

U.S. Methodism Deals with War and Peace

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Beginning of Methodism

Methodism began as an evangelical revival movement in England in the early 18th century under the leadership of John Wesley (1703-1791), a priest in the Church of England. The Methodist Episcopal Church became among the largest Protestant denominations in the United States in the early 19th Century and “was the most extensive national institution in antebellum America other than the federal government (Goen 1985, 57).” Today, the United Methodist Church claims almost 8.4 million members and clergy in the United States and 9.7 worldwide (<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=6&mid=2119>). The World Methodist Council claims 70 million “Methodist and related United Churches in the ‘Wesleyan tradition’ in 130 countries (<http://www.worldmethodist.org/wmc.htm>).” This article focuses on developments in the United States.

Wesley and his followers emphasized both justifying grace, whereby sinners were forgiven for their sins and restored to fellowship with God, and sanctifying grace, an experience of personal moral renewal that enabled believers to achieve “Christian perfection.” “The idea of Christian perfection was the most distinctive aspect of Wesley’s theology (Langford 1983, 40),” although neither Wesley nor his followers “developed the social implications of his doctrine (Schilling 1960, 230).” It has not played a prominent role in Methodist social thought although in the early 20th century “many Methodist voices have appealed eloquently for the sanctification of the whole of life (ibid., 231).”

Attitude toward War

From its inception Methodism has had an ambivalent attitude toward war. It has consistently condemned war as “incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ (UMC 1972a, par. 75).” Yet, it has never regarded a commitment to non-violence as an essential aspect of Christian life. It has tended to regard military service as an appropriate form of obedience to governments, which are thought to have their authority from God. It has left the choice of participation to individuals, but Methodists have generally tended to respond uncritically to their governments’ calls to arms; only a relatively small number have committed to pacifism.

Wesley abhorred war and wrote eloquently and passionately of the moral tragedy it represented. “[L]ike no other well-known author or theologian of his time he protested against every form of war (Marquardt 1992, 128).” Wesley understood war in relation to the doctrine of original sin, the idea that there is a radical flaw in human nature related to our alienation from God. As well, he saw war “as *evidence* of original sin, and confirms the argument with examples of trivial and irrational justifications given for war making (Weber 2001, 359).” Wesley believed that God used war to punish humans beings for their sin and as “a dramatic and painful call to repentance (ibid., 362).”

Wesley did not regard participation in war as inconsistent with Christian perfection. He regarded defensive wars as justified and “placed a high premium on what he saw as the biblically grounded duty to obey the governing authorities” (ibid., 365). Wesley’s approach was “a form of the *just war ethic* (ibid., 353).” He did not, however, engage in serious reflection on “the possibility of a conflict between Christian love and killing of the neighbor in war, or between loyalty to the state with its power and to a messiah who renounces power and goes to the cross (ibid., 354).” Furthermore, he did not promote just war criteria among Methodist people as a resource for discerning when they should obey civil government’s call to war and when they should not. There is also evidence of Wesley’s tolerance of a

pacifist position among Methodists.

18th and 19th Centuries

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the vast majority of Wesley's followers in the U. S. shared his views. "With respect to support of and participation in war, Methodists in the United States have been strongly influenced by the feelings and attitudes they hold as Americans (Schilling 1960, 174)." Methodist attitudes clearly reflected sectional perspectives.

"Methodists took no significant official actions in regard to the **war between the United States and Mexico** in 1846-47. However, the members of the various branches of the Wesleyans reflected the prevailing attitudes of their respective sections—the North critical of war and expansionism and the South favorable because of the prospect of additional slave states in the future" (Will 1984, 10).

Not only did the northern and southern wings of Methodism (which had split over slavery in 1844) vigorously support their respective governments in the **Civil War**, Methodist historian C. C. Goen has argued that Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians actually led the country into war (See Goen 1985).

