

**Statement on Nonviolence**  
Wisconsin Council of Churches Policy  
*April, 2002*

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*A note about this statement:* *Policy statements of the Wisconsin Council of Churches express the biblical, theological, and ethical grounds for the Council's work and witness regarding matters of concern to God's people in the world. They are not binding on member churches, but provide direction and guidance for the Council's education, and worship, advocacy and programming. We hope that they may also be helpful and inspiring to anyone who seeks to think and live as a Christian disciple in the public realm.*

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***Introduction***

Violence is an ever-present reality in our society. Every day the media confronts us with reports of spouse and child abuse, attacks on women, minorities and gay and lesbian people, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and war. These occurrences inflict incalculable suffering on millions of people all over the world and create an environment of fear that terrorizes millions more.

Faithfulness to its mission requires the Church to speak out against violence, minister to its victims and work tirelessly to reduce the level of violence in society. To do this effectively it is necessary to identify and address the causes of violence. One of the most important, most hidden and least understood of these is structural injustice.

**What is structural injustice?**

Structural injustice is the oppression and exploitation many people experience, because the social structures and policies that affect their lives are controlled by and benefit disproportionately elite groups at the expense of the masses.

Structural injustice is perhaps most obvious in the economic sector of society. In unregulated, free market economies maximization of profit is the main motivation for economic enterprise. Large corporations, the main economic actors in such economies, have enormous power, which they often use to keep wages and corporate taxes low and to lobby against government regulations such as laws protecting workers or the environment. These corporations produce an abundance of the goods and services people with buying power want, but for economic reasons they often ignore or address inadequately the needs of poor people and of society as a whole. Bill Gates, one of the world's most successful

capitalists at the turn of the third millennium, acknowledged these inadequacies of the free market when he gave one billion dollars to fight AIDS in Africa. He said that although there was an urgent need for this work, the market would not respond to it because it wouldn't be profitable enough.

Structural injustice, which many see as a form of violence, may be most easily recognized in the economy, but it is present in all other sectors of society as well, including religion. The Church, itself, is not free of it. Indeed, the Church has sometimes supported or even employed overt forms of violence. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years War, the burning of "witches" in medieval Europe and colonial Massachusetts, the torture and execution of heretics by both Protestants and Catholics at the time of the Reformation, and the centuries-long persecution of Jews are dramatic examples of this. It grieves us deeply that religiously motivated violence and violence in the name of religion are continuing and even growing problems in our world. For that reason we rejoice that Pope John Paul II began the Third Millennium on an honest and hopeful note by publicly acknowledging and repenting of these acts and calling the Church to a more consistent and faithful practice of nonviolence. We also rejoice that, although extremist groups still engage in acts of overt violence in the name of Christ or the Church, these acts are no longer officially endorsed or legitimated by the institutional Church.

Structural injustice, however, remains more common. When growth and profitability become the Church's major goals, structural injustice is often the result, because these goals can easily lead the Church away from Jesus' injunction to make the well being of "the least of my brothers and sisters" a priority. When this happens, the Church, pursuing success as the world understands it, organizes its life around the preferences of affluent and powerful groups. It adopts more-or-less uncritically the culture of these groups and starts new parishes primarily among them while abandoning many poor, inner-city congregations. This is an example of structural injustice in the life of the Church, because, through these practices, it serves the powerful while neglecting the needs of poor and marginalized people.

Jesus calls the Church to be concerned about the well being of the earth and all its inhabitants and to minister to the victims of violence. It does this through Word and Sacrament, pastoral care, social services, and worldwide humanitarian programs. Through faith-based public policy advocacy it also urges

governments to seek alternatives to violence in addressing social problems and resolving social conflicts. The Church's inspiration for this work is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### **Jesus' proclamation of God's reign**

Although there are numerous, troubling passages in the Bible itself that legitimate violence, at its heart the biblical message is about a God who is full of compassion and who ceaselessly works to transform the world through love. In this transformed world, peace and justice will kiss each other (Psalm 85:10), poverty will be no more (Deuteronomy 15:4) and war between nations will be a thing of the past (Isaiah 2:4). The Hebrew scriptures use the word "shalom" to describe this New World which God is bringing into being. Shalom is the total well being of the whole world and all its inhabitants. The Bible portrays Shalom as God's will for the world and pictures God as relentless in pursuit of Shalom.

Christians believe and the Church teaches that in Jesus of Nazareth God's work in behalf of shalom reaches a new intensity. Jesus announces and initiates the Reign of God on earth. The Reign of God is the New World, the world of Shalom that God is bringing into being among us.

