**Addendum**

**Advocacy Priorities**

**2021-2022 Legislative Session**

**January 2021**

**Recognizing Connections Among the 2021-2022 Priorities**

The main document lists the following as priorities for the Council’s Ministry of Public Witness during the 2021-2022 legislative session:

1. The Council will work to address the consequences of the spread of COVID-19 in our country, and for policies aimed at curbing its spread. Examples of such efforts include:
2. Funding for the manufacture, distribution, and administration of vaccines.
3. Economic support/relief for individuals (stimulus, unemployment, SNAP, etc.), businesses (particularly small businesses in danger of failure), and state and local governments whose revenues have collapsed due to the pandemic.
4. Protection and expansion of health care that covers all people.
5. Continued focus will be placed on educating people of faith with the goal of building understanding and reducing racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, biases against differently abled persons, and prejudices against anyone who may be considered different or “other.” This includes disparate treatment of Black and Brown populations in policing.
6. The highest priority will be given to issues that have the greatest effect on our most vulnerable neighbors, including, but not limited to, immigration, criminal justice, gun violence reduction, environment, education, and wages and welfare policies.
7. Continued focus will be given to changing our political system at both the state and federal level to ensure that government serves all people, including, but not limited to, protecting the right to vote and seeking expanded opportunities for and ease in voting, reforming redistricting to prevent gerrymandering that privileges specific political parties, and limiting the influence of money in elections and lobbying.

The Ministry of Public Witness recognizes that the largest and most visible part of its work is to engage regularly with the Council’s advocacy network, encouraging learning and action. This will continue through holding learning events, initiating action alerts, creating and promoting sign-on letters and petitions, and maintaining regular publication of the News and Action Update that has been a mainstay of this ministry for a number of years.

However, we must do more to enhance understanding about the connections/interactions between “othering” (e.g., racism) and issues (e.g., criminal justice), and how our political system affects whether our concerns will be heard, much less acted upon, because none of these factors exist in a vacuum. We also continue to seek better ways to educate our network regarding how legislation and policies that are part of our advocacy efforts work to resolve or avoid negative outcomes, and why it’s important that we engage in this work.

One example of a negative connection has to do with how othering affects legislation and policies, and how they are implemented and enforced. We know, for example, that the number of persons of color incarcerated in our criminal justice system is clearly out of proportion to numbers in the general population. What we don’t always know is the factors behind the disparity. Research suggests, for example, that racial profiling—target and arrest of persons of color—is a factor. We also believe that sentencing guidelines, and how they are applied to different crimes, come into play. Lack of education or employment—almost always higher among people of color (though also among poor white populations)—may result in actions where the consequence is incarceration. Racism and/or white supremacy may mean arrest or even death for people of color who are in the wrong place at the wrong time. While the hurdles for resolving these disparities feel insurmountable, it is imperative that we work to educate and advocate on multiple fronts. While a wholesale change in beliefs/attitudes will take years (if it ever happens), our work can help to create the political will to prevent many, if not most of the worst abuses. However, given the difficulty in making progress we have experienced, we are led to another negative connection.

The ideal view of how government works is that we support and work for candidates we believe will carry out the work that we see as important. While we often see that many of our elected officials support positions we have taken, more often than not we have seen little or no action or movement. Let’s use the example of redistricting. After the 2010 Census and election, Pennsylvania found itself with a majority of one political party dominating the General Assembly, with the same party holding the Governor’s office. This led to a process where that party controlled the process of redrawing the lines of Congressional and state level districts—doing so in a way that was designed to cement their majority for the foreseeable future. A poll in 2018 indicated that just over two-thirds of Pennsylvanians supported an independent restricting commission,[[1]](#footnote-1) something that would lead to a fairer, less partisan redistricting process. Despite this overwhelming support and the formidable and sustained work of advocates, both chambers have continued to thwart the will of the people. As long as gerrymandering, campaign finance and lobbying by those with seemingly unlimited funds have an impact on the make-up of our General Assembly, we will continue to face obstacles to passage of legislation supported by a majority of Pennsylvanians when it doesn’t serve the interests of the monied interests.

