

Five Risks Presbyterians Must Take for Peace

*Renewing the Commitment
to Peacemaking in the PC(USA)*

Christian Iosso

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To all the participants in the Peace Discernment Process from the congregations, presbyteries, and General Assembly Peacemaking Committees of 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016;

to the Peace Discernment Steering Team: Shabeen Amjad-Ali, J. Mark Davidson (chair), Jessica Hawkinson, Craig Hunter, Kathryn Poethig, Shaya Gregory Poku, and Roger Powers;

and to stewards of Presbyterian Peacemaking from whom I have learned much: E. William Galvin Jr., Sara P. Lisberness, Edward L. Long Jr., Donald W. Shriver Jr., Ronald H. Stone, and the late Robert Smylie.

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Foreword

After sixteen years of war, overheated fears of terrorism, and the constant sound of gunshots on our streets, some may say that the churches have given up on peacemaking. Not so.

The Presbyterian church has stood up, repeatedly, through its statements and its representatives, to end those wars in the greater Middle East, to seek reconciliation with enemies and restoration for veterans, and to emphasize that without justice there can be no lasting peace. A faithful block of our congregations give steadily to our Peacemaking Program, and that program works both nationally and internationally. And a creative study process involving a wide range of our members helped to discern the “signs of the times” behind this book.

This book is written in the belief that God belongs in public discussion and that God’s will for peace is part of the new creation of the world, which we see in the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth. To use the word *Christ* is to see in Jesus’ life a deep and cosmic pattern and purpose, not of God

swooping in from outside but of God incarnate in the struggle, suffering, and ultimate triumph of love in the world we know. Or think we know.

To risk peace is to prepare to encounter evil and its power. One does not do this alone. The General Assembly itself—with the guidance of its social witness office—drew on the contributions of ninety-some congregations and presbyteries, the regional groupings of ministers and elders in our branch of Protestantism. One part of their discernment was to share—very carefully sometimes—personal experiences of war and violence. Veterans and survivors spoke: military folks, police officers, and protesters who have been beaten and jailed, people who know different sides of force and the courage nonviolence also requires. Very few people are untouched by violence, and few do not long for peace.

In the years of discernment, we saw nonviolent revolutions both win and get crushed. This book helps us to think about how and why that happened. Chris Iosso, the author, was the primary staff person and writer through the six years of discernment and has both unified and streamlined the full assembly language that is found on pc-biz.org, where all actions of each General Assembly are posted. I salute all of the voices he has brought together.

These recent years have also brought a new harvest of scholarship about Jesus as the organizer of a nonviolent reform movement as well as a prophet and more. This book distills some of that thinking, too.

So let us remember the Brief Statement of Faith (1991):

In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us
courage . . .
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,

to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to work with others for justice, freedom,
and peace.

I invite you to be both peacemakers and risk takers for the
sake of the gospel.

J. Herbert Nelson II
Stated Clerk
General Assembly of the PC(USA)

Acknowledgments

My acknowledgements go first to all those who contributed to this project, key ones whom I have named in the dedication. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy is more than an official body sustaining this and other work; it is a “consecrated” team of friends in service to Christ and the church. My war-veteran father and both grandfathers have also been present as I have drafted my own and edited the words of others. Peter Kemmerle, wise writer, and David Maxwell, a generous and equally wise editor, were critical in helping unite and clarify the voice of the book. And my chaplain wife, Robin Hogle, has brought home (in both senses) the reality of interpersonal violence as it is found in the emergency rooms and intensive-care units in all our hospitals. Our true enemies are not flesh and blood, but flesh and blood are what we have to hold and to heal, with God’s help.

Introduction

Risking war is what nations often do. Risking peace is a task for the church. Jesus preached a kingdom where the lion would lie down with the lamb. His body, the church, must risk living that reign of peace. Nations can disregard the suffering of others. Christians cannot.

