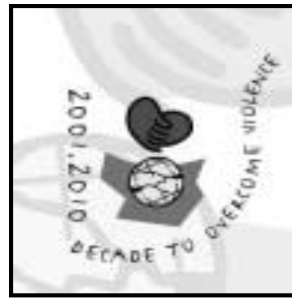


PEACEMAKING

OUR SHARED MINISTRY

THE PEACE CHURCH WITNESS



Bearing witness
to peacemaking
has long been a
concern of the
historic peace
churches.
Now is the
opportune time
to commit
ourselves fully
to ecumenical
dialog and
action.

THE BIENENBERG CONSULTATION

To examine more deeply the peace dimension of the Gospel and to promote peace teaching and dialog across Christian communions, the Church of the Brethren, Friends, and Mennonites have convened periodic conferences. The most recent was the theological consultation at Bienenberg, Switzerland, June 25-29, 2001.

Participants included 10 representatives of the Church of the Brethren. Three of the group presented papers—Bethany Theological Seminary's Scott Holland, the University of La Verne's Debbie Roberts, and Colgate Rochester Divinity School's Lauree Hersch Meyer. Also in attendance were Jeff Bach and Dan Ulrich of the Bethany Seminary faculty; Kristin Flory, coordinator of Brethren Volunteer Service in Europe; Dean Johnson, assistant pastor, Church of the Brethren, Richmond, Ind.; Donald E. Miller, former general secretary of the General Board; Barb Sayler, co-director of On Earth Peace; and Sara Speicher, communications officer of the World Council of Churches. They were joined by peace educators and activists from Mennonite and Friends groups and from the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

THE HISTORIC PEACE CHURCHES

While collaboration among the peace churches in the US dates back to the 1920s, a series of Puidoux Conferences, named for the site of the first meeting in Europe in 1955, began a more international effort focused on working for peace through the World Council of Churches. Since then explorations have been pursued through varied projects and formats, offering the findings to WCC assemblies and other church groups for study.

A SPECIAL DECADE

Given the absolute rejection of violence by our Lord Jesus and his steadfast call to peace and reconciliation, Christians are pointedly aware of the threat of violence to God's people. In light of this, Christians around the world have inaugurated the Decade to Overcome Violence.

The Church of the Brethren, through its representatives to the World Council of Churches, was instrumental in calling on global Christianity to set this theme for the years 2001-2010. At the 2000 Annual Conference, the Church of the Brethren pledged itself to participate in the Decade.

The Decade is not organized around set programs, but is rather an invitation for all Christian bodies to offer their own particular gifts for peacemaking. Components of Brethren participation in the program include a network of 23 district contact persons; resources and leadership provided by the staff of the Brethren Witness office of the General Board and of On Earth Peace; a BVSer assisting the launch of the program; a DOV webpage at www.brethren.org; a congregational resource folder with ideas for worship, study and action; and training events for district contact persons and congregational representatives.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Brethren Witness Office, Church of the Brethren General Board, 1451 Dundee Ave., Elgin, IL 60120; (800) 323-8039.

On Earth Peace, PO Box 188, New Windsor, MD 21776; (410) 635-8704.

Laura Krieder, DOV Program Assistant, Church of the Brethren Washington Office, 337 North Carolina Ave. SE, Washington, DC 20003; (202) 546-3202.



A message from
the International
Historic Peace Church
Consultation on
"Theology and Culture:
Peacemaking in a
Globalized World" at
Bienenberg Theological
Seminary, Switzerland,
June 25-29, 2001

To our brothers and sisters in the Historic Peace Churches and in the wider ecumenical fellowship of Christians:

Greetings in the name of the Prince of Peace.

We, members of the Historic Peace Churches—Mennonites, Friends, and Church of the Brethren—are gathered in Bienenberg, Switzerland, to assess our contemporary theologies of peace and justice in preparation for the Decade to Overcome Violence. We come from all parts of the world, although we lament the disproportionately small participation of those from outside Europe and North America. We come with a commitment to listen to each other, to honor our differences and celebrate our commonalities, and to work together for the culture of peace which is God's will for our broken world.

AFFIRMATIONS

Together we affirm the following:

◆ Essential to the good news of the gospel is the teaching, example, and Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ, who calls us to witness to the transforming power of God's kingdom of peace, justice, and reconciliation—for this nonviolent way of life is at the very heart of the gospel.

◆ The good news of the gospel is more than a renunciation of violence in the struggle for justice and reconciliation. It is a call and a gift to seek to develop a culture of peace that creatively addresses and overcomes the many causes of violence in the contemporary world.

◆ The good news of the gospel calls us to regard seeking justice as central and integral to a nonviolent way of life. The commitments to nonviolent love and to the struggle for justice belong to one another and are not to be separated.

◆ A careful study of the Scriptures discloses this unity of nonviolent love, the struggle for justice, reconciliation, and the creative search for a culture of peace. In the Sermon on the Mount, love for the adversary includes reproof and creative confrontation of evil, but does not include competing with the violent methods of evil. In the New Testament account, the early church did not avoid confrontation for the sake of the Truth.

◆ We are called to find creative, nonviolent ways to address situations of conflict in the search for justice. These include solidarity with the victim, binding the wounds of the oppressed, addressing the needs of the poor, seeking genuine understanding and empathy with all partners of the conflict, efforts for reconciliation when possible, learning to forgive, and genuine love of enemy.

