

A Seventh-day Adventist Call for Peace

We are living in an increasingly unstable and dangerous world. Recent events have resulted in a heightened sense of vulnerability and personal or corporate fear of violence. Throughout the world, countless millions are haunted by war and apprehension and are oppressed by hate and intimidation.

Total War

Humanity has, since the middle of the last century, been living in an age of total war. Total war implies the theoretical possibility that, except for the providence of God, earth's inhabitants could wipe out their entire civilization. Nuclear weapons and biochemical arms of mass destruction are aimed at centers of population. Whole nations and societies are mobilized or targeted for war, and when such war erupts it is carried on with the greatest violence and destruction. The justification of war has become more complex, even though advances in technology make possible greater precision in destroying targets with a minimum of civilian casualties.

A New Dimension

While both the United Nations and various religious bodies have proclaimed the first decade of the 21st century as a decade for the promotion of peace and security in the place of violence in its various forms, a new and insidious dimension of violence has emerged: organized international terrorism. Terrorism itself is not new, but worldwide terrorist networks are. Another new factor is the appeal to so-called divine mandates as the rationale for terrorist activity under the guise of culture war, or even "religious" war.

The rise of international terrorism makes it clear that it is not only a nation or state that makes war, but human beings in various combinations. As one of the leading founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church pointed out a century ago, "The inhumanity of man toward man is our greatest sin."¹ Indeed, human nature is prone to violence. From a Christian perspective, all this inhumanity is really part of a cosmic war, the great controversy between good and evil.

Terrorism Exploits the Concept of God

Terrorists, in particular those having motivations based on religion, claim that their cause is absolute and that taking lives indiscriminately is fully justified. While they claim to be representing the justice of God, they wholly fail to represent the great love of God.

Furthermore, such international terrorism is totally at odds with the concept of religious liberty. The former is based on political and/or religious extremism and fundamentalistic fanaticism which arrogate the right to impose a certain religious conviction or worldview and to destroy those who oppose their convictions. Imposing one's religious views on other people, by means of inquisition and terror, involves an endeavor to exploit and manipulate God by turning Him into an idol of evil and violence. The result is a disregard for the dignity of human beings created in the image of God.

While it is inevitable that nations and people will try to defend themselves by responding in a military way to violence and terror—which sometimes results in short-term success—lasting answers to deep problems of division in society cannot be achieved by using violent means.

The Pillars of Peace

From both a Christian and practical perspective, any lasting peace involves at least four ingredients: dialogue, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Dialogue - There needs to be dialogue and discussion in place of diatribe and the cry for war. Lasting peace does not result from violent means, but is achieved by negotiation, dialogue, and, inevitably, political compromise. In the long run, reasoned discourse has superior authority over military force. In particular, Christians should always be ready to "reason together," as the Bible says.

Justice - Unfortunately, the world is rampant with injustice and a fallout of injustice is strife. Justice and peace join hands, as do injustice and war. Poverty and exploitation breed discontent and hopelessness, which lead to desperation and violence.

On the other hand, "God's word sanctions no policy that will enrich one class by the oppression and suffering of another."²

Justice requires respect for human rights, in particular religious liberty which deals with the profoundest human aspirations and undergirds all human rights. Justice requires nondiscrimination, respect for human dignity and equality, and a more equitable distribution of the necessities of life. Economic and social policies will either produce peace or discontent. Seventh-day Adventist concern for social justice is expressed through the support and promotion of religious liberty, and through organizations and departments of the Church which work to relieve poverty and conditions of marginalization. Such efforts on the part of the Church can, over time, reduce resentment and terrorism.

Forgiveness - Forgiveness is usually thought of as necessary to heal broken interpersonal relationships. It is highlighted in the prayer Jesus asked His followers to pray (Matt. 6:12). However, we must not overlook the corporate, societal, and even international dimensions. If there is to be peace, it is vital to drop the burdens of the past, to move beyond well-worn battle grounds, and to work toward reconciliation. At a minimum, this requires overlooking past injustices and violence; and, at its best, it involves forgiveness which absorbs the pain without retaliating.