To risk peace means challenging the default setting of our society. And it means challenging ourselves. Christianity is above all a religion of love, a response by God to our universal longing for a new order of justice and blessing, as well as our response to God's call. What risks must we take for peace, and how do we help our country do the same?

The Presbyterian church has recently undergone a period of reflection on peacemaking. Building on past policy documents, people at all levels of the church studied and discussed what needed to be modified given the world context today. War is now waged differently than it was in 1998 when the church last gave in-depth attention to its vocation as peacemaker. Those who program the smart bombs and command the drones now wreak

devastation from a safe distance, but much of the world has not become safer. It is time the church evaluated whether its policies are able to address the demands of our day.

From 2010 to 2016, local churches, student groups, national conferences, and academics in the church debated, wrote, and decided on five affirmations the church must make to fulfill its peacemaking calling. Those affirmations become risks when truly taken, because their message collides with the demands for continued sacrifice by the powers that be.

This book does not minimize the violence that scars our species and steadily invades our souls. It contains biblical, theological, and historical insights, drawn from a discernment process of six years involving hundreds of people. Those participants were very aware of the impacts of fifteen years of war since September 11, 2001, the erosion of constitutional safeguards, and the tolerance—even preference—for new technologies of war, such as drones and smart bombs. A designated team of U.S. Christians with international experience helped streamline a broad set of learnings into the five basic challenges on which the chapters of this book are based.

Risking peace is not only about wars overseas. Gun violence, television and videogame violence, bullying, domestic violence, rape and sexual violence—in the military, and even in churches—are part of our culture. The realities of structural injustice and deprivation, of our being part of systems that exploit others, often beyond our awareness—these had to be part of our thinking and our prayer. Harsh, “weaponized” language in politics, sports, business, comedy, and on the Internet assaults our awareness, amplifying insecurity and fear. Economic and environmental disasters add to tensions among ethnic

and racial groups. The seeds of peace are indeed beset by brambles and starved of good soil.

This book proposes five stages of creative resistance to violence. For members of the Presbyterian Church specifically, it offers next steps in a forty-year commitment to peacemaking. But for Christians and seekers more broadly, for U.S. Christians and citizens who are generally not pacifists, this book raises core spiritual questions. These address us individually and in the communities of faith and hope we desperately need. Peacemaking is a spiritual work, a calling, for all believers, and politics is only one of its forms.

In original format, these challenges were presented as a report to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s 222nd General Assembly in Portland, Oregon, in June 2016. That report, called "Risking Peace in a Violent World," proposed a renewal of the church's witness to peacemaking, given the new reality of constant war. As guidance, it proposed that five "affirmations" be added to each congregation's commitment to peacemaking, and it offered a rationale for each one. Those affirmations and rationales—here called "risks"—offer a summary of recent Presbyterian thinking on our corporate calling to peacemaking. You could also say that these five commitments have been tested and found credible—precisely in faith terms—by a focus group of seven hundred people. The General Assembly, in fact, said the five in their initial form as a litany, moving from a call, through a confession of complicity, to a biblical summary, a charge, and a kind of doxology.

What we will see is that the General Assembly made some changes in the wording of the affirmations, changes that reflect the long debate within the church over whether pacifism or thorough-going nonviolence

should be the church's own default position. Before we turn to the challenges—and the way that Presbyterian assembly focused them—let us put this debate in longer perspective, drawing on the wisdom of Presbyterian ethicist Ed Long.

The centrality of peace is a distinctive, biblical feature of Christian fidelity—especially in the idea of shalom in the Hebraic tradition and the idea of being peacemakers in the teaching and example of Jesus. However, translating these visions into policies that further human well-being has challenged Christian thinking ever since the church ceased to be bands of dedicated believers existing as outsiders within Greco-Roman culture.

