

# Peacemaking: A Christian Vocation

## Summary

In 2003 the proposed war in Iraq caused many who had never protested before to take to the streets. However popular engagement in the cause of peace was much too late. For decades Western self-interest had resulted in damaging and confused policies towards Iraq and the scene was now set for a bloody conflict. Many within our churches and beyond are asking searching questions concerning the capacity of governments and the international system to promote peace and maintain order. The study aims to help us on the journey towards a common understanding of ethical principles informed by our Christian tradition.

Having outlined the task ahead, the second chapter '**Learning from the Past**', reviews Christian tradition on the subject. There are several passages in the Old Testament apparently advocating total war or massacre. We must understand the context of these texts and recognize that they must not be interpreted as sanctioning such acts in the present.

The New Testament also raises difficult questions. We engage with these but ultimately conclude that God's will for peace is unequivocal. The Bible canon, taken as a whole, provides a profound witness to the value of life and peace. This survey of biblical texts is complemented by an overview of the development of different attitudes to warfare in Christian history, from early pacifism to the Just War and on to the total wars of the twentieth century and the new threat of terrorism.

In addressing questions of peace and war, it is crucial for Christians to recall with profound regret the way that the medieval church endorsed the use of wars fought for the sake of religion in the crusades. Nevertheless we explore here how our rich Christian heritage and perspectives of other faiths might help us interpret anew the call to be peacemakers today. The call to become peacemakers is the theme for the next chapter, **Building for Peace**.

Jesus' call to be peacemakers is directed to everyone but it is neither simple to discern nor easy to follow. This call is as relevant to our personal and professional relationships as it is in the national or international setting. The Church carries a responsibility to help each member to work out their calling to be Christ's witness in the world yet it too often retreats within comfort zones of familiar debates.

In the years ahead our notions of security will be based less on the presence of national security forces to protect us from threats outside or within and increasingly on our success in tackling global threats such as climate change. A clearer discernment of God's calling to be peacemakers might lead us to more concerted political action.

The instinct to retaliate or assert control over conflict is all too common. Chapter 4 seeks to illuminate some **Non-violent Strategies for Dealing with Conflict**.

Violence finds many manifestations in the home, school or workplace, in video games and in real life. The study turns to the experiences of Gandhi, Martin Luther King as well as social and political movements in Eastern Europe to understand how power by force has been challenged. To achieve progress in non-violence training is essential and adequate resources need to be allocated. Some examples of training by NGOs are described.

Equally we can recount situations where warlords appear to be able to act with impunity. Chapter 5, '**On the Use of Force**' deals with the uncomfortable realities of conflict. In addressing the question of military force the study group took time to read and hear first hand of the experience of those caught up in conflict. Some accounts are retold here. Can Christians ever support the threat or use of military force and if so under what circumstances?

Sin and corruption are an inevitable part of our existence and our earthly authorities are necessarily charged with the application of law, the responsibility to protect using impartial judgement and the maintenance of order. The report contends that violence is always alien to God's reign but recognises that temporal authority is, by nature, coercive rather than persuasive.

Right authority necessitates an element of objective judgement. It is argued that authority to pursue war cannot be reduced to an assertion of a nation's right to self-defence. The implications are explored in the context of the strengths and weaknesses of the UN system.

Having established some theological foundations the chapter offers some insights regarding genocide, terrorism, pre-emptive war, nuclear weapons and arms control. We note the significant peacemaking opportunity the UK currently has to decide against embarking on a costly successor to the Trident nuclear weapons system and call on the churches to argue against its replacement.

Consideration of appropriate responses to any specific conflict must be subordinated to the primary goal of peacemaking. The concluding chapter proposes some practical aspects to the **Christian Vocation of Peacemaking**. Four dimensions to peacemaking are explored, a) fostering just and peaceful relationships, b) being active in resolving conflicts c) supporting strategies for preventing violent conflict and d) engaging with political leaders about how and when violent force might be used.

Taking a stand against powerful interests in the name of peace is a risky business that has cost some peacemakers their lives. This aspect of mission is poorly understood and the individuals and organisations involved need our support.

Those holding pacifist and just war positions have more in common than is at first apparent. In this concluding section we identify a common agenda and lay this before our churches to stimulate reflection. This report is offered in the context of an ongoing dialogue but it is also presented as a call to action. The Church cannot claim to have a monopoly on truth and neither can our governments. Ultimately this report invites bold and effective leadership from the churches in the cause of peace.

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