

August 14, 2020

A Proposal for the Formation of a Committee on Social Justice at Saint Andrews Presbyterian Church

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called both individually and collectively to fearlessly apply our faith to advocate and break down the systems, practices and thinking that underlie discrimination, bias, prejudice and oppression. We are called to act on our beliefs and work to change laws, policies, plans and structures in our society that perpetuate injustice.

While Saint Andrews Presbyterian Church has had a long-standing commitment to helping the poor through its many mission programs, we are further called to address the root causes of unfairness and inequity in our society. We therefore propose a committee under Session to address issues and provide leadership to Saint Andrews members in fighting systemic poverty, structural racism and other issues of societal justice. The committee will seek to engage the entire congregation in this work through coordination with other Saint Andrews committees including Missions, Adult Education, Youth, Children's Ministry, Fellowship and Worship.

The Committee on Social Justice will work to raise awareness of social issues by providing forums for education and discussion. The committee will support meaningful action within the democratic process to end injustice in our society. While respecting the strictures against endorsement of political candidates and political parties, the committee will work to effect change in the systems and laws that perpetuate inequity and unfairness in our community and world.

Following the senseless death of George Floyd on May 25, the Session of Saint Andrews committed to "becoming a church who lives out God's work of justice in our world." We affirm that commitment and request the support of the Session so that Saint Andrews, in the words of the prophet Micah, might "act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God."

Respectfully submitted,
The Social Justice Organizing Committee

Michael Schley, Chair
Jeff Adkins
Juan Ayala-Carmona
Jessica Brueggeman
Nettie Carson
Pat Cash
Dan Cook
Frank Edwards
Lori Edwards
Emily Finch

John Fisher
Marcia Fort
Jerry Gordon
Sherry Hay
Katie Hirscher
Harry Hurd
Marcia Hurd
JD Ice
Shelley Kane
Mark LaMantia

Elizabeth Lusk
Beth Mielcarek
Stephanie Mitchell
Melissa Peacock
Jerry Perkins
Trenna Perkins
Charlotte Sullivan
Rev. John Semmes, ex officio
Rev. Diane Knauf, ex officio

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. What do you mean by social justice? Why use those words?

A. “Social” refers to actions taken collectively by our society and problems that must be fixed by society. “Justice” refers to the moral and spiritual requirement to treat our brothers and sisters with fairness.

Q. How will the committee be organized?

A. We are still working out details, but it is likely that there will be a small steering committee of 8-10 people who will oversee ongoing programs, then issue-based subcommittees or task groups that will come together to undertake specific projects or programs. More than 30 people at Saint Andrews have participated in the organizing meetings, so a structure that engages everyone interested will be important.

Q. What do you see the committee doing in the next year?

A. Again, details are still being worked out, but right now we envision that there would be a program or project each quarter based on a particular issue. The program would typically entail an educational component with guest speakers and shared reading, research undertaken by members, and exploration of possible action.

Q. Can you give an example?

A. Although not selected yet as a project, the issue of cash bail is representative of the topics the committee might address. Today in many cities, people are incarcerated for extended periods of time for minor charges due to their lack of assets such as a house and their inability to pay bail. A program on this issue would start with church-wide educational sessions, then continue into research into what other cities have done, what groups were working on this and what actions would be needed to change the system in Raleigh and Wake County. The project might conclude with recommendations that SAPC members contact their elected representatives or take action in other Christ-centered ways.

Q. What are the main issues of interest?

A. There has been considerable interest in systemic racism and aspects of the criminal justice system including cash bail, harsh sentencing and lack of legal resources. Other topics of interest include food insecurity, lack of access to health care, violence against women, access for those with physical impairment, equal access to education, gun violence, environmental justice, immigrant rights and poverty in general.

Q. Those are a lot of issues. Is the committee going to try to address all of them at once?

A. No. A key to success will be for each subcommittee to focus on one issue at a time. Over time, the committee may undertake projects on a number of issues, but it will be important to do a few things well rather than many things poorly.

Q. Why not do this as a subcommittee of the Missions Committee?

A. While the Missions Committee does important work in addressing the symptoms of poverty, we believe that a new initiative is needed to address the root causes of poverty and systemic racism. Much of the activity of the committee will entail church-wide activity. As an independent committee reporting to Session, the Social Justice committee will be better positioned to coordinate with other church committees including Missions, Adult Education, Youth, Children's Ministry, Fellowship and Worship.

Q. Will the committee need a budget?

A. Not at this time. There may be expenses for some programs, but we see those being paid by participants. The committee might see things differently next year, but during this time of financial uncertainty, the committee can do all or most of its work without funding.

Q. How does this committee relate to the planning done for the Faith Works Team about a year ago?

A. This proposal is the successor to the work started by the Faith Works Team and picks up where the planning for that group left off.

Q. Did the organizing committee research social justice activities at other churches, particularly Presbyterian churches in our state and in New Hope Presbytery?

A. Yes we did. Katie Hirscher took on the task of research and surveyed churches in New Hope Presbytery and related activities in our community. A good number of Presbyterian churches including White Memorial, Durham First Presbyterian and Trinity Avenue Presbytery are adopting the Racial Equity and Justice 21 Day Challenge started by Myers Park Presbyterian in Charlotte. White Memorial and Roxboro Presbyterian have inter-racial corridor partnerships with other churches. Several churches including the Church for Reconciliation and West Raleigh Presbyterian support specific social justice projects. Finally, at least 18 Presbyterian churches in North Carolina have joined the PCUSA Matthew 25 initiative that works to build congregational vitality, dismantle structural racism and eradicate systemic poverty.

Q. Shouldn't the church focus on changing people's hearts first before dealing with social issues?

A. We as Christians cannot allow our society continuing to treat people unfairly and unjustly while we do the work of changing hearts and attitudes. We must do both.