Within the Christian movement two main traditions developed dedicated to the goal of peace, but each understood responsibility for achieving it in different ways. The first, claiming a strong grounding in the New Testament and the practices of the early church, is Christian pacifism; the other, the just-war tradition, grows out of the realization that when Christians become holders of authority and exercise office in a political world, they may be called upon to use violence for the protective love of neighbor and the maintenance of justice and order. We must be clear that both these moral stances are very different from the view that religion may use violent means to advance its own interests, as in crusades or holy wars. Yet the dangers of leaving war to the determinations of nation-states in the “modern” period are also clear: nationalisms and ideologies that still claimed *de facto* religious sanction for dominating others have been major causes of war for more than two centuries, particularly in Europe and countries colonized by European empires.

During the Protestant Reformation some groups, from which the “peace churches” emerged, understood Christian discipleship to require the repudiation of violence in the manner of the earliest church. Other groups, from which most mainline Reformed and Lutheran bodies emerged, understood Christian discipleship to allow for the restrained, and hence legitimate, use of the sword to preserve justice and order. Presbyterian confessions contain just-war positions in relation to the role of the “magistrate,” or civil government. The criteria or conditions for a war to be justifiable are discussed in the fourth risk, but they are predicated on a preference for peace. War is an inevitably tragic last resort.

The just-war tradition grows out of the realization that when Christians become holders of authority and exercise office in a political world, they may be called upon to use violence for the protective love of neighbor and the maintenance of justice and order.

These two main Christian approaches to war and violence retained theological coherence as Christians sought to apply them through revolutions and wars of conquest, liberation, defense, and humanitarian intervention. American Presbyterians participated in and justified the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean conflict but have been less and less of one mind on the more recent “wars of choice,” such as Vietnam, the Nicaragua/Contra war, the two Iraq wars, and Afghanistan. The U.S. role in the Libyan and Syrian multiparty

“proxy” wars raises additional questions addressed in the fifth risk (discussed in the fifth and sixth chapters).

Back in 1936 and 1938, when pacifist sentiment was strong in American Social Christianity, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. sent the presbyteries proposals to remove just-war language from the Westminster Confession, then the church’s only confessional standard. While a majority of the presbyteries voted to remove or amend the language, in neither case did the outcome reach the supermajority of presbyteries required to accomplish that result. (Other churches also made pledges seeking to end war, driven by revulsion at the carnage in the trenches of World War I.)

During WWII, which had the overwhelming support of most Americans following Pearl Harbor, two important developments took place in the church. First, some Presbyterians felt called to be conscientious objectors and were generally supported (or at least benignly tolerated) in taking this position by the church. That support made it amply clear that a pacifist conviction was a legitimate form of Christian discipleship (which may reflect the influence of the votes in the 1930s). The second development was the Presbyterian church’s work with other denominations to imagine a just and durable peace. Studies were undertaken in the denominations and ecumenical bodies exploring such concerns. That work contributed to support for the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and likely helped the postwar settlement avoid the vindictive features of the armistice that settled WWI.

The development of the Cold War—and its tendency to divide the world into two polarized positions—brought increasing questions about the wisdom and adequacy of

military and particularly nuclear means for establishing peace and justice on a world scale. Many Christian ethicists argued that draft laws should recognize the validity of conscientious objection on just-war grounds as well as on fully pacifist grounds, and the General Assembly of 1967 emphatically reaffirmed the right of Presbyterians to be conscientious objectors.

This action highlighted the legitimacy of conscientious differences about participation in war by individuals and made individual integrity a foundational reference point for moral reflection. While the action did not overcome the differences between pacifist and just-war commitments in the church's corporate stand, it clearly undercut any presumption that just-war thinking inevitably means subservience to the policies of the state or that pacifism is unpatriotic.

Such was the situation when the church adopted the Confession of 1967, a bold declaration grounded in the idea of a shared church calling with strong social-ethical concerns for economic and racial justice, family life, and peace:

God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ is the ground of the peace, justice, and freedom among nations which all powers of government are called to serve and defend. The church, in its own life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. *This search requires that the nations pursue fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding.* Reconciliation among nations becomes particularly urgent as countries develop nuclear, chemical, and

biological weapons, diverting their [hu]manpower and resources from constructive uses and risking the annihilation of [hu]mankind. Although nations may serve God's purposes in history, the church which identifies the sovereignty of any one nation or any one way of life with the cause of God denies the Lordship of Christ and betrays its calling. (*The Book of Confessions*, section 9.45; italics added.)

