

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



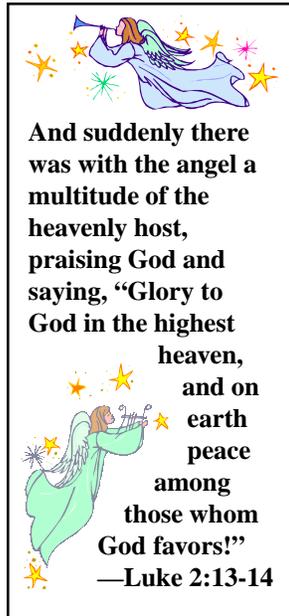
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BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Wondering about peace

What a contrast. It's the season in which we most often hear scriptures about peace, but current news all seems to be about war preparations.

The U.S. president, the United Methodist Church's most visible member and the person seen by many as the current leader of the world, is constantly threatening war. Yet top UMC leaders, like many other church leaders, urge the U.S. to reject war. And many Christians are finding it hard to reconcile what the Bible says with what they see as the need to defend themselves and other innocent people.

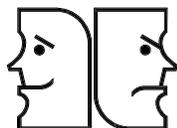


And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"
—Luke 2:13-14



I'm a long way from feeling sure what position Christians should take, so when I decided to use peace as the topic for this issue of *Connections* it turned out to be mostly questions. However, I believe all Christians need to keep reconsidering what the Bible says about war and peace. We also need to admit that some of our personal attitudes toward war could be in conflict with God's will. Thus we need to keep questioning not only our beliefs but also the actions of our nation's leaders.

■ **What is peace?** Is it the absence of conflict? I don't think so, because any change brings conflict, and change is often needed. Does peace require total agreement among individuals or nations or religions? Expecting that seems totally unrealistic. Would promoting



Who, me?

"Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me," says a song that became popular in the 1960's. I've never liked it, maybe because I haven't felt it had anything to do with me or any of the people I know.



Aren't those other people the problem?

After all, I'm a peaceful person, and as far as I can see, so is everyone I know. I'm not murdering people or blowing up anything. It's those other people who are preventing peace. It's the terrorists that blow up buildings and cars and buses. It's Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. It's the Israelis and the Palestinians. We'd have peace if those kinds of people would stop doing what they're doing.

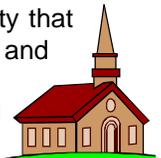


They're the ones who need to be not only saying, "Let peace begin with me," but also doing something to help it begin. Right?

Maybe not. As the world keeps becoming less peaceful and speculation about war keeps filling the daily news, I'm wondering if I and other apparently peaceful citizens might also need to be doing more than we're now doing to help achieve peace.

Maybe we could help

I'm not sure of all that we need to do, but I'm sure we need to think seriously about how Christian principles might apply to current world events. I'm also sure that we need to pray and try to discern God's will for the world situation and our role in it. I'm sure, too, that we need to consider the possibility that some of our present views about war and peace could be wrong. And I feel sure that, in our churches especially, we need to talk about possible alternatives to war.



We U.S. citizens probably also need to let our senators and representatives hear from us. The General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church provides an easy way for doing this, and you don't have to be a United Methodist or agree with official UMC positions to use it. Just go to umc-gbcs.org and click on "UM Power."



Maybe we can help peace begin.

or preserving peace require avoiding criticism of others' beliefs and actions? Surely not. Does peace mean blindly following our government or church leaders? No, that can mean disobeying what we see as God's will. Does peace mean never rocking the boat? No, that can be appeasement. In a completely peaceful world, would any people have more material resources than others? Maybe so, maybe not.

■ **Who's innocent?** The wish to avoid war and to prevent terrorism and other crimes in order to protect the innocent seems legitimate, but it's not always clear who is innocent. Opponents of attacking Iraq see its noncombatant citizens as innocent, and want to avoid attacks in order to avoid harming them. Others, however, see them as guilty because they won't risk rising up against Saddam Hussein and removing him from power. But we're not innocent ourselves when we fail to object to our government's actions that we consider sinful. And many other nations think we're guilty because we're monopolizing



the world's resources and continually overpowering weaker nations. We need to admit that there may be some truth in that accusation.

Seeing ourselves as completely innocent is tempting but unrealistic. Patriotism and loyalty to our nation are important, but only as long as they don't

become refusal to see its real faults. True loyalty to our nation, just as to our churches, requires helping it see and work toward correcting faults and errors.

