

Shalom!

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Are We Still a Peace Church?

IN NOVEMBER, THE Sider Institute for Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan Studies at Messiah University held its annual study conference on “Pursuing Peace in a Messy World.” In his opening address, David Weaver-Zercher, assistant provost and professor of American religious history at Messiah University, outlined “The Brethren in Christ Peace Position in Historical Perspective.” He described four “peace postures” during Brethren in Christ history: 1) the beginnings of Anabaptism when separation and martyrdom characterized our spiritual ancestors; 2) settling as “the quiet in the land” in Pennsylvania on what had been native land; 3) World War II when many Brethren in Christ presented their bodies in alternative service (even though as many as 50 percent did not); and 4) staying on the sidelines during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, believing that “agitating” for civil rights was a bad thing. They maintained their nonresistance rather than engage in activism or nonviolent resistance.

The conference’s theme of pursuing peace echoes the eighth core value of the Brethren in Christ, which in turn reflects almost 250 years of a denominational history that has embraced peacemaking and nonviolence. We are still part of the Historic Peace Church tradition—officially at least. As Weaver-Zercher’s presentation demonstrated, however, there has not been and is not now universal agreement that nonviolent peacemaking is an essential part of what it means to be Brethren in Christ.

That ambivalence is reflected in the cur-

rent peace statement in our “Articles of Faith and Doctrine”: “While respecting those who hold other interpretations, we believe that preparation for and participation in war is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ.” The history of how that so-called “qualifying clause” came to be is told in detail in an article in *Brethren in Christ History and Life* by Randy Basinger (see April 2024). Given the ambivalence and disagreement in the pew plus a doctrinal clause that acknowledges that ambivalence, it is fair to ask: Are we still a peace church?

Some possible answers to the title questions are contained in the articles in this edition of *Shalom!* Each writer was prompted by a set of questions (see the box on page 11). They responded to one or more of the questions with more history, full-throated commitment to nonviolence as an essential component of discipleship, peacemaking as public witness, stories of peacemaking in practice, and a call for poetic imagination when it comes to making peace.

I hope you’ll think about how you would answer the title question, and perhaps also reflect on your answers to the question prompts. Share your thoughts with others, perhaps in a letter to the editor. And whatever you choose to do, remember the words of the Psalmist: “Which of you desires life and covets many days to enjoy good? . . . Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps. 34:12, 14).

Harriet S. Bicksler, editor

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Is the Brethren in Christ Church Still a “Peace Church”?

By John R. Yeatts

THE EARLY BRETHERN in Christ were “ful” people. Carlton Wittlinger says that the Brethren perceived the world “as a hostile force confronting the church.” Instead of resisting hostility, they reacted with “separation from the world—“nonconformity”—in appearance, vocation, behavior, worship, and anything they deemed “worldliness.” Rather than responding in kind to a hostile world, the Brethren in Christ were “peaceful people.”

During the two World Wars of the twentieth century, the world intruded into lives of the Brethren with the military draft. In response, the Brethren declared to the government their position of draft resistance. So, they moved from being peaceful non-con-

formers to declaring themselves a “peace church,” recognized as such by the Canadian and US governments. Rather than fight in the World Wars, they declared their opposition to war as an outgrowth of their separation from the world. Wars are what governments do, not us.

Yet, the military draft during the World Wars forced the Brethren out of their separate peaceful existence to take a stand against those wars. They responded to conscription by participating with other “peace churches” in “alternate service.” During World War I, Bishop C. N. Hostetter, Jr. represented the Brethren in Christ in a joint delegation of “peace churches” sent to Washington, DC “to notify the government that the churches represented were ‘conscientiously opposed to . . . military service in any form.’”

During World War II, the Brethren in Christ joined other “Historic Peace Churches” to create a central office in Washington, “recognized by Selective Service as the clearing house for problems of the non-resistant churches.” The Brethren in Christ also entered “a cooperative relationship with the Mennonite Central Committee . . . [that] administered a vast program of war relief and played a major role in Civilian Public Service.” Later, “Historic Peace Church” representatives went to Washington repeatedly to clarify their non-resistant position. . . . As a result of these overtures, the conscription act provided that men conscientiously opposed to war in any form could render alternate service of national importance under civilian direction.”

Consequently, during World War II, 140 Brethren in Christ men “chose to discharge their responsibilities as Christian citizens in the Civilian Public Service camps and units rather than take up arms against their fellowmen.” The articles, pictures, and lists in the book, *They Also Serve*, are a valuable record of this important time in Brethren in Christ history. Later, conscientious objectors to war “discharged their selective service obligation to the nation through I-W alternate work assignment under MCC.”

Although in the mid-twentieth century, Brethren in Christ “peace church” identity was focused on opposition to war and the selective service draft, in the ensuing years, the draft went away. Perhaps because there was no longer an urgent reason to declare a “peace church” identity, the Brethren in Christ retreated from commitment to non-resistance to war, returning to the early separatist stance as “peaceful people,” focusing on interpersonal conflict resolution rather than on opposition to war.

Perhaps, in the twenty-first century, as violence escalates, it is important to revive our commitment to be a “peace church.” Is there anything our society needs more than peace? Our children have never known a time when our nation was not at war somewhere. Moreover, our culture describes causes using military metaphors—a war on poverty, a war on drugs, a war on crime, a war on terrorism. Indeed, violent language is accepted in public speech and actual violence occurs daily. Our world needs a “peace church” witness. I hear repeatedly: The Brethren in Christ Church is the best-kept secret; part of that is because we are a “peace church” in this violent culture.

But are we still a “peace church? Analyzing the members, to the 2014 Global Anabaptist Profile question, “If the government required you to serve in the military, what would you do?,” 51.7 percent of the Brethren in Christ sample responded they would choose “alternate service.” A similar percentage (52) of draftees during the period from 1951 through 1957 chose alternate service. If half of Brethren in Christ are “conscientious objectors,” does that make us a “peace church?” Some Brethren in Christ see the cup as half-full; others as half-empty.