Methodists also offered enthusiastic support for the **Spanish-American War**. "Indeed, both in support of the Spanish-American War and in advocacy and justification of annexation, Bishops, secretaries, church editors, preachers, and other Methodists in significant numbers talked and wrote like full-blooded imperialists.... They felt little tension between the demands of militaristic patriotism and loyalty to Christ (Will 1984, 16 quoting Miller 1964, 396)."

Even in the 18th and 19th centuries there were exceptions to this general pattern of support for and participation in the nation's wars. "Many preachers were conscientious objectors" to the American Revolution, and Francis Asbury (1745-1816), the founder of Methodism in North America, "did not believe a minister should serve in the armed forces (Will 1984, 8)." There was also some Methodist involvement in the American Peace Society, founded in 1828, whose purpose was the abolition of war.

METHODISM AND THE WARS OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In the decades prior to World War I, efforts to reduce and eliminate war through international arbitration intensified. Methodists participated in such efforts often using the Wesleyan theme of social holiness. The 1908 and 1912 Episcopal Addresses to the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, for example, celebrated the establishment of an international tribunal for resolving international disputes at the Hague.

World War I

Immediately after World War I broke out in Europe in 1914, Methodists tended to support a policy of neutrality. After Germany sank the Lusitania, public opinion shifted toward U. S. involvement and "Methodists reflected the swing." Once the United States entered the war in 1917, "with few exceptions, the churches and the clergy enthusiastically supported" it (ibid., 29-30).

Enthusiasm was fueled by a prevailing sense of optimism that civilization was progressing toward a democratic utopia in which war would be obsolete—a belief particularly significant among those in the Social Gospel movement that supplied much of the energy for Methodist peacemaking in the first decade of the 20th century. "Saving the world for democracy was viewed as a Christian duty. Liberty bonds were sold in churches, and patriotic sermons were delivered. For a season Christian faith and

patriotism were almost indistinguishable. Methodists were no more and no less involved than the members of other churches (Norwood 1974, 294).”

Between the Wars

In the 1920s and early 1930s, “disillusionment and remorse, led American churches to throw themselves into a peace crusade of unprecedented intensity and idealistic fervor. In this crusade the Methodist Church was to play a dominant role (Will 1984, 38-39 quoting Salango 1970, 69-70).” An example of the Methodist commitment to international peace was the establishment of the Commission on World Peace in 1924 by the Methodist Episcopal Church to coordinate its efforts to prevent war. The bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church South told their 1934 General Conference:

“War is another enemy to the human race which should no longer be tolerated by an intelligent, conscientious, honorable people. It is archaic, belongs to the jungle period of human development, and should be branded as an iniquitous and inhuman procedure (Long 1992, 52-53 quoting MECS 1934, 367).” The same General Conference affirmed “conscientious objectors to war (Long 1992, 53 quoting MECS 1934 a, par. 594).”

In 1939, the newly reunited Methodist Church took “its stand undivided in opposition to the spirit of war now raging in the world” and called for “a system of Christian education which shall seek to eradicate the causes of war and train our children for Christian participation in the arts of peace (Long 1992: 55 quoting MEC 1939, 698).” Even as war raged in Europe, the 1940 General Conference declared: “The Methodist Church, although making no attempt to bind the consciences of its individual members, will not officially endorse, support, or participate in war (Long 1992, 57 quoting MC 1940, 777-778).”

One effect of the disillusionment produced by World War I was “a wave of pacifism (Norwood 1974, 398)” among Methodists in the period between the World Wars and into World War II. By 1940, 5,000 Methodists had registered their status as conscientious objectors to war with the Methodist Commission on World Peace. Except for members of the historic peace churches, Methodists were the largest group that provided alternative service in the Civilian Public Service during World War.

