

The Circle of Mercy Is a Peace Church
*A statement adopted unanimously by the Circle of Mercy
during a called congregational meeting on Sunday, June 6, 2010
with revisions approved by the congregation on Sunday, May 6, 2012*

The Circle of Mercy has three guiding principles for our individual and community life:

Seeking Justice · Pursuing Peace · Following Jesus

Introduction

A church that is not able to take a firm stand against war is not a church which deserves to be believed.
—theologian Harvey Cox

The convictions expressed in this document were three years in the making. While we never expect to perfectly align our words with the Word, we believe the time has come to speak with a common mind—as boldly as humility will allow—to the times in which we live.

Three things prompted the discussions behind this statement. First, one of our families, whose son was approaching age 18—when all young men in the U.S. are required to register with the Selective Service System—spoke to us of whether to fulfill this legal obligation. Given his health, Jody would never be conscripted even if the military reinstated the draft. But this moment forced us to ask whether the spiritual formation we provide our young ones should require careful thinking about Christian faith and military service.

That discussion led to a second question: Should we not immerse our youth in the testimony of the first three centuries of the Christian community's history, when discipleship involved the explicit rejection of military service? Furthermore, part of our confessional legacy traces back to the so-called "radical" wing of the 16th century Reformation when a variety of reforming communities, collectively referred to as the Anabaptists, returned to the church's earlier faith commitment of refusing to wield the sword in defense of the state.

Finally, given the official September 2002 National Defense Strategy of the U.S., which for the first time in our country's history offers legal justification for preemptive war, combined with our nation's continuing "war on terror," we believe the stage has been set for putting our nation on a permanent war footing.

As the document makes clear, we believe our calling as peacemakers involves much more than the question of violent conflict. War is but the most exaggerated outcome of the enmity and brokenness that afflict the human community and creation itself. Therefore, peacemaking—synonymous for us with *discipleship*—is far more than being against war.

Above all, we believe that the disarming of the heart—the spiritual transformation begun and continuing in our own lives—is revealed, confirmed and deepened in the Spirit's call for the disarming of the nations, beginning in our personal relations with each other.

We Believe

Believing that the life and teachings of Jesus call us to be active peacemakers and to reject violence, we proclaim Circle of Mercy a Peace Church.

With this statement, members of Circle of Mercy Congregation declare our conversion to the reconciling work of Christ, which is our highest calling.

As a Peace Church, we believe:

Peace is God's deep desire for all creation. From the first chapter of Scripture, where God pronounced creation "good" (Gen. 1:31), to the very last, in John's vision of a tree "for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:2), God pursues peace. In the Bible, trust in God is frequently contrasted with trust in the instruments of war and institutional power (Is. 31:1; Ps. 20:7, 33:16-17; Hos. 1:7).

Peacemaking centers on the work of Christ to reconcile us to God. Without Christ's foundational work of peace, we have no hope for peace (Eph. 2:14ff). The peacemaking mission of God is God's pleasure (Col. 1:20).

Peace was the mission of Jesus. The early church recognized Jesus as the 'Prince of Peace' envisioned by Isaiah (9:6). Angels announcing His birth declared "Glory to God" and "peace on earth" (Luke 2:14). Weeping over Jerusalem, he prayed: "would that you knew the things that make for peace" (Luke 19:41-42).

The fruit of the Spirit is peace (Gal. 5:22). "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord" (Zech. 4:6). Prior to his death, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you," in reference to the coming presence of the Holy Spirit (John 14:25-27).

Peace was the witness of the first Christian church. The new community created in Christ bore witness by its reconciled fellowship: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37). Paul urged the churches to "put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared." (Eph. 6:15).

Peace is more than the absence of war. Peace—*shalom*—also occurs when captives are released (Luke 4:18); when outcasts are gathered (Zeph. 3:19); when the hungry have plenty to eat (Joel 2:19-26; Luke 1:53; 1 Sam. 2:1-8). The Hebrew word *shalom* and its equivalent cognate in Arabic, *salaam*, mean: Completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, the absence of agitation or discord. Our commitment to peace includes the important work of inner peace and extends to peace between races, between religions, within our homes, communities, congregation, and workplaces, and peace with creation.

Justice is the foundation of peace. "The effect of righteousness [justice] will be peace," predicted Isaiah (32:17). "Righteousness and peace will kiss each other," wrote the psalmist (85:10). "Sowing justice," says Hosea, will result in peace (10:12-14).

Peacemaking is an active rather than a passive calling. 1 Peter, echoing the psalmist, urges us to "seek peace, and pursue it" (1 Pet 3:11 Ps. 34:14). Jesus urged worshipers to take the initiative to settle disputes (Mt. 5: 23-24). Peace includes loving and feeding enemies (Luke 6:27; Rom. 12:20).