Jesus' proclamation of God's reign brings him into conflict with the powerful who control the social structures of his society. He boldly exposes the oppressive role these structures are playing in communal life and shows how incompatible many of their present practices are with life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is particularly critical of his society's religious structures and practices. He breaks the Sabbath and purity laws as they were understood and applied by the religious leaders of his society. These laws regulated relationships between "the Righteous" and women, poor people, lame people, blind people, people with leprosy, prostitutes and others considered unclean by the religious elite.

Jesus also challenged in a unique way the political structures of his time and the beliefs and values on which they were based. When his disciples argue about which one is the greatest, he says to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called Benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like one who serves." (Luke 22:25-26) To understand the political undertones of this saying, it is important to know that Benefactor is one of the titles of Tiberius Caesar, Jesus' emperor.

Both in his time and in our own, those who hear and understand Jesus' message realize that he threatens the status quo by calling individuals to radical repentance and also by calling for radical change in the way society is organized and functions.

### **God as Abba**

Jesus' experience of God is the inspiration for his message about God's Reign as a reign of love. For Jesus, God is not a distant, condemning and wrathful sovereign waiting to punish everyone who makes a false move.

Jesus experiences God as "Abba." Abba is the affectionate, intimate name that a little child calls a loving father whom she knows loves her, whom she can trust, with whom she knows she is safe and whom she knows wants the best for her. For Jesus, the transcendent Holy One is Abba, the Lover of humanity, who longs to draw all people into the beloved community.

Jesus' teaching and ministry reflect the universal love and welcome that he experiences from God. Like God, Jesus welcomes all, especially those usually excluded--people with leprosy, handicapped people, poor people, beggars, thieves, and prostitutes--in other words those whom righteous, religious and important people consider of no account. "Tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you," Jesus told the chief priests and elders of the people. (Matthew 21:31). It should come as no surprise that these leaders, as well as the Roman authorities with whom they collaborated, thought Jesus was dangerous and felt they had a responsibility to eliminate him before he undermined the social systems they administered and in which they found their security.

### **Gospel nonviolence**

Jesus is aware of their plot, but he responds in an extraordinary way. On the one hand, he refuses to be intimidated. He continues to preach and live God's reign of grace and unconditional love in spite of growing opposition and danger. On the other hand, he will not use violence to defend himself or the Reign of God that he came to initiate on earth. He trusts God, his Abba, and commends himself to God's care. Most remarkably, he continues to love his enemies, even after he is aware of their plot to kill him. When the disciples tried to defend him in the Garden, Jesus told them to put their swords away. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," he said. (Matthew 26:52). As he hung on the cross, dying and in pain, Jesus prayed for his executioners, "Abba, forgive them,

for they don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Jesus asks God to include in the Kingdom even those who are killing him. Christians believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, demonstrating that his nonviolent, suffering love is the most powerful reality in the universe, more powerful even than death.

### **The call to discipleship**

Jesus calls us to share in his ministry and way of life. His vision of the Reign of God is our inspiration and guide. We are to resist evil and oppose violence, but not by evil or violent means. We are to love our enemies, even those who seek to destroy us, and pray for those who persecute us. This is a counter-intuitive and counter-cultural mandate. Millions of years of evolution and millennia of social conditioning have programmed us not to love enemies who threaten our lives, but to flee from them or to destroy them before they can destroy us. It is impossible for us to change ourselves. But the Spirit of God, dwelling within us, can transform us. The Spirit can open our hearts so that we begin to understand the beauty and joy of nonviolent life in the Reign of God, embrace it, however haltingly, in our personal lives and relationships and work to make it a reality in the world.

### **Nonviolence in the history of the Church**

Nonviolence was a very important part of Christian life and witness in the early Church. The most often quoted saying of Jesus in the first centuries was his teaching that we should love our enemies. All Christian writings from the first 300 years that have survived, if they speak about the subject at all, describe Christians as people who refuse to participate in violent activities such as war, gladiatorial games or public executions. These words of Lactantius, a theologian who lived around the year 300, express well the early Church's consensus about the incompatibility of violence with Christian life.

"When God prohibits killing, he not only forbids us to commit brigandage, which is not allowed even by the public laws, but he warns us not to do even those things which are regarded as legal among men. And so it will not be lawful for a just (person) to serve as a soldier, since justice itself is his military service-nor to accuse anyone of a capital offense, because it makes no difference whether you kill with a sword or with a word, since killing itself is forbidden. And so in this commandment of God, no exception at all ought to be made to the rule that it is always wrong to kill a (human being), whom God has wished to be a

sacrosanct creature." (John Ferguson, *The Politics of Love*, p. 61.)

