

Peacemaking and the Uniting Church

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Peacemaking has been a concern of the Uniting Church since its inception in 1977. As early as 1982 the Assembly made a major statement on peacemaking and has continued to emphasise the importance of this aspect of discipleship.

The Basis of Union

The *Basis of Union* of the Uniting Church speaks of God's intention to bring about the reconciliation and renewal of the whole creation. Jesus was a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love. The Church as the fellowship of the Holy Spirit confesses Jesus as Lord over its own life and also over all things, the beginning of a new creation, a new humanity. The Church's call is to serve God's mission, to be a fellowship of reconciliation. The Church is a pilgrim people always on the way towards a promised goal (par 3). A reconciled and renewed creation is a creation at peace. Peace in the full sense of 'shalom' is one of the main qualities of the fulfilled reign of God. The Church is called to serve God's mission towards this end.

Statements to the Nation

The Uniting Church from its inception has stated its intention to seek the well-being of the whole human race which includes seeking truth, justice and peace for all people.

The 1977 *Statement to the Nation* said:

We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being, the need for integrity in public life, the proclamation of truth and justice, the rights for each citizen to participate in decision making in the community, religious liberty and personal dignity, and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race.

The 1988 *Statement to the Nation* said in a similar way:

In cooperation with all fellow Australians of goodwill, we are committed to work for justice and peace, calling for honesty and integrity, encouraging tolerance and compassion, challenging acquisitiveness and greed, opposing discrimination and prejudice, condemning violence and oppression and creating a loving and caring community.

Peacemaking, Militarism and Disarmament

In 1982 the Assembly made peacemaking explicit in a statement on *Militarism and Disarmament*. It was resolved that the Assembly “acknowledge that God came in the crucified and risen Christ to make peace; that He calls all Christians to be peacemakers, to save life, to heal and to love their neighbours. The call of Christ to make peace is the norm, the onus of proof rests on any who resort to military force as a means of solving international disputes.” It noted that “at this point in history, most governments support military priorities which cause valuable and limited resources to be diverted unproductively towards the purchase of armaments and the maintenance of large military forces”. It goes on to “affirm that the Uniting Church is committed to be a peacemaking body, seeking to follow the Lord of the Church by encouraging political authorities to resolve political tensions by peaceful means.” It called on members of the Uniting Church “to support and engage in peacemaking programmes and resist reliance on military solutions to political problems.”

The statement offered some practical suggestions, such as that encouragement and publicity be given to studies of non-violent methods of national defence. It strongly urged the Australian Government to develop an independent foreign policy for Australia not aligned to either of the (then) super powers and negotiate the gradual removal of all foreign military bases from Australian territories.

Nuclear Deterrence, Disarmament and Peace

In the context of the then accepted ‘realist’ position of deterrence, namely that the best way to halt the spread of the enemy was through a balance of nuclear and conventional military power, the Assembly in 1988 offered a statement on *Nuclear Deterrence, Disarmament and Peace*. It was a theological response to the call of Jesus Christ to peace in an age dominated by the arms race and its economic and ecological consequences.

The statement claimed that “it is always part of the church’s task to move beyond the ‘realist’ appreciation of the world, and to help people envisage new futures and other realities. How one views the world, expresses hope and seeks transformation, are central to what occurs in the world.” It continues, “All Christian affirmation about peace is grounded in the declaration that Jesus Christ is our peace. Through him the power of evil, sin and death is decisively broken, and the hostile and alienated world is reconciled to God and is itself renewed. We speak in hope, trusting God’s promise of the final transformation of all things.”

The statement rejects the view which restricts peace to the heart and inner life of the Christian. While recognising the personal dimension of peace, it also acknowledges the need

to consider politics and the world of nations. It also rejects the view that restricts peace to the political arena, as if it had nothing to do with Christian faith, as if it was only concerned for the absence of conflict achieved through political and military means. This is often achieved “at high cost to justice and human rights and gives no recognition in the realm of national life to the gospel proclamation of reconciliation through forgiveness.”

Christ overcame this divided understanding, whether personal or political. Through Jesus Christ’s reconciling ministry, crucifixion and resurrection, God has overcome the enmity of the sinful world to God. While there is still hostility and violence, “faith sees in Christ the reality and the promise of a healed, reconciled and peaceful world.” In Christ life is whole, and the personal is no longer separated from the political, for the peace of Jesus Christ is a transforming power in both.

The peace gained by Jesus through his crucifixion and resurrection is grounded in God’s righteousness. This righteousness (justice) is a profound contrast to sinful expectations where human beings expect judgment and punishment upon those caught in sin. God declares forgiveness and the gift of new life through Jesus Christ. “Sinful humankind is thereby released from the power of evil, sin and death, and in faith is set free to live a new and reconciled life.”

The statement acknowledges that God’s freely given gift of peace may be profoundly disturbing and bring trouble for those who live by it. “While the sinful world wreaks judgment upon enemies, Christ’s forgiveness – the source of peace – seeks the love of enemies, forgiveness for the sinner, freedom for the captive, liberation for the oppressed.”

This peace is grounded in the justice or righteousness of God. In response we are called to be a community which lives justly as God’s people. “The God of the covenant unites and reconciles and requires that we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God.”