While the gap between registration for the two dominant political parties has narrowed, the party with fewer registered voters continues to dominate the General Assembly. This is what happens when lines are strategically drawn to favor one side over another. We witnessed what happened in 2018 after Pennsylvania’s Supreme Court found Congressional districts to be illegally gerrymandered to favor one party. Throughout much of the decade, the Pennsylvania delegation had been 13-5 in the favor of the party with the least registered voters. After the 2018 mid-term election, the balance moved to 9-9, where it remains. How districts are drawn makes a difference.

Another negative interaction is often less obvious, which makes it more insidious. We see this kind of interaction more often as it relates to legislation, policy, and development and their impacts on the environment. While development has slowed with an economy in crisis, Pennsylvania has witnessed a dramatic expansion in natural gas development with the fracking boom that began in the late 2000s. Much of the development happens in the areas that have lived through the boom-and-bust cycles of previous extraction industries (forestry, coal, etc.), and where the fracking industry promises jobs and boosts in local economies—many rural and lower income. We see a similar situation with the development of new pipelines, though these may also affect more urban areas—most often, however, displacing or damaging the environment of those least able to resist this development, primarily poor and persons of color. These industries have brought negative consequences that often outweigh the promised benefits—damage to the environment, local infrastructures (like damage to roads), emissions that pollute the air and infiltrate wells and water systems, affecting the health of those who live nearby. Legislators (at all levels) have often viewed temporary revenues and perceived benefits as more important than protecting people and the environment, so they frequently fail to enact strong legislation and policies or adequate funding for enforcement measures designed to protect us—both during the active stage and after the boom cycle winds down. The result, time and again, is that entire communities are left in economic straits without resources to do the remedial work that may be required.

**Recognizing Connections Among the Issues**

As noted in the previous section: “The highest priority will be given to issues that have the greatest effect on our most vulnerable neighbors, including, but not limited to, immigration, criminal justice, gun violence reduction, environment, education, and wages and welfare policies.”

Just as described in the previous section, none of these issues stand alone. Perhaps COVID-19 has highlighted this to a greater degree than anything else we have ever experienced. The pandemic has resulted in widespread economic distress as a result of lockdowns to limit spread—businesses, sports, the arts, and more—and fear of exposure that led to people staying home even when there was some reopening. Closures led to rising unemployment, which is currently at record levels. Unemployment means loss of health care for those whose insurance was attached to their employment, and loss of income has led to greater food insecurity and inability to pay rent or mortgage, leading to a looming eviction and foreclosure crisis. Reduction in tax and other revenues because of unemployment, already too low because of unfair tax policies, has resulted in crises at state and local levels, with inadequate revenues to address the needs that exist in their communities. Healthcare workers and frontline workers who have no choice but to work face exposure to a virus that is already overwhelming the resources we have available to address it, creating fear and anxiety. This is in addition to fear and depression because of unemployment or feelings of isolation has led to a growing mental health crisis, with rises in drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and gun violence in our communities. Racial tensions are amplified as the crisis continues. Children that are unable to be in classrooms to learn are falling behind in their education, and the situation is worse for those without easy access to computers, wifi, and broadband services.

However, let’s look at the environment as well. The environment affects everyone. Climate change negatively affects many of our most vulnerable populations—children, seniors, and those with health concerns. As temperatures rise and higher temperatures move farther north, many native species of plants, animals and insects are affected. Overwintering of some insects that would have died in previous winters has resulted in a public health problem—a rise in the number of cases of diseases such as Lyme and West Nile. In Pennsylvania, recreational opportunities such as skiing are threatened and may disappear, and fish are being affected by disease and lesions which many attribute to warmer water. Warming oceans have created more severe storms, resulting in greater devastation when they hit. Rising oceans brought about by melting ice in the polar regions damages habitat for species that rely on the ice cover, and as it begins to inundate low-lying coastal regions and islands, it will drive the migration of people—including many of the world’s poorest and most vulnerable—to higher and safer areas.

