

Overture to the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA)

ON SEEKING GOD'S PEACE THROUGH NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Presbytery of New Hope overtures the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) to do the following:

- call upon all members of the Presbyterian Church, USA, in faithfulness to the God of justice, mercy and compassion, to take actions in defense of God's creation and our own security, which is inextricably bound to the security of the rest of the world, to take all actions such as might be effective in requiring full US compliance with the obligation to achieve nuclear disarmament under the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons,
- renounce the false god of nuclear security with its promise of catastrophic consequences;
- renounce any policy that threatens the death of millions of God's children in any land with a single command and a single warhead;
- join in ecumenical discussion at the highest level to develop a collaborative strategy with Christian and other faith communities to effect the total elimination of nuclear weapons from the earth;
- make use of resources within the Presbyterian Church (USA) to educate members about the existential threat of nuclear weapons and effective actions that can be taken to address and eliminate that threat; and
- call upon Presbyterians to take the *Five Risks Presbyterians Must Take for Peace*: commit to the Gospel of Peace, confess our complicity in not being peacemakers, reclaim Christ the peacemaker, find new peace strategies and convert the empire and work for peace. [Christian Iosso, *Five Risks Presbyterians Must Take for Peace: Renewing the Commitment to Peacemaking in the PC(USA)*, 2017.]

We further overture the General Assembly to call upon the government of the United States of America to:

- begin immediately the process of complete, irreversible and verifiable nuclear disarmament in compliance with our obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (1969), the findings of the International Court of Justice (July, 1996), and the requirements of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (2017),
- recognizing that any use of nuclear weapons is a *de facto* declaration of war, a power conferred by the Constitution on Congress alone, constrain the power of any President to initiate a nuclear "first strike" by adopting "No First Use" legislation,
- eliminate funding for programs designed to prolong the nuclear danger, including the Life Extension Program for existing nuclear weapons and the construction of nuclear weapon production facilities in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Los Alamos, New Mexico; and any other locations that may be proposed;
- direct the U.S. Department of Energy to redirect resources to cleaning up nuclear and other contamination that has accumulated over decades and threatens human health and the environment at multiple nuclear weapons installations, former and present, and at sites used to dispose of nuclear waste;

- provide sufficient resources for the protection of human health and the environment and the remediation of former nuclear weapons facilities;
- provide support where possible to non-governmental groups and organizations working for the abolition of nuclear weapons;
- join in the international efforts to achieve nuclear disarmament, collaborating with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) to seek full implementation of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, beginning with a campaign to compel the United States to demonstrate global leadership to sign and ratify the Treaty;

Rationale

The Presbyterian Church (USA) lives as a servant of the living God, and acts to transform the world. We are guided in our efforts, however imperfect, by the teachings and example of our Lord Jesus Christ, who commanded Peter to put away his sword and eschewed violence. The vision of the Kingdom of God captured in the book of Isaiah is of a world where swords are beaten into plowshares, spears into pruninghooks, and God's children "study war no more."

Since the dawn of the nuclear age, the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons has compelled the church to recognize that these weapons are distinctive among all weapons, having the power to render life on the planet unsustainable. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has engaged the question of nuclear weapons on numerous occasions, saying in *Peacemaking: the Believer's Calling* (1980): "At this critical moment in history, peacemaking is the central activity of all believers individually and corporately," and, in *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age* (1988): "Since the policy of nuclear deterrence is in danger of becoming an end in itself, we must exercise our individual and corporate influence to effect a change in national policy as rapidly as possible."

While many in the church and in the world believed the nuclear threat abated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, and the thawing of the Cold War, the reality of the threat has never lessened. The United States alone has more than 1,500 thermonuclear warheads deployed on hair-trigger alert around the globe. Our would-be adversaries have as many or more. Cumulatively, these weapons represent an existential threat to humanity.

Since the 1980's, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has remained largely silent on the issue of nuclear weapons and has never in its history taken an unequivocal position rejecting the idolatry of nuclear weapons and demanding the United States take clear and irreversible steps toward nuclear disarmament.

And yet we know we serve the living Christ who by his example and through his teachings requires compassion of us that extends beyond our loved ones and even unto those who are considered our enemies: ... *You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."* (Matthew 5:43,44) This radical reversal of the usual dynamic of human relationships is at the very heart of the gospel; its claim on us is inescapable; its imperative applies directly to nuclear weapons.