Regarding leaders, in the credentialing process, prospective Brethren in Christ ministers are interrogated regarding their commitment to our “peace position.” Moreover, my experience teaching the core course required of all prospective ministers, “Brethren in Christ History and Life,” has convinced me that most prospective Brethren in Christ



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ministers affirm our “peace position” in some form—that most are moving toward, rather than away from that position—and that our peace stance is a reason many are drawn to the Brethren in Christ.

But, are we a “peaceful people” or a “peace church?” Since the draft ended, we focused on being peaceful. On political issues, we chose a “third way” to avoid being politically partisan—neither democratic, nor Republican—but in the process, perhaps we

avoided making prophetic political statements advocating peace in Gaza, Ukraine, or the United States. In that sense, we are not a “peace church,” advocating peace in the world.

So, are we a “peace church?” I am a half-full sort of person, so I believe that we are a “peace church.” But I also believe that being a “peace church” involves more than being “peaceful people.” If we revive our active “peace church” stance, our world will know

that we are followers of Jesus by the way we love God and others through supporting persons and institutions that work actively to bring peace to our world.

John R. Yeatts is professor emeritus at Messiah University and senior pastor emeritus at the Grantham (PA) Brethren in Christ Church.

Does the “Qualifying Clause” Strengthen or Weaken the Peace Position?

by Ann Bodling

WHEN I WAS invited to write an article on my views of the “qualifying clause,” my first reaction was to gulp. “Does the qualifying clause weaken or strengthen the peace position?” How do I write an article when one word would suffice? [Ed. note: see the editorial on page 1 for an explanation of the qualifying clause.]

Perhaps the Brethren in Christ have become too comfortable with calling what should be an intentional way of life a “position.” It is easy to talk about a position as something non-personal, as though it were no more than a policy, something that doesn’t really affect individuals in the day-to-day. Rather, living a life of nonviolence, including non-support of military participation for Christians, is a radical obedience to what Jesus taught his followers and what those followers lived out in their early centuries and, later, what the early Anabaptists staked their lives upon.

Does that statement strike you as too rigid? Too exclusive? What about those people who want to join a Brethren in Christ church but entirely disagree? How about this: Imagine Jesus teaching in the midst of his disciples and a crowd. Imagine him saying, “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because God is kind to the ungrateful and

wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:27-32). Now imagine someone in the crowd responding, “But Jesus, don’t you think you’d have more followers if you just let people decide for themselves what to believe and how to treat their enemies?” Perhaps you can imagine how Jesus might have responded.

It should go without saying that anywhere and everywhere, Jesus followers are called to respect others, whether we disagree with them or not. It seems to me, however, that the Brethren in Christ have become confused over the meaning of “respect” in the “qualifying clause”—“while respecting others who hold different interpretations, we believe. . . .” On its face, the clause could be thought to strengthen the core belief “that preparation for or participation in war is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ” by reiterating the Brethren in Christ conviction. The church could then respond, “Yes, we respect you as individuals, but we don’t agree with your belief.” Or perhaps better put, “You don’t agree with our conviction.” But this isn’t how the clause appears to have been interpreted. Now, in practice, the interpretation seems to suggest that whether or not one agrees with the church’s convictions, he/she is welcome as a member because to disagree would be disrespectful.

Going back to that imagined conversation between Jesus and an inquirer, can you imagine Jesus taking this stance? Jesus staked

the whole future of the Kingdom on a few followers who would, all but one, end up being martyred. Over and over he taught them what he wanted them to know about living life in this world as his follower. His words in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain were abundantly clear that Jesus followers were not to harm others but were to meet violence with a love that we, admittedly, have trouble imagining.

Does the qualifying clause weaken or strengthen the Brethren in Christ peace position? I can only answer with a question. If the denomination isn’t willing to ask its members to embrace allegiance to Jesus’s teachings about a life of nonviolence in a robust and unambiguous way across the whole of the denomination, does it genuinely care what its members believe, at least in regard to the peace position? I wonder what Jesus would say to that.

Ann Bodling served with Mennonite Central Committee from 1979-1982. She has been a member of Conoy and Elizabethtown Brethren in Christ Church and now attends the Grantham Church.

Peace Church Evangelism

By Ryan Stockton

CRISIS FATIGUE IS a term that is used to describe the state of exhaustion in which people find themselves when the sheer number of crises becomes too overwhelming to process individually. While not a formal medical diagnosis, crisis fatigue reveals itself when we see “just another” school shooting but we do not click on the article to learn more. It’s our response of indifference when another police shooting occurs, and we scroll past. It’s our increasing apathy to and decreasing compassion for long-standing wars. Or it’s our response of eye-rolling when we hear another political figure calling out the demonic in their political rival. We get so overwhelmed by crises that we lose our ability to care like we know we should. And unfortunately, our world is full of legitimate crises: racial injustices, wars, polarized elections, and personal resentments and vengeance. In a world like this, is it any wonder that many experience crisis fatigue?

But it is in this setting that our commitment to peace can shine so brightly. When a legitimate wrong is countered with a nonviolent response, people take notice—as though this kind of response had never been considered before.

The good news of Jesus is a reconciling work: reconciliation of our broken sinful hearts back to God, and a reconciliation of this broken, fallen humanity and world back to his intention for them of wholeness and health. For too long, much of the Western Church has made the gospel of reconciliation about our individual souls. And while this is a very true and praiseworthy doctrine, it is incomplete if the good news stops there. Is the gospel only good news for me and my soul, or can it be good news that has something to say about the injustice, violence, and inhumanity that we see in the world?

The witness of peace shows others that there can be a better way. It shows that the good news of Jesus isn’t blind to issues of violence and pain. It shows that the brokenness of our world matters to God and that His way is not the way of retribution, but of reconciliation. It is not simply the choice to not

engage in violence; it is the choice to actively work for justice and wholeness in our world using constructive means, rather than destructive. We build, rather than tear down. We mend, rather than tear. And I believe that it is this message that so many in our society are desperate to hear.

