

# **Summary of Discussion**

## **Building a Wesleyan Theology of Peace for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Fresh Look at the Wesleyan Quadrilateral**

**by Richard Deats**

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Methodists United for Peace with Justice called a national conference in San Francisco from September 28 to October 1, 2006 to build a Wesleyan Theology of Peace. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral provided the four-part framework for the conference. The Quadrilateral begins with holiness, defined as love of God, others and self. From this love comes the mission to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land and to reform the nation. This mission is both personal and corporate, for Christians are called to both personal holiness and social responsibility.

The four aspects of the Quadrilateral are

Scripture  
Tradition  
Reason  
Experience

After presentations were made in each group, extensive time for discussion was taken, summarized as follows:

### **SCRIPTURE**

The myth of redemptive violence—that you defeat evil by killing and violence—is widespread but the opposite of the way of Jesus, who taught God’s reconciling love that overcomes evil. Reconciliation is at the heart of peacemaking . We are called to bear witness to God’s reconciling love (Matt. 5:9, 38-48), to love the enemy and to overcome evil with good. God deals with enemies not by annihilation but by self-giving love, as manifested in the death of Jesus. Redemption comes through His suffering (Eph. 2:11-22) In the church—the new community in Christ—violence is renounced. A new life is proclaimed and lived.

What would it mean to recover the vision of the church seen in the Sermon on the Mount where the way of Jesus is followed? To those who say that the Christian life is *more* than the Sermon on the Mount we ask why our Christian vision seems so much *less* than the Sermon on the Mount? We as a community in Christ are those whose life is shaped by the way of self-giving love (Eph. 4:29ff)

We focus on the meaning of Jesus' way through three lens: the church as the community of Christ; the cross as the symbol of suffering and self-giving love; and the New Creation, the hope of God's transforming power.

Jesus says he has been called "to preach good news to the poor," "release to the captives", "recovery of sight to the blind", and "to set at liberty those who are oppressed." We are called to construct alternative communities to replace those that represent violence and war.

Often the focus of the resurrection is in the far off future instead of in the NOW. There is a nowness rather than only a future to the resurrection that stresses the timeliness and urgency to the Gospel.

We are called to the way of Jesus not to confirm us as we are but to be open to God's message seen in the intersection of our lives and Scripture. How do we speak and witness to love and justice in a society steeped in the way of violence? We are called to discern the violence in our land today but also in our own souls and the communities of which we are a part. This means taking on the task of truth-telling, however difficult that might be. Contemplating peace is no substitute for creating peace, step by step, in season and out. This is a particular challenge when warmaking and preparing for war seem to be a permanent feature of our society, to the detriment of all other concerns and needs.

## **TRADITION**

We have much to learn, positive and negative, from the role of tradition in living out our faith. After the era of persecution of the early Church, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. This affirmation of unity led to an *ideology* of unity in which uniformity was imposed and heresies declared. One Empire, one faith, one emperor imposed uniformity for centuries. The Crusades that were to come took the cross and the sword to conquer in the name of Christ, slaying not only Jews and Muslims but Eastern Orthodox Christians as well. The Christian faith also had pacific expressions, found in monasteries and convents and especially in the Franciscan movement, in Joachim of Fiore and Meister Eckhart, along with the rise of the peace churches that were committed to Jesus' way as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.

Many who know this history forget the beauty of centuries of Muslim civilization with its long history of religious tolerance. Our talk of the liberating power of the Gospel needs to be looked at in the light of centuries of Christian intolerance, of the killing of heretics, of the imposition of faith on those who held different expressions of even the Christian faith, of battles of Catholics and Protestants whose echoes are still found today in Northern Ireland.

Of far more dangerous and serious examples are Christian/Muslim conflicts with a revival of the crusading mentality that sees a conflict of civilizations. We send our armies into the Middle East to impose a vision of free market democracy, inflaming widening areas of the Muslim world. Rather than trying to be an honest broker in the

Palestinian/Israeli conflict, we uncritically embrace Israel and her policies. We see ascendancy in our society of fundamentalist voices that stoke the fires of war, fed in part by the belief in the messianic end times.

