

The Statements of Concern (SOC) committee approached their task for this Biennial with a desire to enhance and improve the SOC process to make it more interesting and engaging for delegates. The tradition has always been that the SOC committee creates documents that delegates vote up or down, with hearings throughout the Biennial for delegates to add their input to the published statements. In other words, the focus was only on what the committee developed, with delegates offering input for possible revision.

This year the approach has been quite different. The committee developed statements, less as declarations, and more as the basis for discussion, including leading questions to foster dialogue. We put this into practice by making the traditional hearings into discussion forums, where delegates and participants responded to questions on each topic addressed. The forums were moderated by a member of the SOC committee, while delegates came to the microphones to share their opinions and perspectives.

The four topics we chose were: “Envisioning Our Churches in the 21st Century,” “Immigration Reform,” “Holy Manners: Civil Discourse and Spiritual Discernment,” and “The Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.” In each of the forums the dialogue was robust and fruitful. Our attendance averaged between 50-90 people, which far surpasses SOC hearings in recent memory. The feedback was remarkably positive, as people listened to each other and gained insights and ideas relative to each one’s experience and views on the issues raised. It was, in effect, a time for sharing on issues that impact us all in the local church.

We did receive editorial suggestions to our published statements, which we recorded using a designated form that we gave out with the statements. This allowed us to respect the delegates’ desires to have statements more reflective of their concerns. We were able to revise the statements, but did so by saving paper and time—by noting the corrections, additions, and revisions on a separate single sheet handed out to delegates on Sunday. This is in contrast to the longstanding practice to republish the entire SOC every time a new revision was made. Fortunately, we recognized this was unnecessary and a waste of resources.

At this Biennial, we did not have any statements that were brought to the committee for adoption, nor did we have any Signature Statements. We’re not certain whether this was due to a lack of desire on the part of participating delegates or if the process wasn’t clarified well enough to the delegates during the initial presentation of the Rules and Procedures.

The voting of the SOC’s on Sunday was done by a show of hands for each statement, as there were few responses at that time to challenge the final editions of the statements. Since those who had questions were able to address them in others ways and those who wanted to speak to the topics did so in the scheduled forums, we hope that Sunday’s presentation was an indication of delegates’ satisfaction with the statements themselves and the process we used.

Since this is the final time we will have SOCs at the Biennial, we were satisfied that we ended this era on a high note, with a process well-received by delegates and a model for addressing important topics for the ABCUSA in future Biennials.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes (chair)
Ms. Joyce Kellam
Mr. Edgir Jean
Mr. Douglas Tatreau
The Rev. Dr. Paul Martin

Mr. David Blythe
The Rev. E. Solomon Ernst, Sr.
The Rev. Deborah Hughes
Mr. Walter Clarke
The Rev. Dr. Darla Dee Turlington

The Rev. Andy Smith, staff
Ms. Susan Peterman, staff