In his book *Unholy Alliance: Religion and Atrocity in our Time* (Fortress Press, 1997) author Marc Ellis aptly describes the understandable but misguided loyalty that we sometimes display. He quotes political commentator Noam Chomsky, who sees the prevailing pattern as one of indignant outrage over enemy crimes with much "self-congratulatory appeal to high principle, combined with a remarkable ability 'not to see' in the case of crimes for which we bear responsibility."



"Sooner or later in this battle for truth and survival," Ellis warns, "comes a time when an attempt must be made to understand one's adversary and, at the same time, to criticize aspects of one's own history." And every nation's and religion's history includes some reprehensible actions. Ellis cites Emily Culpepper's jolting metaphor for the mixture that is the history of all religions, including Christianity.



Our history is like compost, she says. It includes matter that has decayed and died, becoming "stinking rot," but such matter can provide valuable nutrients if we use it properly.

Why aren't more Christians saying such things publicly today?

"A time comes when silence is betrayal. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, men do not easily assume the task of opposing their government's policy, especially in time of war. Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. Moreover, when the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do in the case of dreadful conflict, we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty. But we must move on. ..."



"We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, for those it calls 'enemy,' for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers. ... There will be no meaningful solution until some attempt is made to know them and hear their broken cries. ..."

"... We as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. ... A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, 'This way of settling differences is not just.' ... America, the richest and most powerful nation in the world, can well lead the way in this revolution of values. ..."

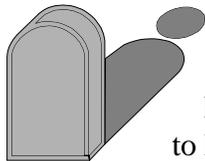
"We must move past indecision to action. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight. ... May our country, on the brink of war, take to heart the final refrain of 'America the Beautiful': 'America! America! God mend thine every flaw. Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.'"

— from an April 4, 1967, speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.

■ **Which innocent people should we protect?**

Many innocent Americans were killed in the 9-11 attacks, and many would be killed if we were attacked with nuclear or chemical or biological weapons. Are innocent Americans less important than the innocent citizens of another country who would be killed by our efforts to keep that country from attacking us with the weapons we see it preparing?

■ **Is striking first ever justified?** What if the Good Samaritan had come along a little earlier, in time to see the attacker sneaking up on the potential victim and apparently about to hit him? Should the Samaritan have then waited to act until after the victim had actually been hit? Should the U.S.



and other countries have struck when we first saw what looked like evidence that Hitler was going to kill Jews and other minorities?

■ **Is any killing permissible?** If so, how should we decide which is permissible and which isn't? Should we outlaw capital punishment, even for the criminals who torture and kill innocent people? If so, how should we deal with criminals in a way that will protect potential future victims? How would we treat criminals in a peaceful world, to be merciful and just but still protect innocent people? I'm not sure. Is killing in self-defense okay? I'm not willing to reject it, yet Jesus apparently did.



■ **Are U.S. efforts to stay in control justified?**

Some seem to be aimed mainly at preserving our relatively extravagant lifestyle—by insuring a supply of oil, for example, so that we can keep driving big vehicles inexpensively. Are we as concerned about helping others to have



the bare necessities of food, clothing, and shelter? And in world decision-making bodies we seem unwilling to risk being outvoted, even though we claim to want democratic decision-making everywhere.

Looking for biblical guidance

The Bible says a lot about war and peace, but what do its words mean for today's world? Is the "new earth" only an ideal state that can never exist among human beings on this earth? Or does God

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth ... The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent —its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.
—Isaiah 65:17-25

want us to act now in the ways that would characterize the new earth, even though we would suffer for acting that way on the present earth? I'm not willing to do that, but I suspect God calls us to do it. Unless more people start doing it, how can a new earth ever come into being?

In the days to come ... [The Lord] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.
—Isaiah 2:2-4

I can't imagine Jesus endorsing our attacking another country, but I'm not sure God wants us to sit idly by and be killed, either. Since Jesus didn't live in a world of nuclear bombs, missiles, and chemical and bio-

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

logical weapons, it's hard to know what response he would want when nations threaten to use such weapons. Jesus advocated peacemaking, but unfortunately he didn't leave specific instructions for it, and some sayings attributed to him

**"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."
—John 14:27**

**"... Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"
—Luke 12:51**

**"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
—Matthew 5:9**



seem contradictory. So what are we to do? How should we promote peace in a world full of war?

Such questions are hard to answer, but for Christians, asking them and looking for God's answers seems essential. This Advent season seems to be an especially good time for doing that.

Barbara

**Do not repay anyone evil for evil ... If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ... If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.
—Romans 12:17-21**

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth, the peace that was meant to be.
With God our creator, children all are we.
Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.



Let peace begin with me; let this be the moment now.
With every step I take, let this be my solemn vow:
To take each moment and live each moment in peace eternally.
Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.