The first major policy statement on peacemaking to follow was *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling* in 1980, which created the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and which has the clear, simple, concise statement that "the church is faithful to Christ when it is engaged in peacemaking." This was followed by *Commitment to Peacemaking* (1983), signed by more than half the churches in the denomination. *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling* was buttressed by significant additions in 1988, with *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age*, and in 1998, with the resolution on just peacemaking.

The recent history of our church is marked by a persistent belief in the importance of peace, but it is also marked by continuing good-faith disagreements as to what kinds of policies and commitments most faithfully translate that central belief into prudent and responsible, yet bold and inspiring action. Certainly the church has done laudable work in the thirty-seven years since *The Believers' Calling* was adopted, particularly in the extent to which it has managed to be critical of the prevailing trends in the society (of which it is an integral part). The Peacemaking Program published biblical studies, held conferences, and has influenced the vocabulary of the church. Yet the recent discernment process behind these five challenges was prompted partly by the fear that the

program has been lacking in prophetic intensity during a time when the United States has been practically on a permanent war footing.

To address these concerns, the 219th General Assembly (2010) authorized a six-year discernment process to take a fresh look at peacemaking in the church's life, particularly the nonviolent understanding of Jesus' call to discipleship. A steering committee was appointed to devise opportunities for the broad membership of the church not only to consider the effectiveness of the church's peacemaking work but also to discern the basic nature and scope of the gospel's mandate for peacemaking.

Study documents were created and widely shared. Churches were consulted in 2013, and in 2015 presbyteries contributed an innovative kind of testing and confirmation received by few other statements of social witness. Military chaplains participated in the process. Professors and students from Presbyterian colleges and seminaries were consulted. Peace activists and Christian ethicists and biblical scholars were part of the peace discernment from the beginning.

The result of the thorough process was "Risking Peace in a Violent World." It recommended that the assembly adopt five affirmations to guide the peacemaking witness of the church into the second quarter of the twenty-first century. Though some wording was changed, the five affirmations that follow were approved, and the assembly retained the cases made for each in the full report. The five risks we propose here are thus guided by the wording of the assembly and also by the content of the full report.

1. We affirm that peacemaking is essential to our faith in God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, whose love and justice challenge evil and hatred,

and who calls the church to present alternatives to violence.

2. We have sinned by participating in acts of violence, both structural and physical, or by our failure to respond to acts and threats of violence with ministries of justice, healing, and reconciliation.
3. We follow Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace and Reconciler, and reclaim the power of nonviolent love evident in his life and teaching, his healings and reversals of evil, his cross and resurrection.
4. Learning from nonviolent struggles and counting the costs of war, we draw upon the traditions of Just War, Christian pacifism, and Just Peacemaking to cultivate moral imagination and discern God's redemptive work in history. We commit ourselves to studying and practicing nonviolent means of conflict resolution, nonviolent methods for social change, and nonviolent opposition to war. Even as we actively engage in a peace discernment process, we commit ourselves to continuing the long tradition of support by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for our sisters and brothers who serve in the United States military, veterans, and their families. We promise to support materially and socially veterans of war who suffer injury in body, mind, or spirit, even as we work toward the day when they will need to fight no more.
5. We place our faith, hope, and trust in God alone. We renounce violence as a means to further selfish national interests, to procure wealth, or to dominate others. We will practice boldly the things that make for peace and look for the day when "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall

not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

The internal debate of the church is clearly visible in the second paragraph of affirmation 4, moving between its emphasis on nonviolence and language affirming the military and veterans (and presumably active soldiers) who still “need to fight.” This book may help some readers make a more informed choice between strict nonviolence and a form of just war or just peacemaking. But it will fulfill its purpose above all if it helps the church be a more effective peacemaker, helping Christ “de-violence” all evils and turn all empires closer to God’s commonwealth of peace.