Since 2014, international efforts to address the nuclear threat from a humanitarian perspective have led to a reemergence of the issue of nuclear weapons on the world stage. After issuing a strong statement condemning nuclear weapons in 2016, Pope Francis, leader of the Roman Catholic Church across the globe, renounced that church's long-standing provisional acceptance of nuclear deterrence and categorically condemned, on November 10, 2017, not only the threat of use of nuclear weapons, but also "their very possession." Nuclear weapons, Francis said, "cannot constitute the basis for peaceful coexistence between members of the human family, which must rather be inspired by an ethics of solidarity."

It is in this context that the persistent exchange of messages and provocative military displays by the United States and North Korea have escalated the danger of a nuclear exchange to an alarming degree.

We would be clear, however, that our responsibility to call for, work for, and achieve nuclear disarmament is not simply a response to fears arising from the current political situation, but rather a positive obligation of followers of Christ.

God's Creation Humankind, Other Creatures, and the Earth

The existence and threatened use of nuclear weapons presents an existential threat to humankind. It has been said that nuclear weapons represent humankind's challenge to God, worded quite clearly: "We have the power to destroy everything you have created." (Arundhati Roy, *The End of Imagination*, 1998).

In the past twenty-five years, accidents, miscommunications, human error and computer glitches have, on numerous occasions, activated US and Russian nuclear launch protocols, bringing the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation because of a mistake. Should a nuclear exchange take place, the use of nuclear weapons would constitute a catastrophe for the environment that is "not an abstraction, but represents the living space, the quality of life and the very health of human beings, including generations unborn," (International Court of Justice, *Opinion*, July 8, 1996),

In 2018, nuclear weapons, now possessed by at least nine states, are the embodiment of a humanitarian catastrophe on an unimaginable scale. If used, they would release not only immense quantities of heat and energy, but also powerful and prolonged radiation causing damage vastly more powerful than the damage caused by other weapons. The destructive power of nuclear weapons cannot be contained in either space or time. They have the potential to destroy all civilization and the entire ecosystem of the planet. (International Court of Justice, *Opinion*, July 8, 1996).

It is this characteristic of nuclear weapons—that their effect cannot be contained in time or space, cannot distinguish between combatants and noncombatants, cannot be confined to the field of battle, cannot be constrained to the time of declared hostilities—that places them outside any reading of the Just War theory.

Additionally, the radiation released by even a small series of nuclear explosions would affect health, agriculture, natural resources and demography over a very wide area in a phenomenon known as nuclear winter. The International Court of Justice, in its 1996 opinion, noted that the use of nuclear weapons would be a serious danger to future generations. Ionizing radiation will inevitably damage the future environment, food and marine ecosystems, and cause genetic defects and illness in future generations.

Thus we see that nuclear weapons pose a threat not only to human life, but to all life on the planet, and even to the natural processes that make life possible—the health of soil and water which, if contaminated by long-lasting radionuclides, will be unavailable to sustain life for millennia.

The fact that the catastrophic consequences of nuclear weapons are so great is almost impossible to contemplate (The radiological half-life of highly enriched uranium-235, a central component in all of today's thermonuclear weapons, is 703.8 million years; it will be biologically lethal for seven billion years.) does not relieve us of our obligation to face the reality of what human beings have done in inventing, manufacturing, testing, using, and deploying for use, thousands upon thousands of these weapons.

Statistics

Today, the United States of America has more than 4,500 thermonuclear warheads in its active nuclear stockpile. More than 1,500 thermonuclear warheads are deployed on “hair-trigger” alert on 700 delivery vehicles positioned around the globe— in underground silos, on airbases, and submerged in a fleet of nuclear armed submarines.

The United States Congress has expressed its intention to commit the United States to an ambitious plan to modernize its entire nuclear weapons enterprise at a cost of \$1.2 trillion over the next thirty years. When costs of environmental cleanup are included, the number rises to \$1.7 trillion.

These numbers represent not only a commitment to an enduring reliance on nuclear weapons as the foundation of our military posture around the world, they also represent, as President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.”

The US plan to modernize its nuclear weapons enterprise is not a projection into the future. The United States plans in 2018 to begin construction of a new manufacturing facility—the Uranium Processing Facility—to produce new thermonuclear cores to extend the lifetime of current nuclear warheads and to permit the design and production of new nuclear warheads at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, at a cost of more than \$6 billion.