Climate change has affected weather patterns as well. While much of Pennsylvania has experienced rising levels of precipitation, creating flooding and strain on our water management systems, other areas are experiencing devastating drought. Drought affects farmers and crop production, but it also creates the conditions for the wildfires that have ravaged the western US for a number of years. The fires destroy many of our forest resources and create hazardous conditions that cause erosion and landslides when the rains do come. However, as we’ve seen in more recent years, these fires have begun to encroach on more populated areas, destroying homes and businesses and resulting in greater loss of life—and often, the release of dangerous substances into our air and water.

Education is another concern that crosses many lines. Failure to provide fair funding that serves all children well creates gaps that lead to barriers for those who are underserved. Those with inadequate education fail to thrive in a society that demands it, often working for lower wages in jobs that fail to provide health care and are insufficient to cover costs for things like childcare. We all suffer when people ignore health problems and only seek help once they are extremely sick, and they tend to use costly options like emergency rooms when care becomes necessary. Many end up in the “school to prison pipeline” because they end up in situations that result in becoming caught up in the criminal justice system. Their children tend to be destined to enter the same cycle—ending up in poverty, low-wage jobs, or prison.

Finally, those living on the margins are most likely to be victims of gun violence and racial profiling, and significantly more likely to become enmeshed in the criminal justice system. Many of our children and younger populations are injured or killed by guns. Persons of color are more likely to be targeted as perpetrators of crimes. Those who are convicted and serve time in the criminal justice system face even greater barriers after release, and these barriers often result in greater recidivism rates. The problem of gun violence has grown so dramatically that it even affects our level of life expectancy, which is falling.

**So How Does This Affect Our Advocacy Efforts?**

Recognizing that the world of issues we face is a web and cannot be compartmentalized helps us to determine how to go about our efforts. It seems that the areas that currently merit much of our attention include:

* Basic needs—income, food, housing, health care.
* Racism and other “isms”—which affect education, employment, health care, immigration, criminal justice, gun violence, and just about everything that touches us daily.
* Environment
* Government reform

Addressing problems in these areas should, over the longer term, begin to resolve many of the other issues we have recognized. Recognizing racism and other “isms” means we must be cognizant of the role of “othering” to ensure that all people and other parts of our creation—not just those deemed “worthy”—benefit.

Basic Needs

COVID-19 has laid bare the disparities that exist based on wealth, race, gender, and other factors. While we have long advocated for a living wage, food security, affordable and safe housing, and access to health care, the current crisis requires that we redouble our efforts. As long as the pandemic continues, we will advocate for the additional support needed to protect those who are unemployed and underemployed, need food assistance and support to remain housed, and that provide access health care even for those who have lost insurance. Once we have moved beyond the crisis, we must continue to support help for those who need it.

Racism and Other “Isms”

We must continue to advocate for:

* A fair and equitable education system, with adequate funding to ensure its success, regardless of income, race, gender, or any other factor.
* A living wage that permits all people to live with dignity.
* A health care system that ensures access to affordable health care for all—preferably a “Medicare for All” style system.
* Immigration reform that protects those who have come to this country seeking safety and security, with a path to citizenship.
* A criminal justice system that is aimed at rehabilitation and not simply punishment, with alternatives to incarceration where appropriate and removal of barriers to success after release, as well as reforms that reduce racial disparities in sentencing and treatment during incarceration.
* Common sense reforms that reduce gun violence—such as universal background checks.
* Efforts to raise awareness about racism and other “isms” to try to reduce barriers and fears and promote opportunity.

Environment

The main focus must be on reducing climate change by reducing the use of fossil fuels and promoting reduced energy usage, energy efficiency, and a move to renewable energy sources. Advocacy for protecting water resources is also important to ensure adequate and safe water for drinking and that protects marine wildlife.

Government Reform

The major foci include protecting voting rights and ensuring adequate access to voting opportunities, fair redistricting that ensures no single party dominates our political system, and reducing the influence of money in politics.

1. <http://www.politicspa/majority-of-pennsylvanians-support-independent-commission-for-district-lines-poll/87358> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)