

FIVE PEACEMAKING AFFIRMATIONS FOR PRESBYTERY DELIBERATION

As part of the process of peace discernment begun by the General Assembly in 2010, then following 9 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 221st General Assembly (2014) approved five affirmations for discussion, debate, and voting in the presbyteries. These affirmations were derived from work by 65 presbytery and congregational study groups and two consultations, one with seminary ethicists and one with Presbyterian college and university faculty, campus ministers and chaplains, and students. For those interested, the full set of study material is posted online: https://www.pc-biz.org/PC-Biz.WebApp_deploy/%28S%28xjllwbkkr5lfzvuydpivwjq3%29%29/IOBView.aspx?m=ro&id=4795

THEOLOGICAL BASIS: The title of the full General Assembly report is “Risking Peace in a Violent World.” It invokes language from both the Brief Statement of Faith, acknowledging not only a “broken and fearful world,” but a violent one, and the Confession of 1967’s prophetic phrase, “This search [for peace] requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at the risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding” (*Book of Confessions*, 9.45). Each of the five rationale sections includes Biblical, theological, ethical, and historical analysis.

“Peace discernment” is the name given to a 6-yr. process of updating the peacemaking vision of the Presbyterian Church (USA). The process was initiated by seven presbytery overtures on the 30th anniversary of *Peacemaking: The Believers’ Calling* (1980). A Steering Team was charged with a twofold mandate to “seek clarity as to God’s call to the church regarding nonviolence as our fundamental response to the challenges of violence, terror, and war,” and to examine “ministries of peacemaking and justice-seeking that honor the Gospel, the history of the church, and the movement of the Holy Spirit...” to develop recommendations for new policy and action (*Minutes*, 2010, p. 69). The study document, *Encountering the Gospel of Peace Anew* contained questions for members and groups to explore not simply the effectiveness of the church’s peacemaking work and its threefold offering, but the basic nature and scope of the Gospel’s mandate for peacemaking. (<http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/peacemaking/peace-discernment/>)

STATUS OF THE AFFIRMATIONS AND POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS: The affirmations clearly build on each other, but presbyteries can decide whether to consider the five as a set or vote on them individually to assess the degree to which they may, or may not, represent that presbytery’s views. The five proposed affirmations honor the range of viewpoints within the church while testing new directions; *they are not statements of policy but propositions for serious debate*. We respectfully ask presbyteries to make time on their busy dockets to consider the affirmations.

Our Presbyterian process values differences of opinion as efforts to speak the truth in love under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Voting is part of the work of the body to build consensus over time, and Presbyterians do not usually see unanimity or total agreement as necessary for decision. We both take corporate stands, believing that the church as a body should not be silent, and at the same time we affirm that “God alone is Lord of the conscience,” making space for dissent... Some presbyteries may wish to approve their own affirmations or amend the ones presented here. If a presbytery develops one or more affirmations of its own, we would appreciate a brief statement of rationale to explain the position or amendment.

The wording of this summary background piece draws freely on the language of the full report and all sources quoted are documented in its footnotes. Leaders of presbytery discussions are urged to be familiar with the cases made in each section.

Here is the action of the Assembly:

"Process of Discernment for Presbyteries: As the next stage in a six-year process of discernment, the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) directs the Stated Clerk to send to each presbytery, electronically and in print, the following five affirmations and supporting rationale with the request that they discuss and take an advisory vote on each affirmation and send the results of those votes, along with a summary of the floor discussion, back to the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy by July 1, 2015, to help guide the preparation of a report on peacemaking directions for the 222nd General Assembly (2016).

"The affirmations for churchwide discussion and advisory vote:

"1. We affirm that peacemaking is essential to our faith in God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, whose love and justice challenge hatred and conflict, and whose call gives our church a mission to present alternatives to violence, fear, and misused power.

1. Summary of Rationale for First Affirmation: This affirmation would support the understanding in *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling* that working for peace is not only an individual matter (such as conscientious objection) but a call of the whole Christian community, including those opposed to all war and violence and those who use categories of the "Just War" or justifiable war tradition. Former chief of chaplains, Kermit Johnson, in opposing nuclear warfare, writes, "Like pacifism, it [Just War] is rooted in the commandment: 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is a presumption against violence, 'the presumption in favor of peace and against war.'" Thus faithful Presbyterians may differ on whether there can be justified force, whether war is inevitable, and what the range from policing to maintain social peace to organized military campaigns may be. The point is: it is our responsibility to deal with these questions. Further, it is not enough to repeat old answers, but it is important to know what they have been. For example, strong majorities of the PCUSA presbyteries in 1936 and 1938 voted to remove Just War language from the Westminster Confession, though not attaining the supermajority necessary for constitutional change. This voting process recalls those votes prior to the adoption of The Book of Confessions. The full rationale section itself summarizes alternatives to violence and war in General Assembly social witness policy, particularly since WWII, and notes the support of more than 50% of PCUSA congregations for The Commitment to Peacemaking and the Peacemaking Offering at some point since 1980.