Risk One

Commit to the Gospel of Peace

We affirm that peacemaking is essential to our faith in God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ, whose love and justice challenge evil and hatred, and who calls the church to present alternatives to violence.

Affirmation One, 222nd General
Assembly (2016)

Peacemaking is at the core of our faith, not at the periphery. It's in our DNA. By not challenging evil and hatred, we disobey. The first risk is to take to heart the centrality of peacemaking to Christian faith and demonstrate what that faith looks like in practice, here, today. "The gospel of peace" is how the author of the letter to the Ephesians sums up the entire Christian message (Eph. 6:15). Another way to put this risk is that we recommit to reconciliation between ourselves and God, and between ourselves and other human beings. As Christians we can never give up on building relationships based on love and justice.

In 1975, the year the war in Vietnam ended, the General Assembly began a five-year study of the church's call to peacemaking. The policy statement that resulted was *Peacemaking: The Believers' Calling*, approved by the 192nd General Assembly (1980). That document offered a broad biblical, theological, and ethical basis for Christian peacemaking and also identified specific directions for that mission: efforts to reverse the worldwide arms race, "conversion of the economy from military to civilian production," and continuing attention to how justice relates to peace. It declared,

- The church is faithful to Christ when it is engaged in peacemaking.
- The church is obedient to Christ when it nurtures and equips God's people as peacemakers.
- The church bears witness to Christ when it nourishes the moral life of the nation for the sake of peace in our world.

The Believers' Calling led to the creation of the influential Presbyterian Peacemaking Program and established a special offering to fund it. It also broadened the concern for peace from being a matter of individual conscience and affirmed that peacemaking was the calling of all believers, particularly in light of nuclear and other Cold War dangers. Invoking Isaiah's vision of making plowshares from our swords (Isa. 2:4), it emphasized our global interdependence and international connection. With New Testament themes, it presented a holistic understanding of peace and encouraged a wide range of church engagement. It affirmed that "peacemaking is an indispensable ingredient of the church's mission. It is

not peripheral or secondary but essential to the church's faithfulness to Christ in our time." Since 1980, peace-making has become broadly accepted in the church; it is integral to our prayers and hymns and is evident in our preaching, teaching, and public witness.

Presbyterians engage the gospel of peace in a variety of ways:

- Our worship points to the reality of God's gift of peace and mission of reconciliation.
- Through prayer we nurture the spiritual life of our communities.
- Through Bible study, we equip people to share the gospel message of peace throughout the world.
- We advocate for affordable housing, better schools, and funding for social services through faith-based community organizing campaigns.
- We work to reduce gun violence in the United States.
- We join with ecumenical and interfaith partners in struggles for human rights and economic justice in countries around the world.
- Presbyterian and ecumenical peacemakers risk nonviolent accompaniment, walking alongside church leaders threatened with political violence in Colombia, for example.
- We seek to make peace with the earth by living more sustainably.
- We challenge legislators to resist the pressures of special-interest lobbies and instead support forward-looking policies that reflect wise stewardship of the planet and respect for a more just world order.

Presbyterian Peacemaking Witness and Just Peace

Since the adoption of *The Believers' Calling* in 1980, careful studies and prophetic statements have addressed the nuclear danger, particularly military interventions and their rationale, and the relation of religion, violence, and terrorism. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has held a virtual "nuclear pacifist" position since 1988, opposing first use and retaliation and calling repeatedly for disarmament. The policy statement *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age* suggests that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) takes a "just-peace" stance, with its images drawn primarily from the Old Testament:

The church in the nuclear age must shift its energies from considerations of just war to the urgent and primary task of defining and serving a just peace. A nuclear stalemate or even the elimination of all nuclear arms is still far from God's shalom. Shalom is the intended state of the entire human race. It involves the well-being of the whole person in all relationships, personal, social, and cosmic. Shalom means life in a community of compassionate order marked by social and economic justice. Peace without justice is no peace; that is why the Bible so often reflects God's special concern for the poor and powerless.

