

We are people of God's peace:

A call for action

October 15, 2001

Statement and actions in the wake of September 11, 2001

From the Mennonite Church Peace and Justice Committee to our congregations

Unbelievable horror, unspeakable sorrow

"When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven..." Nehemiah 1:4

We talk about it now as "September 11"—a day that has shaken Mennonites in the United States and around the world as close as Canada and as far away as Indonesia. When we saw the footage of the World Trade Center towers collapsing, smoke billowing from the Pentagon, and the crumpled steel strewn in a Pennsylvania field we were all at a loss. That evening, though, thousands of us joined together in worship, for it is in our worship that we can cry out in grief, seek God's comfort, and pray for friends, neighbors, strangers, even enemies. We have shown compassion by lining up to donate blood, making donations to relief funds like Mennonite Disaster Service as it shipped crates of supplies to New York, and continuing to shed tears as we grieve and pray.

Violence is never an option

"Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." Matthew 26:52b

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that peace is the will of God. However, humanity has chosen the way of violence and revenge.¹ We do not ever condone acts of terrorism or the taking of human life. Violence is an act of evil which alienates us from God and from each other.²

Revenge is not our Christian response

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." Romans 12:19-20a

"Led by the Spirit, and beginning in the church, we witness to all people that violence is not the will of God. We witness against all forms of violence."³ In responding to violence, we believe in doing the unexpected to stop the cycle of revenge. God calls us to give bread to our enemies, because by joining together at table, we learn each others' hopes and fears. Communication and love stop the spiral of fear and vengeance and increase our true security.

Roots of violence

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to

break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly..." Isaiah 58:6-8a

Under each act of violence lies a tangle of roots, contextual reasons which led to the act of despair. Until we find and acknowledge this context for the September 11 events we will be offering only surface reactions and solutions. There is never an excuse for violence, but we need to understand how other countries perceive our foreign policy and international commerce. Deepening and expanding our historical perspective includes acknowledging Christian/Muslim animosity throughout the ages.

Understanding ourselves

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." Matthew 5:9

We are people of faith. During times of crisis, as we remember who we are, we turn to the Bible, to our history, and to our community of faith. At this time, we recall:

- Jesus' words in Matthew 5:38-42: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."
- Conrad Grebel's letter to Thomas Müntzer: "Moreover, the gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor [should] they [protect] themselves. ... True believing Christians are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter ... They use neither worldly sword nor war, since killing has ceased with them entirely."⁴
- Stonewall Jackson's letter about Shenandoah Valley boys: "There lives a people in the Valley of Virginia, that are not hard to bring to the army. While there they are obedient to their officers. Nor is it difficult to have them take aim, but it is impossible to get them to take correct aim. I, therefore, think it better to leave them at their homes..."⁵

4. Leland Harder, editor, *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 290.

5. Guy Franklin Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1944), 107-108, citing L. J. Heatwole in Hartzler and Kauffman, *Mennonite Church History*, 208. However, documentation is weak. You may find stories from the Civil War era with more reliable backing in Samuel Horst, *Mennonites in the Confederacy: A Study in Civil War Pacifism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967) and Peter S. Hartman, *Reminiscences of the Civil War* (Lancaster, Pa.: Eastern Mennonite Associated Libraries and Archives, 1964).

1. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), Article 22.

2. *A Mennonite Statement on Violence: "And No One Shall Make Them Afraid"* (1997).

3. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), Article 22.

- The Hutterites, our cousins in the Anabaptist family, like Joseph and Michael Hofer who died for their faith during World War I. These men were drafted, and as alternative service was not available, went to military camp. They refused to wear uniforms or do military work and as a result were beaten, imprisoned, and court-martialed, eventually dying from their mistreatment.⁶

Worshiping and praying with our congregations, we remember that we are first and foremost believers whose citizenship is under the Reign of God. “The only Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people from every tribe and nation, called to witness to God’s glory.”⁷ It is only the church which confesses Christ. We come to understand God in the midst of our believing community.

Our congregations nurture people of all ages as they decide to be Christian peacemakers in answer to Jesus. At this time, it is especially important that congregations affirm and support our members who make visible their peacemaking commitment. Consistent education through the years reaps benefits now in congregations who know where their true security lies.

We choose nonviolence not out of cowardice, but out of conviction. Truly practiced, it is not an easier way than the way of taking up arms for battle.

Speaking to our friends and neighbors

“You know the message [God] sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.” Acts 10:36

During times of tension and conflict, many of our neighbors are looking for alternatives to a violent response. People are turning to Mennonite congregations because they want to worship with people preaching God’s peace. Let us learn to listen with the ears of God, and speak with gentleness and integrity, so that those looking for a voice of peace hear an invitation from us.

Youth who are in the military or Delayed Enlistment Program may be questioning their involvement in the military. This is an important time to stay in touch and listen, whether these are our congregational or community youth. We can offer spiritual guidance and logistical support.

Speaking to our government

“Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority.’” Acts 5:29

“As Christians, we are to respect those in authority and to pray for all people, including those in government, that they also may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”⁸ Mennonites believe in clear separation of allegiance to church and state, yet are willing to serve their country in peaceful ways. We pray for and correspond with our national leaders, offering them strength and courage as they make difficult decisions. Another way of service is to recount to officials that nonviolence has effectively changed history, from the Hebrew

midwives who refused to carry out Pharaoh’s order to kill Moses, to the liberation of India from British rule, to the Civil Rights Movement. This is the way of offering hope in alternatives to armed military response.

Here is a list of actions you can take to help build peace and seek God’s justice.

- Allow ourselves and our neighbors time to mourn. The stages of grief take years.
- Open ourselves to prayer and allow God to search our thoughts and actions and then simply listen.
- Join others to study the Bible, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, and *A Mennonite Statement and Study on Violence*.
- Learn more about the intertwined history of Christians and Muslims and of the U.S. and the Arab world.
- Open our meetinghouses for community prayer and learning.
- Listen to our neighbors and offer them the only true security: Jesus Christ.
- Continue making donations to meet the needs of the world, especially through Mennonite Central Committee and Mennonite Disaster Service.
- Act locally and visibly for peace and justice.
- Call on our government to address the root causes of the problem and not simply react to what we see on the surface. We know that nonviolence has solved many of the world’s worst problems and is a practical and workable solution for governments.
- Encourage the governments of the world to use the existing mechanisms of the United Nations security council and world court system to deal with the present crisis.
- Examine our lifestyles for ways we participate in violence and militarism.
- Be willing to take bold steps for peace and justice. Walk together when taking this path.
- Support and join Christian Peacemaker Teams as they “get in the way” of violence.
- Educate for peace and justice as a life response to Jesus, not solely a response to war. Teach the skills of nonviolence to all ages.
- Sing for courage, love, and peace. Live in the hope given to us by Jesus Christ.

Keep the Faith • Share the Peace

Members of the Mennonite Church Peace and Justice Committee: Richard Blackburn, Lombard, Ill., chairperson; members Malinda Berry, New York, N.Y.; Richard Davis, Dallas, Texas; Esther Epp-Tiessen, Winnipeg, Man.; William Scott, Saginaw, Mich.; Dorothy Jean Weaver, Harrisonburg, Va.; Susan Mark Landis, Orrville, Ohio, minister of peace and justice; Goldie Yoder, Kidron, Ohio, PJC secretary; J. Ron Byler, Goshen, Ind., Mennonite Church Executive Board associate executive director

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6. Gerlof D. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War: 1914-1918*, vol. 34, *Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 1994), 152-155.

7. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), Article 23.

8. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995), Article 23.