

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT: THE TIME IS NOW

Adopted by the Governing Board, National Council of Churches USA

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“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

- John 10:10, RSV

“Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”

- 2 Corinthians 6:2

INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, declared that He had come to bring “abundant life” to humanity. Nuclear weapons, which have the capacity to destroy entire cities and nations, and, indeed, all life on earth, represent the diametric opposite to this. In fact, the only thing that they are capable of producing is “abundant death.” The time has arrived to eliminate all of them, before they eliminate all of us. Be it therefore resolved that the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. hereby recommits itself to the total worldwide eradication of nuclear weapons.

For over sixty years, the United States has relied on the possession of an arsenal of nuclear weapons in order to impose world peace and deter attack. It has accomplished neither. Rather, it has siphoned off untold billions of dollars that could have been spent on far more just and productive means of ensuring global “security” through economic and cultural development and cooperation. It has poisoned our air, our water, and our children. It has produced toxic waste products that will remain radioactive for millions of years. Many believe it has also engendered a false sense of security coupled with inordinate pride, much resented by other nations. This has only served to degrade the status and esteem accorded to the U.S. by other peoples of the world, not to maintain or improve them. The same might be said of other nations that possess nuclear weapons.

Many expected that the nuclear menace would gradually disappear twenty years ago with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. While commendable progress was made towards reducing nuclear arsenals and defusing the tension between the two sides, these measures did not go far enough. Efforts have faltered, due in part to the perception that the “nuclear club” states believe that they are entitled to ignore commitments made under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to eliminate their own weapons. But there is “a core hypocrisy” here: “The possession of these weapons and the readiness of a handful of countries to use them upgrades their perceived value and thus stimulates their proliferation and undermines efforts to control their spread.”¹ This has provided a convenient opening for a growing number of nations to seek after these deadly weapons and thus threatens to ignite a second arms race. Even more frightening is the prospect that inadequately-secured fissile material will get into the hands of suicidal terrorists.

It is understandable that conventional wisdom would dictate that this is not the time for the United States to eliminate its nuclear shield. Rather, we should maintain a strong nuclear arsenal as a deterrent to attack. This reasoning breaks down for a number of reasons. As Jonathan

48 Granoff puts it, “Nuclear weapons are of no value against terrorists, they’re suicidal to use
49 against a country that has them, and it’s patently immoral to use them against a country that
50 doesn’t have them. So why do we have them?”² But what about “rogue states,” such as North
51 Korea and Iran, which have recently acquired or may soon develop their own atomic bombs?
52 Here, we must rely on the diplomatic weight of the entire rest of the world coming down on
53 them, peaceably, in order to induce change. This will not happen, however, until the United
54 States takes the lead.

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56

57 HISTORY

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59 The National Council of Churches has a long history of advocating for the restriction, control,
60 and eventual elimination of nuclear weapons (see the select bibliography attached). This
61 commitment is based on solid theological grounding, which goes back to the earliest years of the
62 organization. Thus, in 1951, a year after the current formation of the Council was founded, the
63 following was included in the seminal policy statement, “The National Council of Churches
64 Views its Task in Christian Life and Work”:

65

66 History is purposeful and orderly because the world is in the hands of God, who
67 made it. Cause leads to effect; and moral and spiritual factors are just as real as
68 material factors – even more real. Man, in the exercise of his free will, can no more
69 disregard the moral laws of the universe with impunity than he can disregard the
70 physical laws of the universe with impunity. He does not break them; he breaks
71 himself upon them when he disregards them.

72

73 Man, being a creature of God, has a destiny above and beyond this world. Hence his
74 essential security and his essential freedom are not derived from this world. They
75 are not for this world to give or destroy. It is equally disastrous either for the powers
76 of this world to try to destroy them, or for the people to try to find them in this world.
77 They are ends which this world should serve. But essential security rests only in the
78 righteousness of God, and essential freedom only in His service. The state or society
79 that presumes to bestow or withhold either assumes the prerogatives of God. The
80 man who expects either from the world denies God and surrenders himself to certain
81 frustration and defeat.³

82

83 While the non-inclusive language may sound jarring to our ears, there are important theological
84 principles that emerge from these paragraphs which still guide this Council’s life and work. Two
85 especially stand out: first, that the blatant violation of God’s moral law is ultimately self-
86 destructive: “He does not break them; he breaks himself upon them when he disregards them.”
87 These words perfectly describe the suicidal result of any future deployment of nuclear weapons,
88 because in destroying the enemy, the perpetrators would also ensure their own, and everybody
89 else’s, annihilation.

