



Backgrounder

*Church of the Brethren Witness/Washington Office
A Ministry of the Church of the Brethren General Board*

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The Voice of the Church on Conscientious Objection

The following is a compilation of position statements and resolutions of the Church of the Brethren on issues that deal with conscientious objection to war within the faith tradition and heritage of our church.

These are presented as a challenge to we who are Brethren, a church of peace and nonviolence. When our nation is at war we must consider our involvement and our choices. When our nation seems committed in moving forward with an undefined, perhaps unending war against terror, we must consider not only what our voice has been, but what our voice shall be. It is a matter of conscience, a witness to who we are.

The following statement was originally adopted by the 1948 Annual Conference as the "Statement On Position And Practices Of The Church Of The Brethren In Relation To War." A first revision was made in 1957, a second in 1968. It appears here as revised for the third time by the 1970 Annual Conference.

The Church of the Brethren regards with sorrow and deep concern our nation's increasing movement toward a permanently militaristic outlook. Two devastating world wars, the conflict in Korea, the Vietnam War, and the many international crises of recent decades have produced an alarming change in American attitudes toward war and peace. The American public may come to accept as normal and inevitable the prospect that the nation must be prepared to go to war at any moment, that every young man must spend time in military service, that an overwhelming share of our heavy federal taxes must be devoted to military needs, and that this country must always be willing to assume the military burdens of weaker allies, actual or potential. Because of our complete dissent from these assumptions, the Church of the Brethren desires again, as at other times in its history, to declare its convictions about war and peace, military service and conscription, the use of tax money for military purposes, the right of Christian conscience, and the responsibility of Christian citizenship.

The Church of the Brethren Annual Conference views with concern the ongoing Selective Service System registration of young men. The reintroduction of registration in 1980 was opposed by our church since we do not concede to the state the authority to conscript citizens against their conscience.

...We again affirm these two positions- (1) alternative service as conscientious objectors engaging in constructive civilian work, or (2) open, nonviolent non-cooperation with the system of conscription- to be in keeping with the mind of Christ.

The Selective Service System on June 7, 1982, proposed new guidelines for alternative service work in the event of a future draft. These proposed regulations, as they now stand, would make it extremely difficult for the Church of the Brethren to cooperate with the Selective Service System in carrying out an alternative service program. The delegate body of this Annual Conference requests our government to:

- I. Allow the Church of the Brethren to provide alternative assignments for our members desiring to use them.
- II. Provide civilian administration of the alternative service program rather than requiring conscientious objectors to be assigned and evaluated by military personal.
- III. Allow the Church of the Brethren to provide the orientation for alternative service workers assigned to our programs.
- IV. Provide adequate safeguards to prevent arbitrary jobs assignments and reassignments of alternative service workers.
- V. Allow an alternative service worker to seek employment with any approved agency rather than making work options such as civil defense a top priority.
- VI. Allow alternative service workers to be assigned overseas.

(Excerpted from Reaffirmation adopted by the General Board, Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, Wichita, Kansas, July 1982)

The Church and Citizenship

The church holds that our supreme citizenship is in the kingdom of God, but we undertake to render constructive, creative service in the existing state. We encourage our members to exercise the right of suffrage and to regard public office as an opportunity to work for good government in keeping with our Christian values. We believe that in a democracy, Christians must assume responsibility for helping to create intelligent public opinion which will result in legislation in harmony with the eternal laws of God.

As Christian citizens, we consider it our duty to obey all civil laws which do not violate these higher laws. We seek, however to go beyond the demands of law, giving time, effort, life, and property in a ministry to human needs without regard to race, creed, or nationality. We attempt to reconcile conflicting persons and groups, leading them toward fuller human brotherhood under a common divine allegiance.

We believe that good citizenship extends beyond our own national boundaries and will there serve to remove the occasions of war. Convinced that good citizens in a good society must work out a better way than war to resolve international conflict, we have in recent years undertaken a diligent search of practical, effective means to that end.