"2. We confess our complicity in the world's violence even as we pray for the Spirit's courage to "unmask idolatries," to speak truth about war and oppression, and to stand with those who suffer, and to respond to acts and threats of violence with ministries of justice, healing, and reconciliation.

2. Summary of Rationale for Second Affirmation: This affirmation asks us to be "honest patriots," owning our responsibility for the horrific consequences of the Afghan and Iraq wars, while recognizing the ways that structural and cultural violence permeate our society and those of others. The emphasis here is on honestly counting the costs of what we have done, and in the spirit of the Brief Statement of Faith, to consider whether we have succumbed to idolatries in our efforts for security and justice. The final clause of this affirmation, which speaks of how to respond to violence, was added by the General Assembly and is given support in the background to affirmations four and five. The word, "complicity," has both conscious and unconscious dimensions, and recognizes how embedded we all are in social structures that include unjust relationships. Prophetic self-criticism and

repentance are basic parts of Christian life. This affirmation applies those principles not only to the large scale and deliberate violence of war, but to the roots of war. Members of presbyteries may want to look at the definitions of violence and of “structural violence,” or forms of oppression that can prompt violence or self-destructiveness. As a church in the United States, how do we stand before not only the peoples of the countries which have suffered so much more than we, but before the Lord of history? Does this affirmation help us so stand?

"3. We reclaim the power and authority of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace and Reconciler, who proclaims God's reign, who inspires the prophetic church, forgiving, healing, and undoing violence, and who overcomes evil through the cross and resurrection.

3. Summary of Rationale for Third Affirmation: This affirmation focuses on Jesus Christ in relation to war and violence and proposes a new emphasis for Reformed Christians, without denying our traditional linkage of the New Testament witness with Old (and some New) Testament justifications of force. This affirmation says it is essential to look at how the words and example of Jesus cohere with the rest of the “Gospel of Peace,” and suggests more attention to the earliest centuries of the church when Christians had no public power and largely chose nonviolence. Stating clearly that our faith is not based on scholarly reconstructions of Jesus' life—of which there are many—nonetheless the preponderance of scholarship supporting a nonviolent interpretation of Jesus ministry bears attention. This affirmation does not answer the specific question of how much peace or nonviolence were the goal or method of Jesus' ministry, and does not try to fit Jesus into a programmatic script. Yet it would urge the church not to get too far away from his example, lest we be coopted too easily into war for reasons of state or economic interest.

"4. We seek to understand the nonviolent revolutions and armed struggles of our time by drawing on the traditions of Christian pacifism, just war, just peacemaking and active nonviolence, and by cultivating moral imagination through prayer, study, and engagement with friends and enemies. Even as we actively engage in a peace discernment process, we affirm our responsibility of continuing the long tradition of support by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for our sisters and brothers who serve in the U.S. military, veterans, and their families.

4. Summary of Rationale for Fourth Affirmation: This affirmation proposes that our church's social and ethical teaching give more attention to the nonviolent techniques of social change that have been more productive than violence in a surprising number of cases. That list would include the fall of the Berlin wall and other nonviolent transitions in Eastern Europe, the nonviolent revolution in the Philippines, the painstaking achievement of peace in Northern Ireland, the dramatic transformation of South Africa, and the initial successes of the Arab Awakening. In these cases many non pacifists by chose nonviolent tactics for their effectiveness in mobilizing people. Clearly there have also been incredibly savage wars and instigated religious/ ethnic tensions, with some countries funding forces in other countries as “proxies” for their interests. These point to the weakness of international diplomatic structures and difficulties of protecting minorities within countries, many of which have become refugees. The General Assembly added a sentence that could apply to all five affirmations, expressing concern for those in the military and veterans, and also added the category of “Christian pacifism” as well as nonviolence as a force for social change. The import of this affirmation is to diversify further the alternatives to force available for the church.

"5. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we commit ourselves earnestly to seek and promote loving, nonviolent responses to conflict in our daily lives, in our communities, and in our world, and to risk calling our nation back from the practices of empire to the highest ideals of our heritage, and to practice boldly the things that make for peace."

5. Summary of Rationale for Fifth Affirmation: As amended by the General Assembly, this affirmation emphasizes that nonviolent methods should be chosen first in our personal and corporate efforts to resolve or transform conflict, and that on the national level our country should pursue international relations based less on military superiority and unilateral force. The background rationale here looks at the differences between national interests and principles (such as respect for universal human rights); it challenges the practices of "empire" on practical and even "realist" grounds, emphasizing the soft power of ideals and example, particularly in facing new kinds of global crisis (such as environmental disaster). The rationale also provides a range of "things that make for peace:" truth and reconciliation commissions, interfaith cooperation, accompaniment and nonviolent intervention, increased teaching of peacemaking. Three illustrative examples are given in conclusion: the Reformed village of LeChambon sheltering Jews during WWII, a personal witness that prevented a mass shooting, and an international agreement to remove chemical weapons from Syria in 2013. This affirmation, then, would seek alternatives to military violence at every level.