In a different vein and on a hopeful note are these summary points:

- 1) Tradition is story telling. Spirit is creative and tradition is inherently creative.
- 2) Sharing our stories with others including people of other faiths builds fellowship. Breaking bread together builds relationships of love and respect.
- 3) The racism of crusade continues and is in tension with a long history of Christians embracing difference.
- 4) Eschatology (end times and the coming of Christ) needs to be framed in terms of the Prince of Peace rather than that of the slayer of millions (c.f., *Left Behind* books and belief in the Rapture).
- 5) Unity is not that which persecutes difference but rather the unity of Pentecost when Spirit comes to each in their own language.
- 6) Repentance is key in reclaiming and recovering history. Humor, sarcasm and imagination offer spirit-filled ways of bringing tradition alive now.

The rich peace tradition of the United Brethren is powerful and challenging. Coming from Germany they emphasized Pentecost and the Holy Spirit and the work of reconciliation, with those things that divide people—war, slavery, hierarchies—as a source of sin. Women played a key role as lay leaders and missionaries. Opposition both to slavery and the shedding of blood were prominent. In wartime their members sought to keep in unity. They had a strong mission effort in Sierra Leone where millions had died and been enslaved.

There is a strong just war tradition in Methodism and support generally for U.S. wars with a prevalent view of the U.S. having a unique and sacred place among the nations. This still informs the thinking of many United Methodists today, with a support of her wars and sense of a special role in history. The Methodist George Bush—even though he seldom meets with UM leaders—is reflective of this history.

And it is essential to remember the peace tradition of the Methodist family. After World War II Methodists were prominent in working for world peace, supporting the founding of the United Nations with the vision of “saving succeeding generations from the scourge of war” (UN Charter). Methodist women raised funds to build the Church Center for the UN, a vital hub across the street from the United Nations. E. Stanley Jones, friend and biographer of Gandhi, worked feverishly with Japanese leaders to head off war with the United States. There were other strong voices for peace such as Georgia Harkness, Harold Bosley, Ralph Sockman, Dorothy Nyland, and Walter Muelder. Many Methodists worked in the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, such as George Houser, Glenn Smiley, John Swomley, Herman Will, and Jim Lawson. The Board of World Peace has been a prophetic presence in the Church’s opposition to weapons of mass destruction and for disarmament and the way of nonviolence. Martin Luther King, Jr. received his doctorate from Methodist Boston University’s School of Theology as he developed the underpinnings of his strong opposition to racism and war.

## **REASON**

The United Methodist California-Annual Conference theme this year was “Compassion with the Mind of Christ.” This theme expresses the approach of this section, seeking to determine how we use God’s gift of the mind as we seek to be faithful to Christ. Reason is not to be equated with common sense since that is shaped by unexamined biases and assumptions. Reason is a tool for discerning God’s will; it is a way to reach valid conclusions from the information we have. Reason cannot make us happy, but it can help us understand Scripture.

John Wesley did not use the term “reason” the way we might today in our scientific age, but he did see it as a way to think through the implications of Scripture and faith. We are today also informed by black, feminist and liberation perspectives as we seek the way of peace. Whereas a European-American who professes “love of enemy” may fail to grasp unexamined assumptions of those possessing power, voices of the oppressed place a searchlight on those assumptions. To talk about peace without the demand of justice being considered is woefully inadequate and delusional. Malcolm X was especially perceptive in pointing this out. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an equally powerful advocate for justice, but he was also committed to a radical understanding of nonviolence in advancing justice.

So, too, have feminist voices broken through male domination in our faith, our institutions and our culture, as have the voices of the oppressed throughout the world challenged our unexamined assumptions of what is rational and natural, particularly in the prevailing inequality, where a few individuals and corporations dominate the world.

The just war theory has been widely accepted by much of the church and by the nation state. Despite the rigor of that theory wherein war is resorted to only as a last resort when all other means have been exhausted, the term “just war” is falsely employed to justify every particular war even though alternatives to that last resort have not been pursued. Many would agree that we have become dangerously addicted to making war and in this agreement proponents of both pacifism and the just war would find much to agree on. However, the rigor of Wesley’s quadrilateral of the creative tension of reason, tradition, scripture and experience lead us to a strong theology of peace.