World War II

Official statements changed after the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. After declaring the war “inevitable,” The Bishops’ “Wartime Message” said: “We condemn the processes of war even while accepting the awful alternative, not of our own making, forced upon us by the selfishness and perversity of men (Will 1984, 64-65 quoting MB, 1942, 7-8).” After bitter debate, the 1944 General Conference said: “[W]e are sending over a million young men from Methodist homes to participate in the conflict. God himself has a stake in the struggle, and we will uphold them as they fight forces destructive of the moral life of men.” It continued to offer “respect” for conscientious objectors but said “we cannot accept their position as the defining position of the Christian church (Will 1984, 71-72 quoting MC 1944, 178-179).”

Despite this shift to unambiguous support for the war, “[r]elatively little of the emotional patriotism so noticeable in World War I found expression this second time around (Norwood 1974, 411).” Even before the war was over, the bishops inaugurated a “crusade for a new world order” that helped produce “a tremendous surge of concern and support for the United Nations (ibid., 411-2).”

Vietnam War

The Methodist Church was divided over the Vietnam War. Steadily, however, significant opposition to it emerged. In 1968 General Conference of the now United Methodist Church called for “genuine self-determination for all the people of South Vietnam and the withdrawal of all outside military forces (Will 1984, 142).” The Episcopal address to the General Conference of 1970 “condemned war strongly, deplored the Vietnam war in particular, and urged an acceleration in the withdrawal of troops (ibid., 151).” The General Conference of 1972 declared: “We have sinned against our brothers and sisters, against the earth and our Creator. We have paid our taxes without protest; we have closed our eyes to the horror of our deeds; we have driven families from their homes into endless lines tracking across the pockmarked earth.” It referred to the actions of the United States in Indochina as “a crime against humanity (ibid., 157-158 quoting UMC 1972, 16-17).”

Social Principles, 1972

The 1972 General Conference, four years after the merger of the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, adopted a fresh set of Social Principles. The section on “War and Peace” stated, “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ. We therefore reject war as an instrument of foreign policy and insist that the first moral duty of all nations is to resolve by peaceful means every dispute that arises between or among them.” The section on “Military Service” indicated, “Though coercion, violence, and war are presently the ultimate sanctions in international relations, we reject them as incompatible with the gospel and spirit of Christ.” The section went on to support both conscientious objectors to war and those who choose to serve in the armed services. (UMC 1972a, pars. 74 & 75).

Nuclear Disarmament and *In Defense of Creation*

In 1928, the Methodist Episcopal Church called for “the abolition of military armaments by all nations except for an internal police force (Will 1984, 186, quoting 1928, par. 597)” Attention to disarmament increased after the dropping of the atomic bomb by the United States—which the Methodist Commission on World Peace condemned as “morally indefensible (Will 1984, 188)”—and several nations developed massive nuclear arsenals. That concern reached its climax in 1986 with the publication of *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace* by the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

The bishops said they addressed issues related to nuclear weapons “because the creation itself is under attack.” They referred to “a worsening nuclear crisis” that “threatens to assault not only the whole human family, but the planet earth itself (UMB 1986, 11).” Drawing upon the just war criteria requiring a reasonable hope of success, discrimination, and proportionality the bishops said “*No*, a clear and unconditioned *No*, to nuclear war and any use of nuclear weapons (ibid., 13).”

The United Methodist bishops intentionally went beyond their Roman Catholic counterparts, who three years previously had published their own reflections on nuclear war, *The Challenge of Peace*, by declaring: “The moral case for deterrence, even as an interim ethic, has been eliminated by unrelenting arms escalation (ibid., 14).” They did not call, however, for immediate unilateral nuclear disarmament. Rather they affirmed a “lingering possession of such weapons for a limited period of time” under an “*ethic of reciprocity* as nuclear-weapons states act together in agreed stages to eliminate their nuclear weapons (ibid., 15).”