The great biblical visions of global peace—swords into plowshares, every family under its own vine and fig tree—are fundamental to thinking about just peace. Such a peace is ultimately God's gift; we need to avoid the proud illusion that we can create it by human effort alone. But Christian obedience demands that we move toward that peace in

all possible ways: by extending the rule of law, advocating universal human rights, strengthening the organs of international order, working for common security and economic justice, converting industry to peaceful production, increasing understanding of and reconciliation with those we identify as enemies, developing peacemaking skills, constructing concrete manifestations of just peace across barriers of conflict and injustice, and other means (*Minutes of the General Assembly*, 1988, pt. 1, 450).

In 1998, the assembly approved a statement called *Resolution on Just Peacemaking and the Call for International Intervention for Humanitarian Rescue* that embodied the tension involved in endorsing “humanitarian” military intervention as a method to prevent such things as genocide. The statement moves the church’s thinking beyond the traditional categories of just war, crusade, and pacifism. Along with a realism that has been characteristic of much Reformed ethics (and some liberation theologies), the just-peace resolution affirms a preference for strong peacemaking initiatives, noting the following regarding the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

It has called for greater emphases on the use of nonviolent means for conflict resolution and social change, and for the promotion of training toward this goal.

It has stressed the importance of human rights, religious liberty, and the importance of democracy as a foundation for just peace. . . .

It has called for the abolition of nuclear weapons, limitations on the development of weapons, and

Recent Presbyterian Peacemaking Statements

- 1967 *The Confession of 1967* honors peacemaking “even at risk to national security.”
- 1969 “*War, Peace, & Conscience*” recognizes conscientious objection to particular wars as well as to all war.
- 1975 “*Ministry to Persons in the Armed Forces*” reviews and updates the role of chaplains to represent the independence and fullness of Christian beliefs on war.
- 1980 *Peacemaking: The Believers’ Calling* sees all Christians to be peacemakers, across the range from nonviolence to the just-war tradition.
- 1983 “Commitment to Peacemaking,” a widespread congregational pledge, included offerings for local, regional, and national programs and was supported by both of the reuniting Presbyterian churches.
- 1984–85 *Presbyterians and Peacemaking: Are We Now Called to Resistance?* is a widely studied resource challenging foreign interventions and the cold-war arms race.
- 1988 *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age* is a study and policy statement coming close to nuclear pacifism, mainly on just-war grounds.

- 1991 *A Brief Statement of Faith* includes the call to unmask idolatries and work for peace in “a broken and fearful world.”
- 1998 *Resolution on Just Peacemaking and the Call for International Intervention for Humanitarian Rescue* states that military action may be justified to prevent genocide, yet ten key “just-peacemaking” principles would mainly prevent wars.
- 2004 *“Religion, Violence, and Terrorism”* recommends policing rather than a military model to deal with crimes of terrorism and stresses communal human security over national security.
- 2006 *“Resolution against Torture”* opposes excesses of U.S. occupations, reaffirms human rights, and calls for Guantanamo Bay prison to be shut down.
- 2010 *Gun Violence, Gospel Values* reports on gun proliferation and its effects.
- 2014 *Drones, War, and Surveillance* calls for drone and cyber security regulation, recognizing the pervasiveness of their use.

restrictions on the sale or transfer of instruments of destruction. It has supported these restrictions on the understanding that traffic in arms raises the likelihood of conflict and raises the level of violence should conflict break out. . . .

It has recognized the critical importance of racial and gender justice in the achievement of social harmony and prosperity.

It has called for independent and unilateral initiatives to reduce risks of conflict and to stimulate change. It has affirmed the importance of reconciliation even in the face of great risk. . . .

It has acknowledged the responsibility for international cooperation and leadership, and understands that the power and wealth of the United States require it to be part of international efforts to seek peace. At the same time it has recognized that the United States has and can abuse that power and wealth.

