



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Expanded Advocacy on Civic Engagement/Government Transparency Foundational Statement

Almighty God, ruler of all the peoples of the earth, forgive, we pray, our shortcomings as a nation; purify our hearts to see and love truth; give wisdom to our counselors and steadfastness to our people; and bring us at last to the fair city of peace, whose foundations are mercy, justice, and goodwill, and whose builder and maker you are; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

--Prayer for our nation by Woodrow Wilson

These words prayed to his Christian God by the president of the United States in the early 20th century bring context to today's search for balance in government where leaders have integrity and the people are engaged in the quest for mercy, justice and goodwill.

Christian faith and scripture both speak to government. Scripture is teeming with stories of people of faith accepting the challenge of God's call to speak truth to power and step into the political world. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other Hebrew prophets confronted the power structures of their day to demand change in how the people were ruled. In the early church, Paul lectured on the duties of citizenship. Church reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin took these scriptural imperatives to heart; in fact, according to Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in *Public Church: For the Life of the World* (p. 42), Luther

...wrote over one thousand letters to civil authorities, including letters regarding their public policies; fervently admonished preachers to preach against economic injustice and against economic practices and public policies that thwarted the well-being of the poor...and insisted that if civil authorities call Christians to actions that disobey God, then Christians must resist.

Jesus' life and, indeed, his death exemplified the cost of speaking truth to power.

Biblical figures lived in another time and in a vastly different political climate from the experience of contemporary Christians who co-exist with peoples of many faiths within a representative democracy where citizens have greater freedom and responsibility to bear witness. We are called by scripture to "Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute. Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9).

Over the years, "One of the central questions of political philosophy is the purpose of government. Many great political philosophers, from Plato to John Rawls, have concerned themselves with this question" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purpose_of_government). The article goes on to declare, "One common formulation is that the purpose of the state is to protect rights and to preserve justice." This raises a couple of questions: Which rights and whose rights? What constitutes justice? There are varied conceptions as to the answers to these questions.

According to the *Principles of Public Advocacy* of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, scripture describes a good society as one in which those with political authority provide justice for all. Elected

officials are entrusted with managing the shared resources of the people and ensuring that decisions are made with justice and transparency. If government works as intended, its services, such as public safety and security, health, community and human services and public education, benefit the common good and address the needs of all citizens. Government has an especially significant role in protecting those who are weak and vulnerable—those who are unable to protect themselves.

From its inception, public advocacy efforts by the faith community have focused on root causes of many of the problems government is intended to address, including poverty and hunger. No less important are the root causes of citizen cynicism and disengagement from government, because these conditions often silence the voices of the persons our government is charged to serve and protect.

The fruits of Christian persistence in seeking justice can be found in numerous movements throughout the years, including the abolition of slavery, civil rights, human rights, the environment, and the death penalty/criminal justice, to name a few. In recent months, similar fruit has resulted on the government reform front in Pennsylvania, where steadfast public scrutiny and persistence have been contributing factors in the repeal of a highly controversial pay raise, the enactment of lobbyist control legislation and a new fervor within the General Assembly to change its rules of operation to provide for more citizen engagement and transparency.

The Council has long been aware of the distortions of power and the inordinate role of money within the Commonwealth's governing structures. Woodrow Wilson's prayer for giving "wisdom to our counselors" has become an imperative for citizens whose leaders, elected to public service, have violated the public trust by elevating themselves, enhancing their personal power, and becoming more responsive to moneyed interests than to the voices of common persons, moving agendas that do not benefit the common good or assure protection of the vulnerable. While there is some evidence of change, with an unprecedented turnover of seats in the Pennsylvania General Assembly (approximately 25 percent of the entire body) in the 2006 general election, an overwhelming majority of incumbents remained in office. In addition, some would say that current reform efforts within the General Assembly are mere window dressing, with many members simply biding their time until the intense public scrutiny of the recent past subsides.

In other words, despite some positive signs, there is significant evidence that the power of ordinary citizens continues to remain secondary to that of special interests and, indeed, to those elected to serve us.

The Council's *Principles for Public Advocacy* states, "A just Commonwealth ensures that all persons have a voice in government at all levels." And yet without significant resources to engage in what has become known as a "pay to play" system, Christian advocates, whose voices for justice are strong and passionate, will not be heard on the traditional issues of the faith community, including poverty, health care, and the environment.

Fully cognizant of the serious problems that exist in Pennsylvania's government structure, we now recognize that Christian citizen engagement in government must be as much about seeking transparency and integrity within the halls of power as it has been about seeking economic and social justice. Without successfully changing the dynamics of power in Harrisburg, we have no ability to realize any level of justice. Steadfast witness cannot succeed without systemic change.