Though the bishops acknowledged the significance of Christian pacifism and drew upon the just war

tradition, they said that “the nuclear crisis poses fundamental questions of faith that neither the pacifist nor just-war traditions have adequately addressed (ibid., 13).” “Our churches,” they said, “must nurture a *new theology for a just peace* (ibid.).” Among the long-term ramifications of the nuclear crisis ignored by both pacifists and supporters of a just war approach, the bishops pointed especially to the way in which the nuclear arms race threatened social justice by its “squandering of wealth ... while a holocaust of hunger, disease, and violent death is destroying the world’s poorest peoples (ibid., 15).” Their own “guiding principles for a new theology for a just peace,” however, drew heavily on the just war tradition as they continued to point to the just war criteria cited in the previous paragraph for justification of “any just resort to coercive force” and to reaffirm their condemnation of “any use of nuclear weapons (ibid., 37).”

Contributions of Paul Ramsey and Stanley Hauerwas

Two United Methodist theologians have made significant contributions to contemporary theological discussions of issues related to war and peace in the United States. *Paul Ramsey* (1924-1988) explored and advocated the just war tradition and criticized Methodist statements related to war, including *In Defense of Creation*, for their failure to more heartily affirm a just war approach. As a member of the committee that prepared the Social Principles in 1972, Ramsey proposed an amendment that said “war is *ultimately* incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ,” meaning to signal, that “until Christ finally consummates the Kingdom, war is not completely outside faithful Christian living (Long 1992, 65).” Ramsey’s amendment was defeated.

Years later, however, the 2000 General Conference amended the Social Principles by adding “usual” to indicate: “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ. We therefore reject war as a *usual* instrument of national foreign policy (UMC 2000a, par 74).” This was in response to a petition from J. Philip Wogaman, professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary. That General Conference also adopted another Wogaman petition that rewrote the section on “Military Service” to replace the rejection of “coercion, violence, and war...as incompatible with the gospel and spirit of Christ” with language that acknowledged the difference between pacifists and those who believe that “when peaceful alternatives have failed, the force of arms be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny and genocide.” (UMC 2000, pp. 61-63)

Stanley Hauerwas (b.1940) vigorously defends Christian pacifism. However, his understanding of the theological basis for such a commitment is much different from that which seems to have driven official Methodist opposition to war in the 20th Century. He has no confidence that modern states can be convinced to abandon war or that war can be eliminated from human history. Moreover, he was critical of *In Defense of Creation* for seeming to base its rejection of nuclear weapons on a fear for human survival. Hauerwas calls the Christian community to a nonviolent way of life on the grounds that through Jesus Christ we see that God is nonviolent. Jesus, he says, “reveals the effective power of God to create a transformed people capable of living peaceably in a violent world (Hauerwas 1983, 83).” Though war cannot be eliminated from human history (as many in the early 20th century believed), it “has already been eliminated” for the Christian community (Hauerwas 1985). Hauerwas’s approach points to a possible modern development of the social implications of Wesley’s doctrine of holiness.

Terrorism

The 2000 General Conference spoke forthrightly on the issue of terrorism. “We condemn all acts of terrorism, with no exception for the target or the source.” At the same time, it said that “we oppose the use of indiscriminate military force to combat terrorism, especially where the use of such force results in casualties among noncombatant citizens who are not themselves perpetrators of terrorist acts (UMC

2000, 787).”

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, both the General Board of Church and Society and the Council of Bishops responded. The Board of Church and Society said: “We claim the teachings of the Prince of Peace who instructs us to love and pray for our enemies and refrain from responding to violence with violence.” It acknowledged its “firm belief that military actions will not end terrorism” while expressing gratitude “for those efforts by President Bush and the US Congress toward a measured response to September 11 (<http://www.umbcs.org/gbpr126.htm>).”

After acknowledging that they were “stunned and shattered” by the events of September 11, the bishops said: “We, your bishops, believe that violence in all of its forms and expressions is contrary to God's purpose for the world. Violence creates fear, desperation, hopelessness and instability. We call upon the church to be a community of peace with justice and to support individuals and agencies all over the world who are working for the common good for all of God's children. We also call upon the church to study and work toward alleviating the root causes of poverty and the other social conditions that are exploited by terrorists (http://www.umchurch.org/pastoral_letter.html).”