It has supported international efforts, through the United Nations, at peacemaking and peacekeeping. . . .

These church positions, together with background papers that support them, provide a complex legacy of important ideas. The Presbyterian church has not only made statements but has also encouraged participation in the ongoing tasks of peacemaking. Its peacemaking program has devised many strategies for helping to transform political and economic affairs in ways that promote just-peace policies, whether in the domestic affairs of our own nation or in the world at large, whether through the use of civil authority or, if needed, resistance to it.

In keeping with these principles and policies, General Assemblies have also called for responsible withdrawals by the United States from Iraq (2004) and Afghanistan (2010). The 2004 General Assembly prophetically and controversially termed the Iraq war “unwise, illegal, and immoral.” The resolution on “*Religion, Violence, and*

Terrorism” (also 2004) endorsed a “policing” approach to terrorism and responds to the charge sometimes made that religion engenders violence. In 2008, the General Assembly “commended for study” a careful ethical assessment of the Iraq war titled “To Repent, To Restore, To Rebuild, and To Reconcile,” which includes the concepts of public forgiveness and “honest patriotism” as developed by Donald W. Shriver Jr., a distinguished Presbyterian ethicist.

Recent theological discussion has proposed nonviolence for the majority of Christians as well, deliberately challenging the compromises seen to accompany public responsibility. The wording of the first of the five affirmations adopted by the General Assembly in 2016—the epigraph to this chapter—does not propose that nonviolence necessarily be an essential mark of the Presbyterian church, as it is for the traditional peace churches. Rather, it proposes that we have “a mission to present alternatives to violence.” An earlier wording continued the sentence to include “fear, and misused power,” underlining the breadth of reconciliation work and the possibility of constructive uses of power.

Our peacemaking approach must go beyond
words and engage in transformative worship
and action, creating needed alternatives
for our society as well as ourselves.

Edward W. Long, a leader in Presbyterian peace thinking, has noted how today’s pervasive acceptance of war’s inevitability often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹ How does the church resist being transformed when

it lives in a world of nations that are in constant overt and covert military struggle? This is where our peacemaking approach must go beyond words and engage in transformative worship and action, creating needed alternatives for our society as well as ourselves.

An updated Reformed approach was explored by a large number of congregations in the mid-1980s using the study guide *Presbyterians and Peacemaking: Are We Now Called to Resistance?*² That congregational process (and a parallel conversation among scholars virtually unique among denominations) generated some of the thinking about resisting violence that went into *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age* (1988). Some Presbyterians hold to fully nonviolent positions while a larger number argue that responding to injustice sometimes requires actions on the spectrum of force that include physical violence. During the six-year peace-discernment process, an overall consensus was reached to choose nonviolent alternatives whenever possible without making nonviolence an absolute position. The 2016 General Assembly went further than that, lifting up nonviolence and in a way heightening the risk or vulnerability of believers.

As we will see more in risk 3, it is important to consider nonviolence in relation to the example of Jesus and the witness of much of the earliest, pre-Constantine church. This is not to deny our traditional Presbyterian appreciation of how justice and love, like Old Testament and New, must always go together. According to biblical scholars Donald Gowan and Ulrich Mauser, the apostle Paul sees peace coming in *this* age, embodied in Jesus Christ and the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit. Peace is a key part of the hope of the gospel, part of what it is to live a redeemed and joyful life, larger than even the worst evils in history.³

Given this rich history of peacemaking and the vital ongoing work of making peace, it seems only fitting that we reaffirm the centrality of peacemaking and renew our dedication to this central calling as followers of Jesus Christ. At the same time, as an integral part of honest and authentic peacemaking, we must confess our complicity in the violence of our world.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do you personally embody peacemaking as a Christian in your life?
2. Do you believe there is a reason today for Christians to be absolute pacifists? Why or why not?
3. What alternatives to violence does/should the Presbyterian church offer the world?
4. How is the church at risk for presenting alternatives to violence?

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