## **EXPERIENCE**

Methodism has been rooted in experience. John Wesley, the Anglican priest, felt his heart strangely warmed. He felt called to go into the highways and by-ways with the message of Jesus to those on the margins of society—the poor, the forgotten, the imprisoned, the orphans and widows. His experiential religion—informed by scripture, reason and tradition—opened him to fresh movings of the spirit.

Today we live in a time when heretofore unimagined and powerful nonviolent individuals and movements have spread across the world. Deeply strengthening those who work for

justice and liberation, their way is without the violence and killing that have been so prevalent throughout history. These movements have been particularly inspired and informed by Gandhi and the freedom movement in India and by King and the civil rights movement in the American South.

Gandhi took the ancient philosophy and practice of nonviolence and applied it on the widest scale imaginable, to a nation of millions of people living under the world's most powerful empire. His philosophy of *satyagraha*, soul force, was shaped by Hinduism as well as by the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Gandhi saw nonviolence as the essence of all religions though he found special meaning in the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount. In the Gandhian movement in India, the world witnessed the versatility and strength of nonviolent techniques with a spiritual grounding that began to attract interest around the world.

African Americans were especially drawn to Gandhi as was he to them. It was through some of the early black contacts with Gandhi-like Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin May, and Howard Thurman that Martin Luther King, Jr. discovered the power of nonviolence for the South. Thanks to the black women of Montgomery and the arrest of Rosa Parks, a movement was ignited in Montgomery that eventually led to the overthrow of Jim Crow.

Gandhi titled his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. We follow the way of nonviolence when we incorporate our own experiments with truth in the struggles for peace and justice. Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inseparable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Since that time nonviolent movements have spread to Latin America, Asia and Africa. Representatives from South Africa, the Philippines, India and Palestine brought insights from their struggles and challenged us to incorporate in our experience the challenge of nonviolent organizing and envisioning. Mubarak Awad spoke of the practitioners of nonviolence among the Palestinians and their efforts for nonviolence centers in all Arab states. Kelvin Sauls told how nonviolence played a major role in ending apartheid in South Africa.

Elisabeth Tapia read an e-mail from a Filipino deaconess in which she said, "People of faith, prepare to resist with the peoples of the world! Turn your churches into sanctuaries of peace and refuge to the victims of the empire. Turn your theologies into reverberating sounds of the People's deep longings, protests, and hopes. Turn your rituals into songs of liberation, echoing the message of peace, justice, life and liberation. Bring an end to the breathing of the empire! Onward with our journey towards the Promised Land!"

## **CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

Today there are currents that favor a theology of peace with a Kingdom of God theology rather than a chosen nation approach. Countercultural voices and communities of resistance also challenge the traditional acceptance of war. Women have been a strong

voice for peace and willing to take on the principalities and powers, the bastions of war and racism.

The Holy Spirit moves and speaks most often at the margins. We have yet to understand fully the amazing nonviolent movements of the past half century that built on the Gandhian and Kingian legacies. We see these in the People Power movement in the Philippines, the peaceful overthrow of military regimes in Latin America, the Mothers of the Disappeared and Women in Black, Solidarity in Poland, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and the Singing Revolution in Lithuania, the fasting that brought down the brutal Uruguayan regime, the collapse of apartheid and the bold Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The list goes on and on. Any adequate theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to incorporate the insights learned in these movements.

Bishop Forrest Stith spoke of the hope that is in us, inspired by God's spirit. He said that we will never get rid of war if we accept that at some point we will wage war. The idea of a just war means that at some point you will go to war. The only way to move forward is to say you won't be violent or go to war. Period. Don't get weary, he said. Struggle yes, but don't give up. The struggle is our hope. What a power to hear of these struggles from one another!

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*This report is based upon notes of discussion provided by Joyce Georgieff and Jim Hipkins from the MUPWJ Board of Director, Rev. Bruce Pettit, UM San Francisco District, and David Wildman, United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries.*

*For further information on the conference go to <http://www.mupwj.org/conference.htm> or contact Methodists United for Peace with Justice at [mupwj87 \[at\] mupwj.org](mailto:mupwj87@mupwj.org) or at 1500 16<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036.*