At the same time, abandoned facilities from nuclear weapons production activities in years past deteriorate at sites around the country. Some of these “excess” facilities pose, in the words of the Department of Energy’s Inspector General, “an ever-increasing risk to workers and the public.” The key reason for the failure to remediate these facilities and eliminate risks is fiscal—money is being spent to build bombs and contamination is left behind in soil and water to threaten generations to come.

Causes and Calls to Peace

The use or threat of use of nuclear weapons is in violation of common humanitarian law. This finding, by the International Court of Justice in 1996, was followed by the court’s unanimous finding that nuclear weapons states have an obligation to achieve complete disarmament. The US and many of these states assumed this obligation voluntarily in 1969 under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and promised to disarm “at an early date.”

In July 2017 one hundred twenty-two nations approved the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons at the United Nations. In September, when the Treaty opened for signature, more than fifty nations signed it. At some point in 2018, it is expected that fifty nations will also complete their internal processes of ratifying the Treaty at which point it will enter into effect. The United States, along with its NATO allies and other nuclear weapons states, refused to participate in the negotiation of this Treaty and has refused to sign it.

In the years since 1988 when the Presbyterian Church (USA) said: “Since the policy of nuclear deterrence is in danger of becoming an end in itself, we must exercise our individual and corporate influence to effect a change in national policy as rapidly as possible,” the policy of nuclear deterrence has assumed the power of a sacred text in national policy discussions. But in the last decade, prominent voices in the United States, including Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, Sam Nunn and William Perry, joined by high-ranking military, diplomatic and political leaders from around the globe have declared, “We are at a tipping point,” (Yale Divinity School Journal, *Reflections*, 2009) and have called on the United States to take concrete steps toward nuclear disarmament.

It is widely recognized that in the current geopolitical climate, injudicious statements by some nuclear-armed leaders have had the effect of exacerbating the risk of a nuclear exchange. On January 25, 2018, the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* set the hands on the Doomsday Clock, a universally recognized gauge of the world's vulnerability to nuclear attack, at 2 minutes to midnight, the closest it has ever been set since the clock was established.

In an effort to underscore this moment of peril and hope, the Nobel committee awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). In December 2017, ICAN's Beatrice Fihn said, in accepting the prize: "There are only two endings to the story of nuclear weapons. Either we end nuclear weapons, or they will end us."

The last great national movement to address the threat of nuclear weapons took place in the United States in the 1980s. Faith communities led that movement. It is time for people of faith to step forward once again to provide leadership in the new global movement to achieve nuclear disarmament. The leadership of Pope Francis should inspire all people of faith to insist that governments pursue policies that provide universal security, guaranteed by relationships of mutuality and brother/sisterhood, rather than the threat of annihilation by nuclear arms.

Conclusion

The promise of the kingdom of God fulfills our hope beyond the secular expectations of history. God redeems history; we do not. We must act as consistently with that redemption as our light and our power permit. (*Peacemaking: the Believer's Calling*, 1980.)

History, by the grace of God, has drawn us to this moment, when the threat of nuclear annihilation is once again in the forefront of the public imagination and is brought before the church. Nations of the world, compelled by their understanding of the humanitarian cost of nuclear weapons—not only their use, but the threat of their use—have risen to adopt a Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. The effectiveness of that Treaty depends in large measure upon us—if we permit our government to ignore the Treaty, it will.

In addition, we understand now, in ways that were not understood in 1980, the environmental, health and financial costs that nuclear weapons extract even from those they purport to protect. And we understand the policy of "deterrence" is actually a suicide pact that might be invoked not only by intentional acts of leaders, but by accidents of miscommunication, computer error, or terrorism.

This is a moment in history when the church must speak with its clearest prophetic voice. Our message is the message of the Old Testament prophets: Neither shall we study war, leavened by the gospel of Jesus Christ: unbridled and unlimited compassion for all people, including and especially our enemies.

The mechanisms and instruments required to achieve universal and verifiable nuclear disarmament exist. What is lacking is the political will and the moral leadership. The church can contribute to the former and provide the latter.

It is imperative that we side with the angels and insist, as Jesus did to Peter, that governments around the world put away the sword.