Both statements were criticized, particular by those seeking an affirmation of the U. S. military response to the attacks. *Good News Magazine*, a publication of an unofficial, evangelical renewal movement within the UMC, criticized the bishops’ condemnation of “violence” rather than “terrorism” as an earlier draft had said. The magazine called for an explicit affirmation of the U. S. military response on just war grounds (http://www.goodnewsmag.org/news/010102magarticle_edit.html).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It seems reasonable to expect that Methodism will continue to be torn between the two poles of its ambiguous legacy. Church leaders and official pronouncements will continue to express abhorrence for war and seek methods for its elimination without clearly embracing pacifism or the just war tradition. Left to their individual consciences a majority of Methodists will continue to respond to their nations’ calls to war.

Debate on war and peace issues continued in (1) changes to the Social Principles by the 2004 General Conference and (2) opposition to the war in Iraq by the United Methodist Council of Bishops and the General Board of Church and Society.

2004 General Conference

As noted above, the 2000 General Conference added “usual” to the paragraph on “War and Peace in the Social Principles to make it read, “We believe war is incompatible with the teachings of Christ. We therefore reject war as a usual instrument of national foreign policy.” The “Military Service” paragraph was substantially rewritten and included language that stated “the force of arms may be preferable to unchecked aggression, tyranny, and genocide.” In this manner “just war” theory entered the Social Principles for the first time.

In 2004 the sponsor of these changes, J. Philip Wogaman, offered a new petition to add after “a usual instrument of national foreign policy” a new clause stating, “to be employed only as a last resort in the prevention of such evils as genocide, brutal suppression of human rights, and unprovoked international aggression.” General Conference accepted this clause but removed the word “usual”.

As an observer at the 2004 General Conference I felt that removal of the word “usual” appears to represent a movement toward pacifism by returning to previous unqualified rejection of “war as an instrument of national foreign policy.” However, the addition to the end of the sentence prevents such an interpretation as it indicates that war as a last resort in response to the situations named *is not* rejected by the church. I talked informally to a member of the subcommittee who had vocally supported both steps. He did not see this as a contradiction indicating that war fought according to the guidelines suggested by the Wogaman petition would not be war fought as an instrument of national foreign policy. He seemed to be drawing a distinction between war as an instrument of national foreign policy (which the statement rejects) and “humanitarian” wars (which the statement defines in Wogaman’s terms and accepts).

Another just war advocate is Mark Tooley of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, a critic of the statement by the Council of Bishops in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He called for clear approval of the war on terrorism on just war grounds. In 2004 he petitioned the General Conference to replace the above passage from the Social Principles with the following: “We believe that war was not part of God’s original plan for His creation. But the fallen nature of humanity sometimes makes war, when waged by legitimate authority, preferable to even more terrible alternatives.” This petition, which like Wogaman’s draws on historic just war thinking, was rejected by the General Conference. This suggests that even as the church tiptoes toward a clearer affirmation of just war reasoning, it is unwilling to give up its declaration that “war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ.” (To trace the various petitions to the 2004 General Conference relevant to what is now paragraph 165 of the UM Discipline, see <http://archives.umc.org/calms/MenuPetitions.asp?mid=2886> and use the search tool related to paragraph numbers in the Discipline.)

Iraq War

United Methodist voices, including the Council of Bishops and the General Board of Church and Society, were among those opposing the war on Iraq launched in March of 2003. As early as May of 2002, the Bishops said that “under the heading of ‘war against terrorism,’ ethical restraint has been compromised” and sought an audience with President Bush to express their concerns (<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=21&mid=1615>). In October that same year the General Board of Church and Society expressed approval of the U. S. “for seeking Security Council enforcement of its disarmament resolutions toward Iraq.” It added, however, that it rejected the beliefs “that peaceful means have been exhausted” and “that war would achieve a safer or better world. (<http://www.umc-gbcs.org/site/apps/s/content.asp?c=fsJNK0PKJrH&b=860861&ct=1129767>).”