The church encourages its members to study international relations and foreign policy and to confer with legislators, government executives, and other policy makers concerning these matters in the light of the Christian faith. We favor the strengthening agencies of international cooperation; intelligent sympathy with the desire of the people in underdeveloped areas for self-determination and a higher standard of living; and intensified study and application of the peaceful, constructive uses of atomic power for the benefit of all mankind.

The Church and Spiritual Nurture

The Church of the Brethren seeks by processes of education and spiritual nurture to help its members to allow a spirit of peace and an attitude of nonviolence to develop within themselves as an outgrowth of deep religious conviction. They are encouraged to demonstrate this spirit in their daily relationships in the home, the school, business, and the community.

For this purpose, we provide our services of worship, our preaching ministry, our Sunday and weekday educational efforts, our summer camps, our colleges and seminary, our personal counseling, our volunteer service program, our continuing ministry relief and rehabilitation, and our entire church-extension program. We seek thereby to lead individuals into such intimate contact with Jesus Christ, our Lord, that they will commit themselves to him and to the manner of life which he taught and exemplified.

The Church and Conscience

The church has stood likewise for the principle of freedom of worship and freedom of conscience. The church itself respects the right of the individual conscience within its membership and has never set up an authoritative creed. Instead, it accepts the entire New Testament as its rule of faith and practice and seeks to lead its members to comprehend and accept for themselves the word of Christ as the guide for their convictions and conduct.

We believe that no government has the authority to abrogate the right of individual conscience. "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)

The official position of the Church of the Brethren is that all war is sin and that we seek the right of conscientious objection to all war. We seek no special privileges from our government. What we seek for ourselves, we seek for all- the right of individual conscience. We affirm that this conscientious objection may be based on grounds more inclusive than institutional religion.
(Statement approved by 1968 Annual Conference)

The Church and Alternative Service

The church pledges its support to the draft-age member facing conscription who chooses to engage in constructive alternatives service civilian work as a conscientious objector. Such service might include participation in relief and rehabilitation in war or disaster areas anywhere in the world; technical, agricultural, medical, or educational assistance in developing countries; service in general or mental hospitals, schools, for the handicapped, homes for the aged, and kindred institutions; and medical or scientific research promising constructive benefits to mankind.

The church will seek to establish, administer, and finance to the extent of its resources, projects for such service under church direction or in cooperation with other private civilian agencies.
(Statement approved by 1970 Annual Conference)

The Church and Ministerial Exemption

The Church of the Brethren accepts the concept of the minister as one who seeks no special privilege, but shares the life of his people. Therefore, the church urges those who have the possibility of ministerial exemption from the draft law to consider refusing such exemption and to confront the draft on an equal basis with the laity.

The Church and War

The Church of the Brethren, since its beginning in 1708, has repeatedly declared its position against war. Our understanding of the life and teachings of Christ as revealed in the New Testament led our Annual Conference to state in 1785 that we should not “submit to the higher powers so as to make ourselves their instruments to shed human blood.” In 1918 at our Annual Conference we stated that “we believe that war or any participation in war is wrong and incompatible with the spirit, example and teachings of Jesus Christ.” Again in 1934 Annual Conference resolved that “all war is sin. We therefore, cannot encourage, engage, or willingly profit from armed conflict at home or abroad. We cannot, in the event of war, accept military service or support the military machine in any capacity.” This conviction, which we reaffirmed in 1948, and now reaffirm again, grew out of the teachings of Christ. (Statement approved by 1968 Annual Conference)

The Church and Conscription

The Church of the Brethren feels constrained by Christ’s teachings to lead its people to develop convictions against war. The church cannot concede to the state the authority to conscript citizens for military training or military service against their conscience.

The church will seek to fulfill its prophetic role in this matter in two ways: by seeking to change political structures and by influencing individual members.

The church will seek to use its influence to abolish or radically restructure the system which conscripts persons for military purposes. The church pledges its support and continuing fellowship to all of our draft-age members who face conscription. We recognize that some feel obligated to render full or non-combatative military service and we respect all who make such a decision.

