



Honest Patriotism

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I tried to explain to those seated next to me on the lawn: “It will be loud and bright, but it won’t hurt.” I gestured with my hands lifted high and fingers spread wide. My words were translated from English to Somali. As the fireworks started, one teenager hid her face in her hijab. Her mother and the youngest boys smiled at the sky in amazement. It was my most memorable Fourth of July celebration, and I felt pride at sharing my birth country with these newest citizens.



I pray you all have a safe and memorable Fourth of July. It’s a tricky time for faith leaders. How do we acknowledge a day set aside to celebrate national independence, without substituting nationalism for our singular worship of God? God and country are both important, but only one should receive holy adoration.

Recently, I read again the denomination’s statement on Honest Patriotism, adopted at the 223rd General Assembly in 2018. It has even more relevance than when first adopted. The title derives from Donald W. Shriver’s 2005 book, *Honest Patriots: Loving a Country Enough to Remember its Misdeeds*. As we prepare our hearts and minds for a secular holiday of national importance, I urge you to consider your role as a Christian and a Presbyterian in each of these affirmations:

1. We affirm and honor the work of citizens of the United States who have chosen public service as part of their vocation. This includes, but is not limited to, civil service employees, members of the judiciary, and our elected representatives in the Legislative and Executive branches of our national government. Public employees of local and state governments also serve the common good. We further affirm, as part of our Reformed tradition, that their work is part of God’s design for the governance of creation.
2. We affirm the imperative for honesty in the public statements, proceedings, publications, and theological witness of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), recognizing that our faith is based, at its core, on a commitment to truth. In like manner, we call upon all citizens, as well as governments, to recognize commitment to truth as a core value and to be vigilant in demanding honesty in our public and private interactions. Christians must scrutinize news sources and reject those that oversimplify or sensationalize conflicts and demonize other human beings and peoples.
3. We affirm the protection of the freedom of speech, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America. We recognize that meaningful civic engagement is dependent upon the protection of this freedom, which keeps our engagement lively, meaningful, and prophetic. As this freedom involves clashing ideas of what is true and false, the United States’ legal tradition makes it the responsibility of citizens and their elected representatives to develop measures of public accountability for truthfulness in the public square in all its forms: over public airwaves, through cyberspace, and through proactive requirements of public disclosure by government agencies and publicly chartered profit and nonprofit entities.
4. We affirm the widest possible public access to information and to the products of cultural activity. We recognize that such freedom to listen is vital to the free exchange of ideas and to the practical application of freedom of speech. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes any attempt to limit this free exchange, including but not limited to, monopoly ownership of media outlets and the dismantling of net neutrality. This excludes only the production and promotion of hate speech, designed to exclude others from such access or endanger their persons and property.



5. We affirm the rights of all citizens to freedom of assembly. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes any attempts to abrogate this freedom, including, but not limited to, attempts to criminalize, manipulate by false information, or in other ways delegitimize peaceful protest. New forms of surveillance by drone and electronic means, as well as increased use of military equipment by police forces, require increased public accountability of all policing and security agencies. Similarly, data gathered from electronic devices about personal communications and purchasing history should be governed by privacy protections and not used commercially or otherwise without permission.
6. We affirm the freedom of the press, guaranteed in the First Amendment to the Constitution. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) opposes any attempts to abrogate this freedom, including, but not limited to, threats, intimidation, and the denial of access to certain members or organs of the press for partisan reasons.
7. We affirm the rule of law as inseparable from our Reformed commitment to truth. Recognizing that human law is a human creation and therefore subject to error, we nonetheless affirm the democratic principle of equal protection under the law, as enshrined in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Institutionally, this equal protection is guaranteed by an independent judiciary, the maintenance of which must continue to be a national priority. This has customarily meant laws to insulate judges from partisan politics as well as the use of objective qualifications in their selection, both of which approaches this assembly would endorse.
8. We affirm the need for free critical inquiry that is unhampered by censorship. Commitment to integrity and to the truth must also extend to those whose vocation it is to seek out the truth and to add to the store of human knowledge. We therefore oppose any governmental, educational, or other institutional restrictions on the initiation, maintenance, or publication of research.
9. We affirm the right of citizens to participate in the democratic process. Fundamental to that process is the right to vote. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in affirming its commitment to honest patriotism and responsible citizenship, therefore opposes any efforts to restrict participation in elections, including, but not limited to, voter suppression initiatives and racially-based and/or partisan gerrymandering.