◆ We are called to witness in the hope and anticipation that God may use our witness to bring reconciliation and a culture of peace with justice. Therefore the effectiveness of our witness is always an important consideration, but not the only consideration. We are called to a patient and persistent trust that God will make use of our obedience in ways that often surpass our understanding. The willingness to accept suffering is therefore a part of our witness for peace.

◆ We are called to experience the providential intercession of the Spirit that may

Decade to Overcome Violence / Church of the Brethren



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carry us through situations where the use of violence, even as a last resort, has been renounced.

◆ Our witness proceeds from worship, prayer, study and discernment within the discipline of the community of faith. At the same time, our witness reaches out to the civil societies and ecological environments within which we all live. Peace in its depth includes spiritual, communal, and political dimensions as well as a care for the earth. ◆ The different ways of understanding these affirmations in our various doxological, theological, and ecclesial traditions serve to strengthen them, rather than to weaken our commitment to them. Indeed, the affirmations themselves express our belief in a reconciliation that allows for difference.

CONFESSION

At the beginning of the 21st century, does the title “Historic Peace Churches” fit the Church of the Brethren, Mennonites, and Friends? In many places, we have become indistinguishable from the society around us. Some of us would challenge the extent to which we identify with and conform to our respective states. Is our peace witness simply historic, or does it stand as a challenge to the modern forms of national religion? Our churches’ peace witness arose within contexts of suffering and persecution. Today, many of our churches, especially in the North, exist in a position of privilege in our societies and no longer speak from the vantage point from which our ethic arose. This fact, far from calling into question the radical nature of the gospel, could instead stand as a call to repentance. Many of us have been too inattentive to our brothers and sisters who live in situations of real suffering, whether in the Southern Hemisphere or in the North and even within our churches and homes.

We do not seek suffering for its own sake; yet too many of us practice a comfortable and conformist ethic of peace, which is incompatible with God’s mission to overcome the evils of this world. We deplore the apparent inability of this very consultation to more fully reflect the realities in which many of our churches in the Southern Hemisphere find themselves.

COMMITMENT TO THE DECADE

We who are gathered here express our commitment to the Decade to Overcome Violence, and to all ecumenical work which serves the cause of peace, justice, and reconciliation. We urge our churches, whether they are members of the World Council of Churches or not, to commit to active engagement with other Christians in the service of God’s will for peace. We intend to continue the discussions begun here this week, and to broaden the participation to include those who are not here. We intend to share the gifts of our tradition with the ecumenical community of churches through the Decade. We intend to make this a time of renewal and energy for our active, non-violent work for peace, justice, and reconciliation.

As we begin this Decade to Overcome Violence together with the ecumenical fellowship of churches, we make the following commitments:

- ◆ We wish to deepen our understanding of the peace God wishes to give us, the righteousness with which God graces us, and the justice God requires of us.
- ◆ Our witness for peace and our calling to Christian unity are two aspects of the same gospel imperative “that all may be one” (John 17). We admit that we have not always ourselves understood or embodied the necessary link between reconciliation

among Christians and the Christian ministry of reconciliation in the world. We pray that through the Decade to Overcome Violence, we can discover that a commitment to nonviolent peacemaking need no longer be a church-dividing issue.

◆ The search for peace is not the possession of the peace churches, but is a deep, common yearning of all Christians, people of other faiths, and all of humanity. We recognize that in committing to ecumenical dialog and action for peace, we are called to lay aside any prideful tendencies within ourselves to lay special claim to this concern. Instead, we are called to listen humbly to the earnest commitments of others to peace. We must understand and willingly embrace the fact that through ecumenical encounter, we, too may be changed. Indeed, a vulnerability and openness to the “other” is constitutive of the peace witness we profess.

◆ We commit ourselves to urge our respective institutions, with their resources, to engage fully in the ecumenical dialog and action of the Decade to Overcome Violence. Now is the time to bring forward our gifts with a spirit of generosity.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE DECADE

From our perspective as members of peace churches, we offer the following suggestions for the Decade to Overcome Violence:

- ◆ For the churches of our traditions, a commitment to nonviolent action for justice and reconciliation is a mark of the church, a point of confessional status. We suggest pursuing an ecclesiological approach to nonviolence, following on the WCC’s recent work in Ecclesiology and Ethics. We strongly affirm the statement from that study that “ethic is intrinsic to the nature of the church,” and suggest this might be a

fruitful avenue for building ecumenical consensus in the Decade.

◆ Much of the world’s energy and resources are channeled into preparing for and engaging in violent attempts to resolve conflict, and in misguided attempts to create security. The governments of the world continue to outdo themselves in arming for war. In addition, much creative imagination and energy is absorbed by the interpersonal, social, structural, economic, cultural, and ecological dynamics of violence. We all suffer from a lack of energy and resources for creative nonviolent conflict transformation. Through this Decade, we urge that significant resources be devoted to experimental methodologies for positive alternatives to violence, so that our “no” to violence can be followed by the “yes” of love, justice, and transforming power. ◆ Our experience in peacemaking has taught us that overcoming violence is very difficult. We therefore suggest committing ourselves to utilize resources from beyond ourselves, to pray for the courage of our convictions, and to practice patience so as not to impede God’s spirit of peace.

FROM THIS CONSULTATION

The participants here this week are clear that this is not an isolated experience, but is rather one chapter in a story which began long before us and will continue into the future. We feel the need for more consultations of a similar nature. More fundamentally, we feel the need to continue together, to witness together, to share our differences in love, to embody the reconciliation we seek to call forth in the world, and to strengthen ourselves and the entire community of Christians in our shared ministry of peacemaking.

May you be blessed by the One who calls us to be peacemakers.



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