from their doorsteps to the ends of the earth, and we are confident that they can provide a strong base of support for the church's public advocacy and action.

The Present Work of Homeland Ministries

Currently, Homeland Ministries carries out its justice ministries in two ways: by specific program ministries related to priority social issues, and by incorporating or infusing justice issues in other areas of ministry. Specific program emphases include racial justice and anti-racism education, the anti-immigrant backlash, criminal justice, stopping violence, welfare reform, health care reform, environmental stewardship, mother-to-mother, AIDS ministries, resources on understanding hatred and hate groups, domestic violence, and peacemaking. Homeland Ministries makes public statements on its own behalf, usually in concert with ecumenical partners and directed to the U.S. Congress and Administration or to the Canadian Parliament and Administration. We are working to strengthen support for our volunteer legislative advocacy network in Washington, DC. We hope to be able to offer this model of volunteer legislative advocacy to regions who wish to augment the legislative networks of Disciples women.

Justice issues are incorporated into children's ministry, youth ministry, young adult ministry, Disciples Women, Disciples Men, family ministry, Volunteers in Mission, refugee and immigration ministries, Asian American ministries, racial-ethnic and multicultural ministries, Mission Centers, People of the Covenant, and lay and clergy leader development. Our overall evangelism strategy, particularly urban evangelism, strongly identifies social justice ministries as part of the evangelistic task.

Our Hope for the Future

Our hope is that congregations will: first, see all that we do as their ministries which they carry out through Homeland Ministries; second, that congregations which respond to doorstep needs and challenges will look to Homeland Ministries for resourcing and support to strengthen their own ministries of justice; finally, that we may be able to help the whole church, building on the voices from congregations, to speak and act with unity, power and authority.