Because of sinful human nature and the resulting violence, some form of forgiveness is necessary in order to break the vicious cycle of resentment, hate, and revenge on all levels. Forgiveness goes against the grain of human nature. It is natural for human beings to deal in terms of revenge and the return of evil for evil.

There is, therefore, first of all the need to foster a culture of forgiveness in the Church. As Christians and church leaders, it is our duty to help individuals and nations to liberate themselves from the shackles of past violence and refuse to reenact year after year, and even generation after generation, the hatred and violence generated by past experiences.

Reconciliation - Forgiveness provides a foundation for reconciliation and the accompanying restoration of relationships that have become estranged and hostile. Reconciliation is the only way to success on the road to cooperation, harmony, and peace.

We call upon Christian churches and leaders to exercise a ministry of reconciliation and act as ambassadors of goodwill, openness, and forgiveness. (See 2 Cor. 5:17-19.) This will always be a difficult, sensitive task. While trying to avoid the many political pitfalls along the way, we must nevertheless proclaim liberty in the land—liberty from persecution, discrimination, abject poverty, and other forms of injustice. It is a Christian responsibility to endeavor to provide protection for those who are in danger of being violated, exploited, and terrorized.

Support of Quality of Life

Silent efforts of religious bodies and individuals behind the scenes are invaluable. But this is not enough: "We are not just creatures of a spiritual environment. We are actively interested in everything that shapes the way we live and we are concerned about the well-being of our planet." The Christian ministry of reconciliation will and must "contribute to the restoration of human dignity, equality, and unity through the grace of God in which human beings see each other as members of the family of God."³

Churches should not only be known for spiritual contributions-though these are foundational-but also for their support of quality of life, and in this connection peacemaking is essential. We need to repent from expressions or deeds of violence that Christians and churches, throughout history and even more recently, have either been involved in as actors, have tolerated, or have tried to justify. We appeal to Christians and people of good will all around the world to take an active role in making and sustaining peace, thus being part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Peacemakers

The Seventh-day Adventist Church wishes to stand for the uncoercive harmony of God's coming kingdom. This requires bridge-building to promote reconciliation between the various sides in a conflict. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, "You will be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of the streets in which to dwell" (Isa. 58:12). Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, wants His followers to be peacemakers in society and hence calls them blessed (Matt. 5:9).

Culture of Peace Through Education

The Seventh-day Adventist Church operates what may be the second largest worldwide parochial school system. Each of its more than 6,000 schools, colleges, and universities is being asked to set aside one week each school year to emphasize and highlight, through various programs, respect, cultural awareness, nonviolence, peacemaking, conflict resolution, and reconciliation as a way of making a specifically "Adventist" contribution to a culture of

social harmony and peace. With this in mind, the Church's Education Department is preparing curricula and other materials to help in implementing this peace program.

The education of the church member in the pew, for nonviolence, peace, and reconciliation, needs to be an ongoing process. Pastors are being asked to use their pulpits to proclaim the gospel of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation which dissolves barriers created by race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and religion, and promotes peaceful human relations between individuals, groups, and nations.

The Christian Hope

While peacemaking may seem to be a forbidding task, there is the promise and possibility of transformation through renewal. All violence and terrorism are really one aspect of the ongoing controversy, in theological terms, between Christ and Satan. The Christian has hope because of the assurance that evil-the mystery of iniquity-will run its course and be conquered by the Prince of Peace and the world will be made new. This is our hope.

The Old Testament, despite the record of wars and violence, looks forward to the new creation and promises, like the New Testament, the end of the vicious cycle of war and terror, when arms will disappear and become agricultural implements, and peace and knowledge of God and His love will cover

the whole world like the waters cover the oceans. (See Isa. 2:4, 11:9.)

In the meantime, we need, in all relationships, to follow the golden rule, which asks us to do unto others as we would wish them to do unto us (see Matt. 7:12), and not only love God, but love as God loves. (See 1 John 3:14, 15; 4:11, 20, 21.)

1Ellen G. White, Ministry of Healing, p. 163

2Ibid, p. 187

3Quote from Pastor Jan Paulsen, President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

This statement was voted during the Spring Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee on April 18, 2002 in Silver Spring, Maryland.