We commend to all of draft age, their parents, counselors and fellow members the alternative position of (1) Alternative Service as conscientious objectors engaging in constructive civilian work, or (2) Open, non-violent non-cooperation with the system of conscription. The church pledges itself to renew and redouble its effort to interpret to the membership of the church at all levels of the church’s life these positions which we believe are in harmony with the style of life set forth in the gospel and as expressed in the historic faith and witness of our church.

The church extends its prayers, spiritual nurture and material aid to all who struggle and suffer in order to understand more fully and obey more perfectly the will of God. (Statement approved by 1970 Annual Conference)

The Church and Non-cooperation

The church pledges its support to the draft-age member facing conscription who chooses open non-cooperation with the system of conscription as a conscientious objector. Individuals who follow the lead of their conscience to this position will need the support of the church in many ways. The church will seek to meet these needs, to the extent of its resources, by providing such ministries as legal counsel, financial support, and prison visitation. To demonstrate a sense of community and fellowship with the non-cooperator, congregations are encouraged to offer sanctuary and spiritual support. All members of the church who take the position of non-cooperation should seek to exhibit a spirit of humility, goodwill, and sincerity in making this type of courageous witness most effective, non-violent, and Christian. (Statement approved by 1970 Annual Conference)

The Church and Taxes for War Purposes

While the Church of the Brethren recognizes the responsibility of all citizens to pay taxes for the constructive purposes of government, we oppose the use of taxes by the government for war purposes and military expenditures. For those who are conscientiously opposed to paying taxes for these purposes, the church seeks government provision for an alternative use of such tax money for peaceful, non-military purposes.

The church recognizes that its members will believe and act differently in regard to their payments of taxes when a significant percentage goes for war purposes and military expenditures. Some will pay the taxes willingly; some will refuse to pay all or part of the taxes as a witness and a protest; and some will voluntarily limit their incomes or use of taxable services to a low enough level that they are not subject to taxation.

We call upon all of our members, congregations, institutions, and boards to study seriously the problem of paying taxes for war purposes and investing in those government bonds which support war. We further call upon them to act in response to their study, to the leading of conscience, and to their understanding of the Christian faith. To all we pledge to maintain our continuing ministry of fellowship and spiritual concern.

(Statement approved by 1968 Annual Conference)

The Church and Its Continuing Witness

The Church of the Brethren has always believed that peace is the will of God. In the two and one half centuries of its history, it has come to understand more clearly the tremendous evil which war brings upon human beings and their society. The church, therefore, feels an increasing responsibility for the careful instruction and guidance of its members on all the problems of war and peace. It is also aware that there is room for further growth in the understanding of these questions and in ways of expressing the church's convictions in practical action.

This statement embodies the stage of thought and action which the Church of the Brethren has thus far reached in its desire to learn the will of God for our times. We undertake a continuing and growing witness and pledge ourselves to be receptive to new truth and better modes of expression as these come to our attention.

Obedience to God and Civil Disobedience

This statement was accepted as a position paper for the Church of the Brethren by a two-thirds majority of the 1969 Annual Conference held at Louisville, Kentucky.

Christians have always faced choices which test the relationships between faithfulness to God and responsibility to the state. Today such choices confront us:

How shall we relate to laws which enforce or support racial discrimination, laws which deny welfare aid to some groups of poor people, laws which conscript youth for military and civilian service, laws which require payment of taxes for war purposes, laws which forbid providing food and medical aid to so-called "enemy nations?"

When should we obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29) or refuse to render to Caesar what we consider to be God's (Mark 12:17)? Recently the Church of the Brethren answered this question briefly by saying, "When he (a Christian) is profoundly convinced that God forbids what the state demands, it is his responsibility to express his convictions. Such expression may include disobedience to the state" (Church, State, and Christian Citizenship, Annual Conference, 1967).