



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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## SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY

*The Presbyterian Church (USA) has established a long record of taking stands and speaking out on issues related to justice in society. Westminster Presbyterian Church's actions are informed by this history.*

*Just as Westminster has spoken out on issues of concern within the denomination, Westminster needs to use its voice to lead in the public sphere.*



# OUR CALL

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## *Living Out Shalom*

### **Shalom**

Throughout scripture the theme of establishing shalom as a form of justice is a strong call to act on behalf of those who have no voice. Because of the call to establish shalom, the Session of the Westminster Presbyterian Church takes the position that an essential part of our ministry in God's world is to advocate for justice in our own communities—both religious and civil. Advocacy should be carried out by individuals and by groups within the church acting on their own behalf. Individuals and groups—as parts of the body of Christ—are called to advocate for the sake of others. In addition, Westminster Presbyterian Church as a corporate entity is called to advocacy for the sake of justice.

### **What God Requires**

At least a part of what each of us means by faith and faithfulness is shaped by our own concepts of who our God really is. Our mission to be faithful, therefore, is shaped by our understanding of this divine reality. Who is this God we serve? The writers of Deuteronomy end their historical review of the Hebrew people with a wonderful picture of who God is and what God wants from us.

So now, O Israel, what does God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in God's ways, to love God, to serve your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments. For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphans and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. *Deut. 10:12-22*

#### **What God does, God also requires of us.**

- Show truthfulness and honesty.
- Execute justice for the poor and those at the margins of society.
- Practice hospitality for strangers.
- Provide basic needs such as food and clothing.

### **Leadership**

Through God's actions, God reveals the characteristics that God is looking for in leaders of the community of faith. In the book of Jeremiah, God passes a judgment about kings that can be extended to all faithful leaders.

Woe to him one who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing and does not give them their wages; who says 'I will build myself a spacious house with large upper rooms,' and who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar, and painting it with vermilion. Are you a king because you compete in cedar? {That is, because you are rich and powerful?} Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is this not to know me? Says (God). *Jer.22:13-16*

Doing justice, therefore, is a way to know God.

Justice has to do with the arrangements of our public life and how people are treated by the systems that govern our shared lives. A primary biblical criterion for justice is shalom—a social and communal term that indicates well-being and wholeness. Shalom is a corporate condition signifying good relations between persons, families, nations, and the physical environment as well as between each of these and God. Not only is Shalom the absence of violence, shalom also includes active faith, adequate material prosperity, physical health, happiness, justice and peace. God intends that the just peace of shalom should be the goal of our life together.

## **Doing Justice**

God desires justice in the public arena. That is the message that comes to us from every part of scripture.

In the commandments of the law, the protection of the poor is a major focus of the public establishment of justice. Among many examples is one from Deuteronomy.

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes...and they shall render just decisions for the people...Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue. *Deut.16: 18-20*

This theme is picked up again in Wisdom literature.

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor God. *Proverbs 14:31*

From the Psalms we hear,

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice...May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. *Ps. 72:1-4*

The prophets speak to justice issues and the need to advocate for justice in the land a great deal. For example, Isaiah 58:6-8 talks about advocating for justice as worship pleasing to God.

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

A model of religious leaders directly confronting secular power occurs in the interchange between Amos and Amaziah. Amos confronts the court prophet Amaziah to pronounce judgment against King Jeroboam. Another passage from Amos also addresses God's preference for actively seeking justice over worship that does not address issues of the real world. *Amos 7:10-17*

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them...But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. *Amos 5:21-24*

Both Matthew (23:23) and Luke record this saying by Jesus,

But Woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practiced, without neglecting the others. *Lk. 11:42*

Over and over again, the parables of Jesus emphasize God's ongoing commitment to the poor and to those at the margins of the society. Jesus does not talk much about governance. Events such as his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (*Lk. 4:7-26*) and his meals with tax collectors, however,

clearly indicate that Jesus refuses to be bound by cultural arrangements that limit the inclusiveness of the civic and faith communities. Consistently, Jesus stood against the right of some to have power over others by virtue of wealth, political rank, family position, or the use of violence.

## Our Call

Shalom calls faithful people both to serve the needs of individuals (*Mt. 25:31-46*) and to change the structures that bring harm to people living under them (*Jer. 29:1-7*).

The Book of Order, in the chapter on THE CHURCH AND ITS MISSION, reinforces our call to commitment to serve and to advocate for justice. Our call is reinforced in the statement,

The mission of the Church is given form by God's activity in the world as told in the Bible and understood by faith. *G-3.0100*

According to the Book of Order, one of the ways the church is called to be "Christ's faithful evangelist" is

. . . participating in God's activity in the world through its life for others by (a) healing and reconciling and binding up wounds, (b) ministering to the needs of the poor, the sick, the lonely, and the powerless, (c) engaging in the struggle to free people from sin, fear, oppression, hunger, and injustice, (d) giving itself and its substance to the service of those who suffer, (e) sharing with Christ in the establishing of his just, peaceable, and loving rule in the world. *G-3.0300*

The next section states,

The Church is called on to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life . . . . *G-3.0400*

Doing justice is an ongoing demand of faith and of scripture. Doing justice is what we are called to do together even at the risk of the church's life.

# OUR RESPONSE

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## 1. Develop and Adopt Policy Statements

- The Social Justice Ministry Team will consult with appropriate Westminster groups and/or committees to develop policy statements describing specific topical areas related to eliminating oppression and seeking justice including, but not limited to, housing, hunger, and human rights. The Faith in Action Council will also propose and implement a detailed plan for publicizing, providing education and gathering input for each issue on which it intends to recommend action.
- The Faith in Action Council will review and adopt these policy statements to be forwarded to Session.
- Session will review and adopt any such statements before they become positions or policy principles of Westminster Presbyterian Church. These policy statements will guide action taken on behalf of Westminster Presbyterian Church as it relates to the specific topic.

## 2. Discern Issues and Priorities

- The Social Justice Ministry Team will serve as a clearing-house for internal and external requests for Westminster to take a position or to take action on social witness and public policy issues.
- The Faith in Action Council may develop priority issues that will be the focus for Westminster social justice advocacy to be adopted by Session.

## 3. Develop Broad Understanding of Social Justice Advocacy Within the Congregation

- Newly adopted policy principles and positions will be publicized in the Westminster News and at the annual congregational meeting.
- Efforts will be made to generate discussions about policy principles and positions in venues such as Parish meetings and Sunday Forums.
- The Social Justice Ministry Team will provide opportunities for Westminster members to put their faith into action through social justice advocacy efforts that will include offerings of letters, signing petitions, and participating in faith-based advocacy events.

## 4. Respond to Issues Not Yet Considered by Session

In the absence of policy statements that have been adopted by the session, other levels of action by councils, committees, or ministry teams may be appropriate. This might include sponsorship of a table or other venue where individual members of the congregation may sign petitions or letters if they wish. All groups will seek guidance from positions taken by the Presbyterian Church USA. in discerning requests for such action.

## 5. No public statement will be made or action taken in the name of Westminster Presbyterian Church without Session's adoption of related policy principles or positions (or other action).