Peacemakers sometimes cause trouble. Jesus turned over the tables of oppressive money-changers (John 2:13-16). When he says "I come not to bring peace but division (Luke 12:51), he challenges us to overcome injustice, the great impediment to true peace (see Jer. 6:13-15). It was Jesus' peacemaking mission which landed him on the cross (Col. 1:20).

Peacemaking is rooted in grace. In Jesus' model prayer, our "debts" are forgiven in the measure to which we forgive others (Mt. 6:12). "Whoever is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). It is grace which frees us from our fear (1 Jn. 4:18) and empowers us to risk our lives for the sake of justice and peace.

Peace in Christ and peace in creation are linked. Not only are divisions in the human community overcome "in Christ" (Galatians 3:28), but also in the whole created order. The knowledge of God and the healing of creation are parallel realities (Is. 11:3-9). The land itself mourns (Is. 33:9). "But ask the beasts...and the birds...or the plants, and they will teach you" of the ways of the Lord (Job 12:7-10).

Peacemaking is the church's calling. Biblical truth calls the church to dual tasks—"preaching the Gospel" and "working for peace and justice." Jesus prayed: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). We cannot both love God and ignore our neighbors in need (1 John 4:20). Loving enemies—whether they be in our family; in our congregation, in our school, neighborhood or workplace; or across nation-state boundaries—is the way to become children of God (Mt. 5:44-45).

God's promised future is peace. Though now living as "aliens" in a strange land, peacemakers have caught a glimpse of how the future will finally unfold. Both Isaiah and John's Revelation speak of the coming "new heaven and new earth" (Is. 65:17-22; Rev. 21:1). The day is coming, say both Isaiah (2:4) and Micah (4:3-4), when nations "shall beat their swords into ploughshares...and neither shall they learn war any more" (4:3-4). On that day, creation itself—which "has been groaning in travail"—"will be set free from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:19-24).

As a Peace Church trusting ourselves to Divine Grace, we make these commitments:

- We commit ourselves to the compelling work of love and forgiveness, to seeking justice, and to learning to live without resort to violence—economic, institutional, physical, and psychological—in every arena of our lives, from the most intimate of family relations to the widest application of public policy. Stated theologically, this commitment entails the rejection of vengeance and the practice of mercy and hospitality. Such is the challenge to all who pledge to be conformed to Christ. All facets of our congregational life—worship, education, fellowship and mission engagements—should be tailored to hearing and living this mandate.
- We say a clear *yes* to the good news of Jesus that can bring peace among nations, cultures, individuals, corporations, and ideologies. We say a clear *no* to the use of violent means for resolving any type of conflict.
- We place our commitment to nonviolence and Christian love at the heart of our spiritual journey. We strive to follow the nonviolent way of the cross by living lives characterized by mercy and the pursuit of justice.
- As a faith community and as individuals we commit ourselves to continuing to reflect on the challenges we face as we seek to live the teachings of Jesus in our daily lives. As one part of this commitment we will encourage our young people to reflect on their commitment as followers of Jesus in light of our nation’s requirement that all young men register with the Selective Service [for possible military conscription] at age 18. We do not seek to predetermine the outcome of such reflection; we simply encourage each of our young people, and their parents, to give serious consideration to this question. The Circle of Mercy will help our young people find resources, support, and guidance to assist them in this work.
- We commit ourselves to the vital inner work of peace. Through self-examination, both individually and with the support of this faith community, we will recognize the ways in which we are complicit in the culture of violence that surrounds us. We will strive to overcome the violence within us, cultivating in its place peaceful inner spirits.
- We take risks in the cause of peace. As individuals and as a community we go beyond what is safe or comfortable to respond to Jesus’ call to end violence, to overcome injustice, and to make peace. We will support and assist those who’s conscientious decisions to follow the spirit of this declaration create controversy, result in criminal charges, or incur penalties imposed by the government.
- We commit ourselves to pursuing and providing the kinds of study and training we need to embody our ideals about peacemaking. Our goal is that, when confronted with violence, our chosen response will be peaceful.
- We promise never to use this peace church commitment as a new standard of orthodoxy whereby some in the community are judged unworthy and rejected. At its root, the word “obey” indicates the decision to “listen.” The only stipulation involved in our peace church declaration is that members agree to listen consistently and intentionally to this communal affirmation and to God.

This document does not attempt to prescribe the countless ways the Spirit leads us (as individuals and as a congregation) to profess and express the following of Jesus. Some are very ordinary and modest. Some are bold and venturesome. We are one body with many parts, none of which may claim priority over the others (Romans 12:3-8) In the end, the only reliable evidence to the convictions stated in this document is our actual practice of “the things that make for peace.”

We promise to live with this document in the years ahead, continually seeking to uncover its implications; to explore further its claim on our personal and congregational lives; to consider, as seems appropriate, revisions of its language; and to open ourselves to potential new mission initiatives in peacemaking so that we may bind ourselves ever more fully to the commitments articulated in this statement.