Although this teaching of the early Church never completely died out, after Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire it was pushed to the margins of the Church. The theological tradition that became dominant after 300 and remains so today teaches that God might call saints like Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa to embrace a nonviolent way of life. But, according to this later tradition, nonviolence is not a part of the ordinary Believer's calling and has very little if any relevance for the institutional life of society. This later tradition also teaches that social systems and institutions cannot function without violence and that effective leaders cannot consistently act nonviolently. Nor, according to this tradition, did Jesus ever intend his nonviolent teaching and example to apply to society.

### **Rediscovery of gospel nonviolence**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several Christians, including the novelist, Leo Tolstoy, rediscovered Jesus' nonviolence. However, more than anyone else it was the Hindu, Mohandas K. Gandhi, who explored its meaning for society. Gandhi applied the nonviolence he claimed to have learned from Jesus in new and revolutionary ways. Through his "experiments with truth," he disproved the idea that Jesus' teaching on nonviolence can have no relevance for society or that it is reserved for special saints. He brought Jesus' ethic of nonviolence into the Town Square and even the battlefield. His commitment to nonviolence was religious. He believed in nonviolence not because it was successful but because it was right. But he also tried to prove that a courageous, fierce but loving nonviolence like that of Jesus, when practiced on a mass scale by committed and courageous people, is a powerful method of social transformation. Gandhi repeatedly acknowledged that Jesus, particularly his Sermon on the Mount, was the chief inspiration and guide for his work.

Gandhi's experiments with nonviolence inspired many others to take up this work. Among the best-known are Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Desmond Tutu, and Dorothy Day. Corazon Aquino, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, Oscar Romero, Nelson Mandela and many other leaders of the nonviolent revolutions that swept through the Philippines, South Africa, Eastern and Central Europe, the Soviet Union, and Central America in the waning years of the twentieth century are also among the disciples of Gandhi. Some of these leaders do not reject violence absolutely but are

proponents of the Just War theory, which has played such an important role in Church history. This theory is often misused as a justification for war, but when responsibly applied, it is only a short step from Gospel nonviolence. Those who espouse and responsibly apply it remind us that, while Jesus calls us to a life of nonviolence, we still confront situations in the world which are ambiguous and confusing. In light of this ambiguity, some Christian leaders, although agreeing that violence is always both tragic and sinful, have concluded that there are extreme situations that justify the use of limited violence against evil when all other possibilities seem to be exhausted. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is an example of such a Christian.

### **Our commitment**

Nonviolence both as a personal way of life and as a way of transforming society is rooted in and inspired by the life and teaching of Jesus. It was affirmed and nurtured by the early Church. Therefore the institutional Church today has a particular responsibility to support and promote it. As Church leaders, we confess that we have often failed in this responsibility. We repent of our failure and ask God to forgive us and give us the courage we need both to embrace nonviolence in our personal lives and relationships and also in our work for social justice and peace in the world. In the spirit of repentance and hope, the Wisconsin Council of Churches, a community of churches that proclaim the Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ, commits itself, as opportunity and resources allow, to:

- Urge member Churches to examine their policies and practices for instances of institutional violence and work to eliminate any they discover;
- Encourage Christian leaders to lift up Jesus' vision of nonviolence in their preaching, teaching and liturgical ministries;
- Support the United Nations Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World (2001-2010) by sponsoring educational events, making resources on nonviolence available and promoting training in nonviolence;
- Work to reduce and eventually eliminate weapons of mass destruction and land mines;
- Advocate for the dignity and civil rights of all persons and groups and speak out against expressions of hatred or acts of violence directed against persons or groups because of their race, nationality, culture, ethnic group,

religion, political position, gender or sexual orientation;

- Seek common ground among all those concerned about the problem of unwanted pregnancies so people who take different points of view will be able to work together both to reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies and abortions and to promote the welfare of all children;
- Support efforts to reduce violence in the media;
- Advocate restraint in defense spending;
- Advocate legislation that keeps guns out of the hands of unstable or dangerous persons;
- Cooperate with groups working nonviolently for economic justice and peace when their work is compatible with the faith and values of the Wisconsin Council of Churches and its member churches;
- Work nonviolently in behalf of the goals outlined in the Wisconsin Council of Churches' statement on economic justice;
- Support efforts to end domestic violence and provide safe haven for abused spouses and children;
- Advocate in behalf of adequate legal services for all, alternatives to incarceration for nonviolent crimes and a criminal justice system that strives for restorative justice, restitution, rehabilitation and reconciliation rather than retribution. This includes continued opposition to the death penalty and other cruel and unusual punishments such as prolonged solitary confinement and sensory deprivation.

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