

# A Peace Church Declaration

## Montclair Presbyterian Church, Oakland, California

### **Prologue**

For nearly two years,<sup>1</sup> a group of dedicated and interested congregational leaders, members, and “friends of the family” at Montclair Presbyterian Church (MPC) met regularly to explore the possibility of MPC declaring itself to be a “Peace Church,” thereby committing itself in a formal way to the ongoing work of moving our society beyond its addiction to military violence, and of bearing witness to God’s beloved community. This declaration is the fruit of that conversation.

There are many wonderful and wonderfully-effective secular organizations that do good work in the cause for peace, but MPC entered into this conversation because churches have a unique voice and draw from the deep wells of spiritual traditions. By employing its singular articulation of ancient wisdom, the church is able to remind both its members and the broader community that peacemaking is integral to our quest to achieve our fuller humanity.

In its work of peacemaking, the Church is responsive, prophetic, and sacramental. The response is in relation to God’s calling us and all humanity to work for reconciliation and peacemaking.

The prophetic work happens when we speak God’s word to the world. Usually this involves the articulation of challenging and unpopular ideas. Often prophetic witness involves actions not generally appreciated by those in power. By declaring itself a Peace Church, Montclair Presbyterian Church issues a challenge to the American Empire, which like all empires sustains itself through military violence. By declaring itself a Peace Church, MPC chooses to pledge its allegiance not to a flag, but to God, known to us through Jesus Christ who, while challenging another great empire, showed us that peace is stronger than violence and that love will abide long after hatred has faded away. This is prophetic work.

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<sup>1</sup> The conversation began in the Fall of 2016 and drew to a close when the congregation approved the declaration on November 11, 2018.

At the same time, peacemaking is sacramental work because it fulfills the vows the Church makes at baptism, when the gathered community promises to train each baptized person—child or adult—in the faith and to nurture each child of God in the love and grace of God.

By declaring itself to be a Peace Church, MPC gives faithful expression to its baptismal promises by teaching and living the ways of peace and by providing its younger members with a greater understanding of God’s call to us to be peacemakers, and thereby to understand the church’s conscientious objection to war. For those members of MPC serving in the military, MPC’s Peace Church Declaration upholds our baptismal covenant by seeking a world where no military personnel are forced to harm or kill other human beings.

Besides violating the basic Christian admonition not to kill, military service also does violence to those who, under immoral orders, perpetrate violence. It is a fact that military personnel suffer greatly when forced to harm those whom politicians have designated as enemies. This suffering is not trivial: high rates of suicide among the veterans of recent American wars attest to the fact that the United States military may be good at providing body armor, but when it comes to shielding or healing souls damaged by the work and witness of killing, the military fails. The MPC Peace Church Declaration, by calling for an end to war, seeks to address this failure. By helping those who may one day be subject to the draft to understand the religious basis for refusing military service, and by protecting those already in uniform from the damage caused by violence, MPC is fulfilling the responsibility of the baptismal covenant.

By declaring itself a Peace Church, Montclair Presbyterian Church joins its voice with the chorus of congregations, denominations, parachurch organizations, and ecumenical bodies around the globe exploring issues relative to peacemaking and violence. Together, we are working to build a world in which no child of God must fear or commit violence. May that day come quickly.

## **Declaration**

Montclair Presbyterian Church, a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (USA), of the Synod of the Pacific, and of the Presbytery of San Francisco, together with a growing number of Presbyterian Churches, after careful consideration of the Christian scriptures and our long faith tradition, as an expression of our devotion to the love and teachings of Jesus and our commitment to social justice, and in response to the PC(USA)'s 219th General Assembly (2010) call for peace discernment, hereby declares itself a Peace Church. In so doing, Montclair Presbyterian Church

1. denounces warfare as incompatible with the teachings of Jesus as recorded in Scripture<sup>2</sup> and "The Great Ends of the Church" enumerated in the Presbyterian constitution<sup>3</sup>;
2. commits itself to the work of peacemaking in our families, in our economic decisions, in our personal lives, in the places of our employment, in our congregation and the larger Church, in our cities, in our nation, and in the world;
3. will continue its practice of welcoming all people, respecting those who are serving or have served in the military and their families, and inviting everyone to walk with us as we explore together the practice and meaning of peace, along with the challenges of achieving justice, in the world and in our lives;
4. believes that service to one's community, nation, and the world is our responsibility and will continue to teach it, but we cannot exercise the reconciling ministry to which we are called by wielding a sword;
5. will provide our full support for anyone electing to be a conscientious objector; we will support both those who choose alternative service and those who refuse to participate in the war effort, especially young adults who choose these commitments as an expression of their faith, as we did during the Viet Nam war, the last time the United States had a draft for military service.

## *Rationale*

1. Both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are univocal on the assertion that God's command to us is to not kill other human beings. We are taught through our history of encounters with the Word of God, including in the life and work of Jesus Christ, that rather than killing our enemies,

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Matthew 5:9, 26:52; Luke 4:16-20

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order 2015-2017, F-1.0304

we are to love our enemies. We have been taught, and commanded, that there are other ways to achieve justice on earth than through violence. We have been taught that judgment, punishment, and vengeance are God's responsibility, not ours. We have been taught that we achieve our full humanity by the exercise of love, not of hate. We have also learned that though the human potential for love and justice is far greater than we have so far achieved, perfection is not within our reach due to the limitations of the human perspective. And that due to our inclination to self-interest rather than the common good (both deliberately and subconsciously), we are capable only of partial achievements of justice, and so even in the good that we will, we often perpetuate and increase injustice.

2. Our decision to declare ourselves a Peace Church is rooted in our identity as Presbyterian Christians whose spiritual roots are nurtured in the soil of the Reformed Tradition. Historically, the Reformed Tradition has affirmed the idea that the Church must be "reformed and always reforming."<sup>4</sup> To that end, we must allow ourselves to critique our own assumptions and practices, and to re-think and reform our understanding of the morality of war.
3. We understand the need for systems and institutions that organize our communal life in such a way that it become more just. Our tradition and history have taught us that secular rulers and systems of government are necessary to ensure domestic tranquillity and preserve the common good, and in fact in their own way contribute to the life God calls us to lead. To this social order, we must also be responsible, so that we understand we must render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's. But the admonition to civic responsibility does not mean Caesar's claim on our loyalty is higher than God's; to God's command and God's will, as we are given to know it, we owe our ultimate loyalty.
4. While Reformed Protestantism has historically affirmed the right of governments to wage war if it meets certain criteria, it is unlikely that any war has ever met those criteria. They were established for the purpose of defining under what very limited conditions a war might be justified -- where the evils of war may be preferable to a greater evil that could occur if not stopped by war. Lists of just war

<sup>4</sup> Book of Order, F-2.02

criteria vary<sup>5</sup>, but most include the following elements, all of which must be met, in order for a war to be considered “just”:

- A war must have a just cause,
- A war must have a just motive,
- In a just war, civilians and other non-combatants must be protected,
- In a just war, violence must be meted out proportionally,
- A just war must be declared by a proper and recognized authority,
- A just war must have a reasonable chance of success, and
- A just war must have peace as its ultimate goal.

Modern warfare makes use of technologies and methodologies that make just war impossible. We believe, further, that governments have misused and misappropriated the doctrine of just war to excuse the waging of unjust wars. This belief is manifested in the fact that wars lead to more war and seldom (if ever) lead to lasting peace,<sup>6</sup> or as Gandhi put it, “There is no path to peace, peace is the path.”<sup>7</sup>

5. Historically, the Reformed Tradition has affirmed the doctrine of human fallibility, meaning we know that when given the opportunity to sin, humans often will sin. This means we believe governments—being composed of fallible humans—are prone to err both by what they do and by what they leave undone. Guided by this doctrine, we acknowledge that governments--often with the acquiescence of

their populations--have sinned and continue to sin in the ways they wield power.

6. Historically, the Reformed Tradition has placed a strong emphasis on repentance, and to that end, we confess that the traditional Presbyterian support for and promotion of just war theories has enabled our governments to justify immoral wars. We confess we have fallen prey to the claim that use of military force is essential for national security, when evidence demonstrates that it actually breeds greater threats to our security.<sup>8</sup> We confess further that an infatuation with power and privilege, together with misguided patriotism, have kept the Church quiet when it should have spoken out against the evils of war.
7. Historically, the Reformed Tradition has affirmed the responsibility of Christians to speak out prophetically in ways that hold governments accountable when they err. To that end, we must denounce as unjust the conduct of governments in the prosecution of war. We acknowledge, however, that such denunciations, despite being well-intended and well-articulated, do not go far enough. We must acknowledge that as Reformed Christians, we have been part of the problem.
8. The Reformed Tradition calls us to engage the world and, to that end, we cannot practice a passive pacifism. We believe that service to one’s community, one’s nation, and the global community, are important aspects of personal responsibility when they are in fidelity with God’s will. We also know that people, systems, and institutions may at times embody injustice, so we are also called to critique and sometimes disobey civil authorities when we believe they are wrong, or would force us to participate in actions that are wrong. This, too, is part of not only our religious but also of our civic responsibility. We must recommit ourselves to acts of service, education, advocacy, engagement, nonviolent resistance, and restorative justice. We call upon governments to address the root causes of war, such as greed, hatred, revenge, imperialism, inequality, oppression, injustice, and the misuse of power.
9. In 2016, the 222<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) called upon “Presbyterians at all levels of the church to...

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, *Making Peace in the Global Village* by Robert McAfee Brown (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1981)

<sup>6</sup> It is common for people to consider World War II a just war. They may express the conviction that while the overwhelming majority of wars are unjust, it was morally necessary for the United States and its allies to fight World War II, to prevent the expansion of Imperial Japan, to curtail the growth of Fascism in Europe and—most importantly—to confront the Holocaust. In declaring itself to be a Peace Church, it is not the intention of Montclair Presbyterian Church to sit in judgment of those who have gone before by second guessing the necessity of World War II. Rather, our intent is to support those who seek to prevent the next world war by opposing all war, because any war could lay the groundwork for a catastrophic global conflict.

<sup>7</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “*Non-Violence in Peace and War*,” 1948. The quote is sometimes attributed to A. J. Muste, a Reformed Christian clergyman prominent in the American pacifist movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *A Global Security System: An Alternative to War*, <https://worldbeyonddwar.org/alternative/>.

prevent violence on the local, national and international levels through prayer, direct action and advocacy” and to consider the following affirmations:

- “We affirm that peacemaking is essential to our faith in God’s reconciling work in Jesus Christ, whose love and justice challenge evil and hatred, and whose call gives our church a mission to present alternatives to violence.
- “We confess that we have sinned in participating in acts of violence, both structural and physical, or by our failure to respond to the acts and threats of violence with ministries of justice, healing and reconciliation.
- “We follow Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace and Reconciler, and reclaim the power of non-violent love evident in his life and teaching, his healings and reversals of evil, his cross and resurrection.
- “Learning from non-violent struggles and counting the costs of war, we draw upon the traditions of just war, Christian pacifism, and just peacemaking to cultivate moral imagination and discern God’s redemptive work in history. We commit ourselves to studying and practicing non-violent means of conflict resolution, non-violent methods for social change and non-violent opposition to war. ... We commit ourselves to continuing the long tradition of support by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) for our sisters and brothers who serve in the United States military, veterans, and their families. We promise to support materially and socially veterans of war who suffer injury in body, mind, or spirit, even as we work toward the day when they will need to fight no more.
- “We place our faith, hope and trust in God alone. We renounce violence as a means to further selfish national interests, to procure wealth, or to dominate others. We will practice boldly the things that make for peace and look for the day when “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”<sup>9</sup>

**10.** Montclair Presbyterian Church has a long history of participating in anti-war and peacemaking efforts.

- During the Viet Nam era, Montclair Presbyterian Church provided sanctuary for a naval airman seeking discharge as a conscientious objector; and our pastor and members of our congregation led national and regional Presbyterian peacemaking efforts.
- During the 1980s, Montclair Presbyterian Church established a Center for Peacemaking in conjunction with Northern California Presbyterians for Peace and Justice; the church hired staff to direct our peacemaking efforts, and members of the congregation became active in efforts to promote nuclear disarmament and to oppose American-supported wars in Central America.
- During the 1990s, members of Montclair Presbyterian Church opposed the first Gulf War and were active in confronting the epidemic of gun violence in the United States.
- During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Montclair Presbyterian Church congregation has been active and vocal in its opposition to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Members of the church spoke out against the use of torture by the United States in its conduct of the so-called “war on terror.” Members stood in solidarity with victims of environmental degradation in Bolivia and called for the closure of the prison at Guantanamo Bay and an end to drone warfare.
- As the second decade of the third millennium draws to a close, we continue our work of peacemaking by supporting refugees and asylum-seekers, learning about the suffering of Palestinians in the Holy Land, participating in local anti-gun violence initiatives, protesting the death penalty, advocating for reform of the criminal justice system, strengthening interfaith relationships, and deepening our faithful activism.

**It is therefore fitting and consistent with our faith and our history to declare ourselves a Peace Church. Thanks be to God whose blest children we are when we work for peace.**

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see “Risking Peace in a Violent World: Affirmations for Presbytery Consideration.” [http://oga.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/ga\\_21\\_item\\_11-11\\_risking\\_peacemaking\\_in\\_a\\_violent\\_world.pdf](http://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/ga_21_item_11-11_risking_peacemaking_in_a_violent_world.pdf)