Sharon Brown Christopher, president of the Council of Bishops, was even more explicit in a pastoral letter to the church on behalf of the Council in October of 2002. The letter acknowledged Iraq’s “gross violation” of UN Resolutions and noted that “President Hussein’s demonstrated behavior leaves any thoughtful person horrified by his treatment of his own citizens and the citizens of Iraq’s neighboring countries.” The letter also expressed recognition of “the need for military action as a means of self-defense demanded by highly unusual circumstances.” Bishop Christopher added, however, that “a preemptive war by the United States against a nation like Iraq goes against the very grain of our understanding of the Gospel, our church’s teachings, and our conscience. Preemptive strike does not reflect restraint and does not allow for the adequate pursuit of peaceful means for resolving conflict. To be silent in the face of such a prospect is not an option for followers of Christ” (<http://www.gb-gm-umc.org/met-duane/bishopiraq.html>).

General Conference actions in 2004 related to the war in Iraq were ambiguous. The Conference approved a petition from Jim Winkler, General Secretary of the Board of Church and Society, but

amended it by striking language that specifically condemned the U. S. war in Iraq and the “doctrine of preemption” on which it was based. It did approve a more general statement that removed specific reference to the Iraq or the United States but said that “Unilateral and preemptive actions and policies of nations are deeply disturbing, ineffective and counter-productive, as they undermine the international cooperation that is key to preventing further terrorist attacks” (<http://archives.umc.org/Calms/petition.asp?mid=2886&Petition=462>). However, General Conference did another resolution which criticized the attack on Iraq and stated that the church “strongly protests all unilateral first-strike actions and strategies on the part of any government or military force and calls on the President and Congress of the United States to cease and desist from such actions without ratification by, and collaboration with, the United Nations” (<http://archives.umc.org/Calms/petition.asp?mid=2886&Petition=1262>).

The Council of Bishops has remained forthright in expressing its concerns about the war. In May of 2004, the Bishops noted that “the premises advanced by the United States government for engaging in this war, namely, the presumption of weapons of mass destruction and alleged connection between Al Qaeda and Iraq have not been verified” and lamented “the continued warfare by the United States and coalition forces” (<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=5143>). In November 2005 over half of the active and retired bishops of the UMC signed a statement in which they expressed repentance “our complicity in what we believe to be the unjust and immoral invasion and occupation of Iraq. In the face of the United States Administration's rush toward military action based on misleading information, too many of us were silent.” They went on to “confess our betrayal of the scriptural and prophetic authority to warn the nations that true security lies not in weapons of war, but in enabling the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized to flourish as beloved daughters and sons of God” (http://www.umc.org/site/c.gjTJbMUIuE/b.1174097/k.FD54/A_Call_to_Repentance_and_Peace_with_Justice.htm). By February 2006 two-thirds of the bishops had signed this statement.

Many have, of course, criticized the Bishops and the General Board of Church and Society for their opposition to the war in Iraq. An editorial in the May/June 2003 issues of Good News Magazine insisted that many United Methodists “are tired of hearing their leaders talk about peace, but fail to mention freedom and justice.” The editorial expressed an awareness of evangelicals “who were reluctant to support this war, as well as those who outright oppose it,” but also noted “that according to the latest Gallup polling data, church-going Americans support the war in Iraq by an almost two-to-one margin” (http://www.goodnewsmag.org/magazine/3MayJune/mj03war_peace.htm). The fall 2005 UMAction Briefing published by the Institute for Religion and Democracy chided the signatories to the statement of repentance for their failure to acknowledge the recognition in the Social Principles that “war might be justified in cases of genocide, brutal suppression, and aggression” (<http://www.ird-renew.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=fvKVLfMVIIsG&b=435637&ct=1732379>)

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