My children are all school age and regularly run fire drills and school shooting drills. They hear of the political division and divisive rhetoric online. They know of the wars that are raging around the world. And we wonder why our children can get despondent about their future and the future of the world. Our witness to peace can bring an element of agency back to our children and young people. It can allow them to say, “I have seen where the violence and revenge language and behaviors get us, and it is not working. I can be a voice of peace that changes the dynamic of relationships and societies. I can be that voice of peace!”

This is truly good news for those tired of the violent rhetoric, tired of the violence, tired of the hatred and divisiveness we see in our government, our world, and in our families. And what makes all of this possible is not some pie-in-the-sky idealism, but a sense of hope rooted in the person of Jesus who has already claimed the victory over sin, death, and violence. The violence done to Jesus means that we do not need to engage in violence ourselves any longer. Jesus himself, even before his crucifixion, did nothing to overthrow a very oppressive, violent ruling regime in the Roman Empire. Instead, he lived a life of peaceful subversion: undercutting the violence, resentments, and divisions of his day to bring a better kingdom and to rule over that kingdom as the Prince of Peace.

In our Brethren in Christ core values, we talk of witnessing to the world, where we value an active and loving witness for Christ to all people. In a society so governed by violence and violent rhetoric, this commitment to peace is one of the biggest witnesses for Christ that we can imagine. If evangelism is the work of spreading the good news of

Jesus, then the good news of his peace can perhaps speak the loudest.

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Editor’s Notes

Looking forward to 2025

Subscription renewals were waived for 2024, because of a strong balance in the *Shalom!* account. However, in 2025, we expect to send out a renewal letter early in the year. The cost will remain the same (\$20/year), with additional contributions welcomed and encouraged. If you’d like to get a head start on your renewal, you can do so online at bicus.org/resources/publications/shalom/ or send a check payable to Brethren in Christ U.S. to the editor. Thank you!

As *Shalom!* enters its forty-fifth year (counting its predecessors), here’s a quick reminder of our mission: “to educate and stimulate Christ-like responses to the needs of society by providing biblical, theological, sociological, denominational, and personal perspectives on a variety of contemporary issues.” With that mission in mind, what topics should we be addressing in 2025? Here are a couple possibilities:

1. Migration and displaced people.
2. Anabaptism at 500: In 2025, Anabaptists will celebrate the 500th anniversary of their beginnings in Europe. What can we, as spiritual descendants of those early Anabaptists, learn from their legacy?

What else? If you have ideas for future topics, please contact the editor at bickhouse@aol.com.

The Power of Dying vs. the Power of Death

By Zach Spidel

I WANT TO make a case for regarding a commitment to nonviolence as an essential component of Christian witness. I do not regard such a commitment as a mere denominational distinctive, if that means treating nonviolence as a kind of optional ornament upon our faith. I believe all Christians are summoned by Christ to nonviolence and that our witness is deeply compromised and rendered at least partially incoherent apart from such a commitment.

First, some necessary preliminaries. I do—deeply and genuinely—respect Christians, including quite a few members of my own congregation, who do not see these matters as I do. I respectfully disagree, sharing the truth as I have come to understand it and seeking to do so with an open-hearted grace. Scripture teaches me to regard myself as the chief of sinners and to regard others as better than myself—and I do. I count those Christians living out different convictions as better than myself because I know what a sinner I am. I also (and there is no contradiction here) think my fellow Christians who have not embraced nonviolence are wrong about this highly consequential matter.

When we, as Christians, disagree about what is true, I don't think we ought to retreat to a polite and silent truce ("to each their own") but to a shared, earnest, and patient conversation in search together of the Truth that is greater than us all. Such conversation can and should, in my view, be marked by a willingness to listen, a kind manner of speech, and deep conviction. I am convinced nonviolence is a key element of how Jesus wants us to live and proclaim his Gospel. Perhaps you have a conviction different from mine? If that's so, let us reason together with kindness and conviction, loving one another by passionately pursuing the truth together.

Second, a (necessarily very simplified) definition. By "nonviolence" I mean a commitment never to kill or prepare to kill or aid in the killing of another human being. This rules out lethal forms of defense (firing a gun

at a criminal or assailant), military service, abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia... any and every instance of killing people.

So, why do I say that a commitment to never kill, prepare to kill, or aid in the killing of other humans is essential rather than ornamental to our Christian witness? I could write a whole book on the topic (and others have), but here I will summarize what I see to be the heart of the case. Essential to our faith is this: we human beings have made ourselves the enemies of our Creator. We do awful things all the time. We hurt and kill, steal, abuse, and lie. And, in response to our depravities, God became one of us to save us from the self-inflicted wound of sin, a wound that would, untreated, lead to our eternal death. Yet, when he came, we killed the one who came to save us. God, while we were still his enemies, died for us.

Jesus, God Almighty in human flesh, forgave his murderers while they were in the act of murdering him. He anticipated this fate and, in fact, taught that it was precisely why he had come. He came to die for his killers—including you and me. On that fateful Friday, we humans took up the power of death, but he took up the power of dying. We crucified, he let himself be crucified. Not only did he do this for us, he taught us that we are to do likewise. He told his disciples to carry their crosses in following after him. His cross was no metaphor, and neither was theirs. All but John and Judas would give their lives for Jesus.

Why did Jesus refuse to wield the power of death and take up only the power of dying (the power of the cross)? It is because death is God's enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). He came not to kill, which only adds to death's domain, but to invade and annul death's domain! He knew that he, being life incarnate, could destroy death from the inside. He knew the devil comes to steal, kill, and destroy and that our ancient enemy wields the fear of such fates to inflict them on others. We kill to avoid being killed, we steal for fear of missing



out on what we think we're owed, we destroy rather than let what we love be destroyed. This is human history in a nutshell. So, Jesus put an end to that whole terrible cycle by letting us kill him. But death could not swallow up life any more than darkness can snuff out light. And Jesus, by dying willingly, defeated (rather than used) the power of death.

Jesus taught his disciples that nothing in this world was worth their soul and that, in fact, they should be willing to lose not just their life, but the whole world, to gain their soul. Will we, for fear of earthly evils and injustices, for fear of loss and death, take up the power of death which Jesus refused? Will we assume to ourselves the right to kill rather than suffer loss and death ourselves? Maybe we fear our own death, maybe we fear the death of those we love, maybe we fear the death of those earthly nations or institutions of which we are a part, but the question is still the same. Will we, to prevent death take it upon ourselves to kill? Or will we learn from Jesus, with help from the Holy Spirit, how to stop fearing death and striking out at others to protect that which Jesus told us we need to be willing to lose?

When he ascended to his Father, Jesus sent the Spirit to help those first disciples do just that. The Spirit enabled the apostolic generation to bear their crosses as the ultimate embodied proclamation of Jesus's message: God loves his enemies and offers them forgiveness and new life. Jesus walked with so many of his dearest friends in the years that followed to grisly fates of their own. He did not physically defend his dear friends from their murders, but he called them to give up their lives for him. So, Jesus walked with James as he came under the sword in Jerusalem. He shone down on Stephen as he was stoned to death by an angry mob.. He stood by Thomas as he was pierced in far off India. And Jesus held onto Peter as he was

led away by cruel hands to a cross of his own. Jesus did not kill to defend his friend; why do we suppose we should kill to defend ours? Do we believe in the resurrection, do we believe that death and suffering, as great as they may be, amount to light and momentary afflictions when weighed against the glory that is to be ours?

How will others come to believe in the reality of resurrection if, for fear of death (our own or that of those we love) we are willing to kill rather than be killed? How will people believe in the power of the cross—the power of dying in love for one’s enemies—if we take up the opposite power, the power to kill our enemies? Do we believe that on the cross Christ conquered death by dying? How can we proclaim a God who loves his enemies to the point of death if, to avoid death, or even loss, we take it upon ourselves to do what Jesus refused to do and kill?

Let worldly people wield death and think it an awesome power. I know of a far great one! Romans 13 says God uses the power of the state’s violence to keep evil at bay, but Romans 12 says that’s none of our business, be-

cause he’s put a far greater power in our hand—a power that doesn’t merely limit the world’s evil but can expunge it! Our power is Christ’s—not the power to kill, but the power to die. Let us prefer, as Jesus did, to suffer harm rather than to inflict it and thereby prove that there is a Kingdom far greater than all of earth’s combined. Let us show, by our refusal to kill, that we really do believe in a life beyond this one.

Moreover, let’s have faith that if we dare to die—to lose ourselves, or even lose everything in the world we care about—we will see God’s resurrection power unleashed. Perhaps we do not see his power manifest in America, as we so often complain, because here in America Jesus’s disciples have allowed themselves to be captured by a culture of death. We clutch at that worldly power to protect ourselves and what we love, rather than trust Jesus and follow his example. America has the world’s largest military and the developed world’s most active system of capital punishment. Here we dispose of countless babies rather than provide for them to be born. Here mass shootings have be-

come so common they barely make the news without some especially salacious angle to spice up the violence. Here the main response to such shootings is to make sure there are more armed people around to protect against those other armed people. In all these ways and more we cling to the power of death, rather than the power of dying, and wonder why we see so little resurrection. The power of resurrection always and only follows for those who freely chose to die. We kill others and support their killing, and then wonder why God’s resurrection power isn’t evident in our midst. But for that power to be active among us, first we’d have to die.

In the New Testament (and in the early church) Christians rejected the power of death and, following Jesus, took up the power of dying. If we too let go of the power of death and determined to die rather than kill, we might just see some resurrections ourselves.

Zach Spidel is pastor of East Dayton Fellowship, Dayton, OH.

The Pursuit of Peace: Stories of Hope and Humility

By Ray Chung

ON THAT FATEFUL day in March 1965, a crowd gathered in Selma, Alabama, standing at the edge of confrontation. The tension in the air was palpable when a commanding voice broke through, declaring, "It would be detrimental to your safety to continue this march. This is an unlawful assembly. You have two minutes to disperse and return to your homes or your church." Reverend Williams, sensing the gravity of the moment, asked, "May we have a word with the major?" The reply was curt: "There is no word to be had." John Lewis, a steadfast leader among the group, stood resolute, declaring, "We were there. We were not going to run." Despite understanding the peril ahead, the only option left was to kneel in prayer. Just a minute after the warning, Major Cloud ordered, "Troopers, advance." Chaos erupted at 4:15 p.m., marking that day forever as "Bloody Sunday."

As we reflect on our pursuit of peace in

communities, nations, and public spaces, we must look to inspiring examples and the principles that guide our efforts. From the early endeavors of women like Sarah Bert to the globally impactful initiatives of organizations like HOPE International, it becomes evident that the pursuit of peace is an active process, one that demands both posture and intentionality.

In 1906, a young woman named Sarah Bert set out on a mission to bring peace to her community by serving the vulnerable. Although she was new to mission work, an opportunity arose when she met Mrs. Clark of the Fruitful Vine Mission. Initially hesitant, Bert agreed to assist with a sewing class. What began as a small commitment soon transformed into a life of service as she became captivated by the potential of the young girls around her. The class expanded rapidly, and Bert found herself teaching over eighty students how to sew—a skill that

would provide them not only with clothing but also with the foundation to build a brighter future. These sewing classes did more than impart a practical skill; they instilled hope and dignity in the lives of young girls at risk of poverty and exploitation. Sister Sarah’s mission exemplified peace in action, illustrating that peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of opportunities for individuals to thrive. By creating a safe space and equipping these girls with the tools to succeed, she communicated peace through her service.

The concept of peace extends beyond our own communities; it encompasses how we interact with individuals from diverse backgrounds, faiths, and cultures. My friend, former bishop Ken Hoke, who grew up in a Brethren in Christ family in India, learned this valuable lesson early in life. Surrounded by a predominantly Hindu and Muslim community, Hoke’s Christian faith distin-

guished him without isolating him from others. Hoke's experience taught him that peace does not hinge on a special language or rigid religious practices. Rather, it involves recognizing the divine image in every person, regardless of their background. As he succinctly puts it, "God does not need a special language in order for us to communicate. God understands our everyday conversation." Hoke's journey serves as a reminder that pursuing peace in public spaces often requires reaching across divides, engaging in dialogue, and embodying humility. In an increasingly diverse world, our commitment to peace must be reflected in our interactions with neighbors, even those who differ from us. This echoes Jesus's words: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

Pursuing peace entails not just the right actions but also the right posture. Tim Keller warns, "It is quite possible to do all sorts of morally virtuous things when our hearts are filled with fear, pride, or a desire for power." True peace is rooted in humility and love, not in the desire for control or self-preservation. Therefore, how we approach others is as vital as the intentional actions we take.

A powerful model of this can be seen in the work of HOPE International, an organization dedicated to breaking the cycle of poverty through biblically-based training, savings services, and microloans worldwide. Having served with HOPE for nearly a

decade, I have witnessed firsthand how peace is communicated through the simple yet profound acts of empowerment. By equipping individuals with the tools needed to rise above poverty, HOPE fosters peace in a dignified manner, embodying both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission in communities across the globe.

The intentionality behind HOPE's work is clear: peace is not just a concept; it is a lived reality nurtured through concrete action. This principle resonated with me during a personal experience when friends invited me to join their families for Iftar, the evening meal that breaks the fast during Ramadan. As we gathered together, sharing the meal and exchanging greetings of "Assalamu alaikum" (peace be upon you), I was reminded of our common humanity and the peace that fellowship brings. Pursuing peace can sometimes be as simple as sharing Iftar, enjoying a delicious biryani dish right in our own backyard.

As we reflect on how to communicate and practice our commitment to peace, we must recognize that peace is not merely the absence of conflict; it is the presence of God. This understanding is crucial for any meaningful pursuit of peace. We are called not just to avoid conflict but to actively bring God's peace into every situation, trusting in his presence even amid challenges. This is the kind of peace Frances Davidson longed for when she expressed, "How gladly I would lay

down my life for them if that would draw them still nearer to the Savior." Her sacrificial love for others, rooted in a desire for their salvation, embodies the heart of Christian peacemaking—not merely peacekeeping. It is not a passive endeavor but an active commitment to drawing others closer to God.

As we navigate the complexities of our daily lives, let our commitment to peace remain steadfast. Take heart in knowing that God is present in the midst of it all. C. S. Lewis beautifully captures this hope in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

Peace, like spring, will return. It may not come easily or quickly, but through our dedication to pursuing peace with others—through service, humility, and faith—we can introduce glimpses of that spring into the world around us.

Ray Chung works with *Rising Sun Consultants* and attends the *Meetinghouse Dillsburg, PA*. He also serves on the *Brethren in Christ U.S. General Conference Board*.

Serving Haitians in Springfield, Ohio

By Beth Saba

WESTSIDE IS A small congregation of about fifty committed members living in a small city which has grown from 58,000 to more than 70,000 since the pandemic. The increase in population is due to a large influx of Haitian immigrants who began arriving in 2017, but by 2023 were arriving in numbers that overwhelmed the city's health, housing and safety resources. The *Warder Public Literacy Center*, (WPLC) headed by a former missionary to South America, was overwhelmed with the Haitian need for English lessons for this newest group of immigrants.

He began reaching out to churches and organizations to help teach ESL classes.

Westside (formerly *Beulah Chapel*) was attracting Christian Haitians who lived in the neighborhood. One family of brothers began attending in early May of this year. They used their phones as translators for the sermons and for communicating with us. One Sunday, I approached the oldest brother and asked if he would be interested in learning English. He and his brothers were excited about the possibility. So we talked to the church board who unanimously gave their

endorsement for this program. My husband, another member and I then took training from the WPLC. We began TESL classes in the middle of May. Because many of our students already have jobs, the best time to teach was immediately after church each Sunday. We posted the classes on an electronic sign facing Route 40, which runs by the south side of the property. These first students began inviting friends and other family members. We now serve 12-14 adults, and two families bring their children.

The stories of how these Haitians came

to Springfield vary. Why they left Haiti was based on several reasons. Hurricanes and earthquakes on that small island have devastated the economy which was already unstable. In August 2021, a 7.2 earthquake caused at least 2,200 deaths. It is the poorest country in the Americas. The gangs that have taken over parts of the island creating fear among families have contributed to the instability of the government. As a result, many of our students are fleeing to have jobs, to protect their families, and/or bring their families here. They are all here under the TPS (Temporary Protected Status) visa program which is one the US extends to fifteen other nations. It can be renewed after eighteen months.

W, AL, and C¹ all have jobs. Their biggest concerns are learning English and learning how to drive. W wants to bring his wife and children when he has a permanent job. J and F went to Chile from Haiti and then immigrated to the US when they realized there was no future for them there. J is working two jobs in order to bring his mother and sister. His English is proficient enough to help me teach the class. C and I are here for the safety of their family. A, a single woman, came for work and safety. M and her husband and children came for the same reasons.

Most of the members of our class are followers of Jesus. Christian missions in Haiti have been successful for several generations. It was natural that those converts would seek a church for fellowship and teaching. We have a great responsibility to help these newest neighbors of ours, even though our resources are limited. Those in our congregation who are uncomfortable with the teaching aspect have helped with child care and snacks. We have a table of donated goods from church members, and our Haitian brothers and sisters are grateful to add items to their households. Another member shares his garden produce with them.

When the debate between the two presidential candidates took place on September 10, our ministry took a turn. Up to that point, we were trying to correct misinformation about what the newest immigrants were or were not receiving from the government. Rumors had started that they were getting a stipend of \$2,000 a month per person which

was not true. When they come, they have to have their own funds.

Some city dwellers were so incensed that they began attending city commission meetings, and the atmosphere became volatile. The commissioners began modifying the meetings to limit the open forum style and require prepared written questions to address their concerns. Our city and state governments are working hard to bring more health clinics to the county, to set up driving lessons and open more areas for TESL classes. Several churches are stepping up and providing lessons as well and also giving guidance to job searches. Businesses who have hired Haitians are satisfied with their decisions. Jamie McGregor who owns a manufacturing company had been interviewed on a local PBS station and raved about thirty of his workers who were Haitian. He was impressed with their work ethic and wished he could hire that many more. Miriam Jordan, an immigration correspondent for the *New York Times*, did a follow up interview and discovered that he and his family had been threatened and that their lives were in danger. He took lessons on the use of a gun, and owning a gun, something he had never considered before.

After September 10, because of the false information regarding our friends eating neighbors' pets and retrieving ducks from our local parks for food, Springfield was placed on the world stage.

Our class was deeply affected. Two women—a mother and a daughter who had come to find jobs—were so afraid that they would not leave their house. They have since moved to the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania area. The daughter had just found a job working for an Amazon Distribution Center, and the mother was looking for something in the education field as she had taught school for twenty-seven years in Haiti. We had helped them with more than language services, and it was very difficult for all of us to see them leave. Two of our students were harassed at work. AL was confronted with a foreman who was wearing a “F_ Haiti” hat. When he shared that with our group, we could tell he was noticeably upset. One of our single women did not want to stay but has nowhere else to go and has since found a job. We admire her resilience.

Miriam Jordan came to Springfield recently and interviewed a family who has been here since 2021. They had steady jobs and moved into what they hoped would be their permanent home. Their daughters were thriving, and they attended a local church.

Members of hate groups have descended on Springfield several times in the last month. One group unfurled a huge banner outside city hall inscribed with “Haitians Have No Home Here” in English and in Haitian Creole. Ku Klux Klan fliers have popped up around town. A neo-Nazi group waved swastikas in front of the home of the mayor, Rob Rue, who has praised Haitians' contributions while acknowledging the challenges created by the influx of new residents.²

They now take great precautions when they leave to go to work or to school.

The week following the debate, we decided to have a round table discussion with the class instead of teaching. We could sense their fear as they shared their unease. They had come to the US for safety and that now was being threatened. In the weeks following, the class dropped to about six, but recently has climbed back to the original number.

Westside has continued to minister to our newest neighbors. They see our love and care and are grateful for a safe place to build relationships with each other and us. Faithfully pursuing peace, loving God, and using holy hands to help our neighbors has given us a purpose that one year ago was not on our radar. Our God had something in mind and we stepped into it. It is righteous and just to do so.

Notes:

¹We have used the initials of their first names.

²Miriam Jordan, “Many Haitians Prospered in Springfield, Ohio. Then Came the Hate.” *New York Times*, October 11, 2024, www.nytimes.com/2024/10/11/us/haitians-springfield-ohio-pets.html?searchResultPosition=1.

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When God Called a Pacifist Pastor to Grow Up and Love a Rude Marine

By Jonah Langenderfer

WHO IS THAT person who has been your greatest challenge to love—who doesn't like you and you don't like? Let me tell you a story about when an acquaintance became an enemy while I was trying to love my neighbor.

This fall my wife and I had an unfortunate reunion with her close friends from college to help one of them prepare to bury her husband in his final days dying from cancer. The friends and “the husbands” banded together to be as helpful as possible to pack up all the belongings so the wife could immediately move home after the funeral. We husbands were sent in a car on various missions to track down storage units and needed moving supplies. It was a good couple days of meaningful work to love our friend.

One husband, John, was a Christian who was an officer in the Marines; I knew him the least. We were very different, but were getting along well. On our long drives to do various errands, we got to know one another and even got into spirited but civil discussions about what it means to love your neighbor during war. For example, he talked about the James Bond-like, precise killings of terrorists in the Hezbollah walkie-talkie and pager bomb detonations; they were small enough to spare surrounding Palestinian civilians. Were Christians in the Israeli military loving their Israeli neighbors by hating their Palestinian enemies?

This debate was not that different from the debate Jesus spoke about in Matthew 5:43: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” This debate shows up another time when an “expert in the law” appeals to the same “love your neighbor” command as central to true life but quickly brings up a crucial question on which the debate is largely based: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responds with the famous Good Samaritan parable, his teaching of enemy-love in story form. This was his way to say that all people are your neighbors, not just Jews, but Samaritans too.

Good discussion with my new friend John continued: “But, what if someone is threatening your family?” Well, who is my family? Jesus's teaching to love even our enemies expands our restricted circle of love of “our people.” For instance, how should a child of God view his/her attacker? Instead of thinking of potential self-defense scenarios and viewing the attacker as less than human—the way Jews viewed their Roman adversaries—think of how you would respond to an attacker if that enemy was a mentally-ill son. That changes things. Jesus's all-inclusive enemy love invites us to imagine potential enemies as valuable family members rather than beastly threats to you and yours. In other words, with Jesus's teaching in mind, Israeli Christians are to view Palestinian terrorists empathetically as family members who are out of their minds, but still their dear brothers. Overall, it was an interest dialogue to pass the time.

But then some hours later, we were called back to hospital with news that our friend's husband was expected to pass that evening. The car immediately became tense. Conversation continued as we neared the hospital, but then I said something that I did not anticipate would offend John. I will spare you the details of this incident, but he became really upset. I tried to explain myself and apologize, which eventually pacified the situation. But in the process, John said things to me in a way that was wrong and hurtful. Do you remember how you felt the last time someone wronged you? Over the next couple days until I returned home, I was viscerally reminded that when we are emotionally wounded by someone, it is much easier said than done to love them!

After returning home from the trip, I was surprised to see Matthew 5:43-48 on my preaching schedule for the very next Sunday! Had God been preparing me to preach on Jesus's difficult command to love my enemy? While I had studied this passage before as a crucial teaching for the peace position, what

I had not noticed until this time was that Jesus's purpose for calling us to love our enemies was to teach us to “grow up” in love.

Jesus calls us not just to love our loved ones, for even the “world” does this (46-47); but love your enemies “that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (45). We must grow up in our character to love our enemies. There is a reason why so many have tried to soften this command—it's hard!

What will it feel like for my five year old son when he faces his first bully? I will tell him the story of my namesake—the prophet who ran from God's call to preach to his enemies. He was furious when God mercifully forgave his enemies through his meager attempt to warn them of Judgment: “God, don't you know what they've done to us? They've killed my family! The Ninevites are no mere Veggie Tale depiction of meanies slapping you in the face with fish; they humiliated my people when they took captives, dragging them by the nose after piercing their noses with large fishing hooks!”

I'll spare my son those vicious details until he's older, but I'll say: “Son, one lesson from Jonah is that it's easier said than done to be like our Father in loving the wicked. But, it's expected and possible! Don't forget how David loved his enemy Saul!” Because it's possible with God's help, Jesus calls us to grow up in love. You can translate “that you may be” as “may become”; it's a process!

The early church took this call to grow in love much more seriously than today; Matthew 5:44 was something like the “John 3:16” of the early church! The early church fathers were not only almost all pacifist, but they were focused on thoroughly putting on the character of Christ's love. For example, John Chrysostom writes not of nine criteria for just war, but of nine ascending steps of virtue in love, beginning from step one, not punching our enemy, all the way to growing to the pinnacle of love in step nine, praying for our enemy. Jesus says that when we love like God, our love is not small and incom-

plete, just for our loved ones (46-47), but our love is a large love, “mature” or “complete” (as “perfect” in v. 48 should be translated), like our Father who mercifully gives sun and rain not just to the good, but also to the evil—not just his own people but the Ninevites too.

Think again of the person that has been your enemy. After my incident with John, it was hard for my thoughts not to race about what happened, and difficult for me to have any feelings of love. But what is God saying to his children? Despite feelings of hatred, Jesus’s command makes it clear: “Grow up! Love your bully!” Jesus knows it’s easier said

than done. When you are experiencing your own cross, Jesus calls you to “pray for your persecutor” (44), as he did from his cross, “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” I learned for the first time that the grammar of this verse indicates that Jesus likely repeated this prayer again and again while his enemies killed him.

As God was inviting me to take my next step in growth in enemy-love, I took these words and prayed them repeatedly for John. It started to give me a more empathetic imagination. As I was doing my final sermon prep, I was reminded that Jesus’s “complete” scope of love was not just for me but also for John.

I overheard my wife sing “Jesus Loves Me” to my boys. After imagining John as a child whose own mother sang this to him, I prayed, “Father, forgive John, for he didn’t know what he is doing.” May God help us to grow up in love for our enemies that we might become like our Father.

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Where Peace and Unity Intersect

By Dave Downey

THIS PAST SUMMER I was privileged to go on a civil rights bus tour. What lingers most in my heart and mind from the experience is easy to identify. In Birmingham Alabama—nicknamed “Bombingham” during the civil rights struggle due to fifty dynamite blasts set off by white supremacists between 1957-1965—I encountered a remarkable artifact that testifies to how Jesus-centered and nonviolent the movement was.

The SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, partnered with other leaders in Birmingham to expose racism and advocate for integration. As local churches assembled participants, each person was asked to sign a sheet of paper agreeing to “ten commandments.” In bold at the top the paper read, “I hereby pledge myself, my person and my body, to the nonviolent movement.” The ten commitments that followed included: “meditate daily on the life and teachings of Jesus,” “remember always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation and not victory,” “walk and talk in the manner of love for God is love,” and “refrain from violence of fist, tongue and heart.” I was deeply moved. For these civil rights leaders, nonviolent peacemaking was core, not secondary, to understanding Jesus and what it meant to follow him.

As the Brethren in Christ Church, we

would wholeheartedly agree on the importance of nonviolent confrontation of injustice. Central to the Christian ethic is love that’s extended to even our enemies. If obeyed by the people of God, nonviolent peacemaking is a healing balm in an unjust and violent world.

But it’s one thing to articulate a theological conviction in a statement and another to discern how to hold a belief in an increasingly pluralistic church and society. How much theological diversity can we handle without compromising our conviction? Should we become more or less dogmatic, especially given our position’s minority status within American Christianity?

I find these questions extremely important. In moving towards an answer, it’s important to recognize that any theological conversation shouldn’t operate in a silo, as if we can neatly move on from one multiple choice question on a seminary exam to another. We must consider how one theological view, in this case nonviolent peacemaking, is shaped by other convictions.

For example, what happens to our theological posture related to peace when we consider other important values like finding unity amidst diversity and forming communities in which those who disagree on key political, cultural or theological issues can still break bread together? New Testament

writers find such efforts necessary in giving witness to the power of Jesus to transform the world. It’s within this context—where convictions on peace and unity intersect—that our theological posture must take shape. For some, creating space for doctrinal disagreement is cowardly and waters down a belief. Yet, my experience on the ground as a pastor has taught me that one of the hardest things in the world is to invite an ideologically and theologically diverse group of people to see one another as spiritual siblings because of the work of Christ. It’s anything but cowardly.

Personally, I’m increasingly passionate regarding the Brethren in Christ position on peace. In a time where “Jesus-centered” is a ubiquitous phrase, it begs the question, which Jesus? We’re incredibly skilled at creating a Jesus that bows to political and cultural preferences that we already hold. I believe cross-shaped, enemy love must be core to our understanding of Jesus. And, alongside my increased clarity around peace, I’m convinced more than ever that the church must give witness to a Jesus-centered unity rather than a dogmatic uniformity. Why? Because we are all in process and the church ought to be a place where contentious lines of division are broken down because of the new humanity that Jesus died to create (Eph. 2:15-16). With this in mind,

I'm not bothered that our statement on peace begins with "while respecting others who hold different interpretations, we believe. . . ." Should we see this clause more often throughout our doctrinal statements?

As we create space for those who disagree with us, may we not be ashamed of what we believe! Jesus-centered movements like the one in Birmingham should inspire confidence. With winsome conviction we must invite others to consider the non-violent way of Jesus. Our world is bleeding, metaphori-

cally and literally, from the myth of redemptive violence to which Christians have too often contributed. The way of Jesus and the truth of Jesus cannot be separated. If we think we need to stop obeying Jesus in order to bring the Kingdom of God, something in our discipleship is broken. Jesus heals the world through nonviolent, enemy love. Yet, there are those among us who aren't convinced that followers of Jesus are forbidden to use violence in certain contexts. If hospitable space is extended to them (while re-

maining grounded in our beliefs), who knows what the spirit of God might do as they take the bread and the cup, remembering that Jesus exchanged violence for forgiveness and love as the ultimate act to heal the world?

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Here is the call to disengage, to pull back, to gain perspective and find a place of inner peace. This call is not to hide from the world and its troubles, but to recharge, to bask in nature, and reconnect to nature's God. It is a pathway to re-enter the world with a soul-peace that allows us to go forth sowing peace into our worlds. This poetic imagination gives us permission to retreat, to rest, to remember the Sabbath.

Berry's image of lying down next to water brings to mind another poet. David's Twenty-third Psalm calls us to many kinds of peace. The psalm is a well-known comfort and balm for our soul precisely because it is the poetic imagination at work. In italics I have noted themes of peace I see. As you read the psalm through a lens of peace, what ideas of peace do you find?

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

The peace of contentment.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.

An inner soul-peace.

He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.

The peace of living rightly.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

The peace of being with God.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.

God's peace during warring struggles.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

The peace of healing and gratefulness.

Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,

Peace to live in this life.

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.

Eternal peace.

Psalm 23 speaks of inner peace and peace with the God-shepherd who leads us beside still waters, quiet and calm. It teaches peace

in the presence of darkness and death, teaching us not to fear evil. Our peace is based in our trust in our shepherd allowing for peace even during conflict.

Peace is always in God. Is this the type of poetic imagination that Levertov called for in her poem? Poetry calling to our hearts, influences our thinking, decisions, and actions. Poems may not instruct us in the detailed how-to of peace, but they can provide the why-to and the want-to of peace. They can create or enrich our desire for peace. Every work begins with the imagination, with an idea of something not yet a reality. We are called to imagine peace; and poets and writers and artists can spur our creative imaginations and our wills to be peacemakers. Maybe your experience of poems comes in the forms of lyrics, hymns, or Psalms. If you listen, can you hear the call to peace? Can you imagine a way to make peace a reality? The world needs your imaginations of peace.

Lois Saylor is an editorial advisor for Shalom! and a member of the Harrisburg (PA) Brethren in Christ Church. She also writes poetry.

Question Prompts for "Are We Still a Peace Church?"

1. How much theological diversity/pluralism on this topic can we handle?
2. In what specific ways are we still a peace church (beyond what we say in our "Articles of Faith and Doctrine" and core values)?
3. Why does this doctrine require a qualifying clause ("while respecting others who hold different interpretations?") Does it strengthen or weaken our position?
4. How is our commitment to peacemaking a plus in our evangelistic efforts?
5. How can we communicate and practice our commitment to peace in more public spaces (our communities, the nation, etc.)
6. What are some stories of peacemaking from individuals and congregations?

Reflect on these questions yourself and share your answers with others. Share your thoughts in a letter to the editor (bickhouse@aol.com).

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Peace: A Call for Poetic Imagination

By Lois Saylor

IN DENISE LEVERTOV'S poem "Making Peace," a voice calls out from the darkness and calls on poets to give the world an "imagination of peace." It is a challenge to the poets and artists and all creative people to help the world see how we can unfold peace.

Challenging words have long been a place of inspiration that ignite our imaginations and actions. Whether from a gifted orator like Martin Luther King Jr., or a socially aware novelist like Charles Dickens, a satirist like Jonathan Swift, a churchman like Bishop Desmond Tutu, or poets like Dante, John Milton, and T. S. Eliot, words plant seeds that can have profound effects on our thinking. Imagination is where change begins and Levertov is calling for poets to begin imagining peace. Is she right: can poets call us to peace?

Levertov's poem begins to explore the "imagination of peace." In the second stanza of her poem, she likens making peace to writing a poem. It is an act of imagination, but also an act of discovery in the doing, and an act of will to bring a poem or peace into being—imagination and action coming together.

*But peace, like a poem,
 is not there ahead of itself,*

*can't be imagined before it is made,
 can't be known except
 in the words of its making
 grammar of justice,
 syntax of mutual aid.*

Sometimes we are defeated in peacemaking because we can't see the end and so do not know how to plot our course. Levertov calls us to step out into the process and simply begin. Like writing a poem on blank paper, we enter a peace process imagining as we go. Learning as we go. Changing things as we go. But we go. We step out. We imagine new roads, new ways, new journeys to peace. Our own core value on peace echoes this theme of striving and reaching for peace in its title "Pursuing Peace" and in the word "promote": "We value all human life and promote forgiveness, understanding, and nonviolent resolution of conflict."

The cryptic poem below is based on the pursuing peace core value and picks up on this theme of searching for the "how" of peacemaking using biblical images. (It is from a series of poems I wrote on the core values published in *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, April 2021).

VIII. Pursuing

*maybe stumbling
 forwards, maybe towards
 the sword, the plough share
 the basin, the towel
 the enemy, a love story
 an unfolding
 a sowing of seeds
 watered, sprouting
 a harvest, a Shalom to live in*

In this theme of pursuing peace, as in Levertov's poem, there is a call to begin, to start, to go after peace even if we stumble along the way. But if we put down the sword, if we serve, if we love an enemy, then maybe we are sowing the seeds of peace and we will begin to cultivate shalom.

In another poetic call, Wendell Berry, the American novelist, poet, essayist, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer, calls us to step away from ourselves to find peace. In the poem "The Peace of Wild Things," he writes these lines when despair and fear come into his nighttime thoughts:

*I go and lie down where the wood drake
 rests in his beauty on the water, and the
 great heron feeds.
 I come into the peace of wild things. . .*

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