God’s reconciliation in Jesus Christ relates not only to humans but to all life. The statement says, “The righteous God who redeems sinners is at the same time the God who has created the universe, who sustains it by the power of the Holy Spirit, and who seeks its radical renewal, thus transforming all into healed and peace-filled life.”

By contrast war with its mass destruction is a symptom of death and opposition to God and a sign of enslavement to sin. “The call to peace which comes from Jesus Christ is a radical call to trust the gracious God for life and security and to oppose the reign of death.”

The statement goes on to argue especially against nuclear weapons and calls for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Its final section deals with common security. It affirms that it is not appropriate to view the world in terms of a clear dichotomy of good and evil. Love of neighbour to which Christ calls us is denied by a desire to secure our future at the cost of others. We are to be peacemakers and the peace sought is more than the absence of war or the end of strife. It means restored relationships of love, compassion and justice. Jesus Christ’s gift of righteousness reconciles us to God and to each other, especially enemies. It concludes, “There is the need for an alternative understanding of the world, an understanding which is possible because the church believes that Christ is saviour, giver of peace, security and value, and the one who calls us to bear our cross.”

Uniting for Peace

In 2003 the Assembly endorsed the statement *Uniting for Peace*. It reaffirmed previous resolutions, namely that God came in the crucified and risen Christ to make peace; and that God calls all Christians to be peacemakers, to save life, to heal and to love their neighbours; and that the Uniting Church is committed to be a peacemaking body.

In its commitment to the World Council of Churches’ initiative of a Decade to Overcome Violence, the Uniting Church promised to:

- work together for peace, justice and reconciliation at the local, national and global level and in collaboration with local communities, secular movements, non-government agencies and people of other faiths;
- embrace creative approaches to peacebuilding which are consonant with the spirit of the Gospel;
- empower people who are systematically oppressed by violence, and to act in solidarity with those struggling for justice, peace and the integrity of creation;
- repent of our complicity in violence and attempt to overcome the spirit, logic and practice of violence.

The Assembly also called on members, councils, agencies, congregations and groups of the Uniting Church to examine their own lives in order to overcome violence and to transform systems and structures of injustice within them.

Uniting for Peace outlines a vision of peace through justice and genuine security. It held:

- true justice can only be achieved through means that do not consist of violence, nor perpetuate the cycle of violence;
- true security can only be achieved through non-violent means that seek to build trust and relationships of understanding and acceptance between nations and people.

It supported and urged the Australian Government in relation to the following mechanism for dismantling the global culture of violence and building a culture of peace through justice and genuine security:

- international treaties and programs on human rights, environment, and social and human development, also ensuring that Australia fulfils its obligations in these areas;
- co-operation with governments, the United Nations, and community sector and religious organisations to develop peaceful solutions to conflict and to seek just and peaceful means for overcoming and preventing violence in all aspects of our life together, from the personal to the global.

The Uniting Church restated its strong condemnation of the increasing global militarism, willingness to use military force, and the renewed arms race. It declared that:

- ownership, use, or threatened use of nuclear, chemical and/or biological weapons is evil;
- reliance on weapons for peace and security can never achieve a just and lasting peace. Security achieved through armament is sustained by fear of the enemy and can never see the world reconciled;
- genuine global security will only be achieved by working for an end to the trade in illegal weapons and the arms trade, preventing the proliferation of nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, and requiring progressive disarmament of all nations.

The Uniting Church is not being unrealistic in these statements. It is seeking to be true to Jesus' alternative vision of the reign of God, God's rule of love, justice and peace. Followers of Jesus are to be peacemakers in a sinful, unjust and violent world. The world will only change towards God's desire for 'shalom' as people commit themselves to the values of the reign of God, and the non-violent and compassionate way of Jesus Christ.

An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace

The Uniting Church is in line with the World Council of Churches recent statement, “An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace (2011).” It invites Christians to commit themselves to the Way of Just Peace. It embodies a fundamental shift in approach from the emphases of the Just War theory to an emphasis on Just Peace, namely peace through justice.

The church is called to be a place of peacemaking. Especially in the Lord’s Supper, our liturgical traditions illustrate how God’s peace calls us to share peace with each other and with the world. When the church is grounded in God’s peace it can then be an agent of reconciliation and peace with justice in homes, churches and societies as well as in political, social and economic structures. The Way of Just Peace requires both movement towards the goal and commitment to the journey. Pursuing peace involves working to eliminate violence including violence against people because of race, caste, gender, sexual orientation, culture or religion. Non-violent resistance is central to the Way of Just Peace.

Just Peace is understood as “a collective and dynamic yet grounded process of freeing human beings from fear and want, of overcoming enmity, discrimination and oppression, and of establishing conditions for just relationships that privilege the experience of the most vulnerable and respect the integrity of creation.”

The document speaks of living the journey acknowledging the difficulties, seeking the process of transformation from conflict to peace, working for peace in the community, for peace with the earth, for peace in the marketplace, and peace among the peoples.

The Uniting Church is committed to being a peacemaking church seeking peace through justice. It calls on its people to practice the Way of Just Peace in all areas of life, from the personal to the political, from how churches conduct their own life to the global arena. We do so as followers of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace.