

How is the UMC building peace around the world?

Creating a Culture of Peace *and* Shalom

James E. Winkler

Eight years ago, I traveled for the first time to the Philippines. I accompanied my father, a pastor whose congregation had contributed significant amounts of money over the years to help construct United Methodist churches in the Philippines. One morning, our host pastor picked us up at our hotel to drive us two hours south to one of the churches under construction in General Santos City in southern Mindanao. After the visit, we all went to a food court in a local shopping mall for lunch.

The district superintendent of the area asked us why we had not told him earlier that we would be visiting. I replied, "Until this morning, I did not even know there was a General Santos City. We did not know we would be here." The district superintendent said, "Well, had I known you would be here I could have ensured safe passage for you with the Muslim rebels." Needless to say, my antennae rose and I asked him, "Do you mean to

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say that we are in danger right now?" "Indeed," he told us, "there is a war underway between the government and the rebels. We United Methodists do what we can to make peace, but American visitors are prime targets for kidnapping!"

I was relieved when we returned safely to our hotel that evening, and I was and remain grateful our denomination continues to be involved in efforts to resolve the decades-long conflict in the Philippines. Twice this August board members and staff of the General Board of Church and Society have traveled to the Philippines at the invitation of United Methodist Bishop Solito Toquero to participate in a Pastoral Ecumenical Delegation Visit organized at the request of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines by the Christian Conference of Asia and the World Council of Churches.

These visits took place in "troubled and troubling times," Bishop Toquero wrote. "We wish to pose a challenge to you, our partner, to stand with us and lend your support as we try to stave off the intensifying political repression in our country." At least fifty people,

Other Websites to Know

World Council of Churches

www.wcc-coe.org

Carter Center

www.cartercenter.org

Churches for Middle East Peace

www.cmep.org

including six members of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (our partners through the Evangelical United Brethren Church), have been ambushed or assassinated in 2005. Many thousands more have been victims of repression in the past several years.

I would venture to say that most Americans are not aware of these recent developments in the Philippines. As peacemakers, we try to sound an early alarm about emerging crises. Our journeys to the Philippines and other hot spots around the world are part of a "ministry of presence," the importance of which cannot be underestimated.

Through General Conference action, our church has made a bold statement about peace:

Peace is not simply the absence of war, a nuclear stalemate or combination of uneasy cease-fires. It is that emerging dynamic reality envisioned by prophets where spears and swords give way to implements of peace, where historic antagonists dwell together in trust, and where righteousness and justice prevail.

I believe it is part of the mission of the church to actively engage in peacemaking efforts, and it is my belief that we are carrying out that mission.

Liberia

Another example of peacemaking actions involves the situation in Liberia. As I write, two GBCS staff executives are on their way there to lead Social Principles training events. What does that have to do with peacemaking? Once again, the very presence of U.S. church leaders in war-ravaged Liberia is a significant event. United Methodist Bishop John Innis has arranged for our staff to meet with the Chairman of the National Transition Government of Liberia, the National Elections Commission, and human rights leaders during their week-long visit to indicate the seriousness with which the third largest religious denomination in the U.S. takes the situation.

During the first week of October, immediately prior to the national elections, a GBCS board member will participate in an international delegation organized by the Carter Center and the World Council of Churches to meet with the major presidential candidates (the front-runner is a member of First United Methodist Church of Monrovia) to urge the election be honest and the transition be peaceful. This visit will be hugely important.

Iraq

Today, we are engaged in a dreadful and disastrous war in Iraq. Prior to the war, many of us worked hard to stop it from taking place. We organized, marched, and demonstrated. We traveled to Baghdad and returned with a message from the Iraqi government of a desire for a negotiated settlement that was rejected out of hand by the Bush administration. We proposed another peace plan to President Bush and sent teams of religious leaders who met with the pope, Prime Minister Blair, Chancellor Schroder, and senior aides to Presidents Putin and Chirac.

The General Board of Church and Society continues its efforts to bring peace by supporting legislation to cut off funding for the war and to develop a timetable for the withdrawal of coalition forces. We are working to develop deeper understanding between Christians and Muslims. We will not rest until peace is achieved.

Middle East

There will be no peace in the Middle East without a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We are active and founding members of Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP), an important organization housed in the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C. The very day I began writing this article I accompanied other CMEP representatives on a visit to a senior official of the National Security Council to express support for President Bush's commitment to a viable, contiguous Palestinian state. We also expressed distress about the illegal Israeli expansion in east Jerusalem, a move that would make a sustainable Palestinian state impossible.

Our bishops are engaged in the Interreligious Initiative for Peace in the Middle East, a remarkable and unprecedented partnership of the highest-ranking Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders in the nation. This initiative has held meetings with then-Secretary of State Powell

and remains in contact with the Bush Administration.

How You Can Help

Within The United Methodist Church, a strong network of Peace with Justice coordinators in nearly every annual conference has been developed for witness and engagement. Each year, Peace with Justice Sunday is observed, and the offering taken up that first Sunday after Pentecost enables ministry to go forth for nuclear disarmament, to provide opportunities for education in congregations, districts, and annual conferences. Grants have been made to support peace centers and peace education. As a church, we must be dedicated to creating a culture of peace and shalom.

Another network that has grown in the past three years is our Isaiah Circle which gathers United Methodists for United Nations advocacy. Advocates reaffirm the fundamental role of the United Nations in the building of multilateral mechanisms for peace to end the scourge of war. Our United Nations Ministry Office in New York is active in witness to UN agencies and member states, offering ethical and moral considerations in areas that connect peace with sustainable development and security.

The board needs the prayers of all United Methodists to undergird our peacemaking work. Further, it is possible for local churches to be involved by becoming a Peace with Justice Covenant Congregation. The board provides action alerts on a regular basis. Church members can receive these by signing up at our website, www.umc-gbcs.org by clicking on the UMPower button or by calling us at (202) 488-5600.

I thank God for the witness of our denomination, and I pray this hard work will come to fruition throughout the world. I am not sure many of our clergy and laity are aware of the ongoing peacemaking efforts underway by The United Methodist Church. I like to believe if this story was shared more broadly in our congregations

that our people would recognize this is the work of the Lord. □



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