90

91 Second, true security and authentic freedom derive only from our sovereign Creator.
92 Consequently, when a state or society presumes to be able to bestow or ensure either, especially
93 when based on the raw exercise of power, this is to assume “the prerogatives of God.” In other
94 words, it is idolatry, and it will inevitably fail. A country may amass the greatest and most

95 sophisticated military machine in history; it may extend its power and influence and economic
96 might to every corner of the globe; but none of this – least of all, our nuclear arsenal – guarantees
97 our “national security”. All it took was a small group of committed fanatics with nothing more
98 deadly than box cutters and with commercial jets as their missiles to demonstrate this truth.
99 Later in the same document, sound scriptural direction is provided, regarding the proper
100 application of the concept of “security:”

101
102 Christ taught us to seek the well-being of our neighbors but He showed little
103 concern for His own personal security. To seek security for others is a
104 requirement of justice. It is ennobling. To seek security for ourselves at the
105 expense of others is debasing and self-defeating for the nation and for the
106 individual. The United States will not inspire the world by making its own
107 security its chief end. It may even lose it by seeking it. “Whosoever will save his
108 life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”⁴

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110 Considering how many *trillions* of dollars we have spent on nuclear weapons over the last seven
111 decades, and how little we have to show for it, these words are sadly prophetic.

112
113 Condemnation of the use of atomic weapons was first expressed in an American ecumenical
114 context in 1945 by the predecessor organization to the NCC, the Federal Council of Churches,
115 shortly after the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁵ It is clear that these church leaders were
116 horrified by the indiscriminate death caused by such a weapon of mass destruction. Such
117 misgivings soon gave way to a cautious acceptance of their “defensive” use, however, as the
118 Cold War got underway. Nevertheless, we already see a call for an end to the arms race by the
119 Governing Board of the National Council of Churches in 1951. At that time, they stated the
120 following: “History offers convincing evidence that the kind of peace for which Christians pray
121 cannot be achieved by piling gun upon gun and bomb upon bomb. We warn the people of our
122 churches that the civilization which they treasure may be destroyed unless the nations agree on a
123 plan for the control of armaments on a global scale.”⁶

124
125 Control and reduction of armaments was called for in 1957 and again in 1958, in response to the
126 beginning of the “Space Age,” which presented such dangerous implications for the use of space
127 for purposes of nuclear war.⁷

128
129 In 1960, we see the first mention of the need for “enforceable agreements to eliminate weapons
130 of death,” clearly referring to those “ultimate weapons, which threaten victim and aggressor alike
131 with mutual suicide.”⁸ This was coupled with a strong message of support for the United
132 Nations, as the most appropriate body in existence for overseeing the enforcement of any future
133 arms agreements, and for creating a stable international order.⁹

134
135 While the decade of the 1960’s was primarily preoccupied with pronouncements expressing
136 concern about or opposition to the War in Vietnam, the issue of the nuclear threat was not
137 ignored. In “Imperatives of Peace and Responsibilities of Power,” the Governing Board
138 recognized that, “in order to avert nuclear holocaust it is imperative that limits be imposed upon
139 the use of military might, and that the inherent limitation of force in the solution of human and
140 social problems be recognized.”¹⁰ Here, we hear echoes of the warnings about political hubris
141 from 1951. The world is in God’s hands; we cannot compel the rest of humankind to do our

142 willbased solely on the sheer magnitude of our military power. The document, furthermore,
143 called for a reassessment of our country’s foreign policy assumptions and goals based on a more
144 realistic acceptance of our true place in the world as one nation among many, rather than either
145 the world’s savior or the world’s policeman. It again called for an increased reliance on the
146 United Nations and other international bodies in order to foster peace with justice.

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148 In that same year, the Governing Board published “Defense and Disarmament: New
149 Requirements for Security.” This remarkable document, far-reaching in its vision and clear-
150 headed in its understanding of the larger issues regarding peace with justice, combined sound
151 theological principles with practical, detailed prescriptions for the changes which, if they had
152 been heeded, would surely have resulted in a quickening of the pace of nuclear disarmament and
153 the consequent reduction in tensions between the great powers. It emphasized instead the need
154 for international development and dialogue as the most appropriate and effective means for
155 achieving lasting security for our nation and, indeed, the entire world.¹¹

156
157 During the following two decades the NCC weighed in on all the major controversies of the day
158 regarding the nuclear threat (see the Bibliography for the documentation):
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- 160 • Opposed to the anti-ballistic missile program (1969)
- 161 • Supported the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (1971)
- 162 • Supported United Nations conferences on nuclear disarmament (1975 and later)
- 163 • Opposed nuclear fuel reprocessing because of the threat of proliferation (1976)
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- 165 • Called for the complete cessation of all explosive nuclear testing (1977)
- 166 • Declared total opposition to the possession or use of nuclear weapons and called for their
167 complete elimination (1977)
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- 169 • Called for a nuclear weapons freeze (1981)
- 170 • Declared that the 1980’s escalation of the arms race was “utterly in conflict with
171 the Gospel of Christ” (1981)
- 172
- 173 • Celebrated the excellent work of the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in
174 their 1983 Pastoral Letter on the nuclear crisis, “The Challenge of Peace: God’s
175 Promise and our Response,” while also using this as an opportunity to recognize
176 the serious “unresolved questions” that confront all Christians with regard to this
177 difficult issue
- 178
- 179 • Expressed excitement and hope at the time of the Reagan-Gorbachev Meeting in
180 Reykjavik, Iceland, that almost achieved a breakthrough with regard to the
181 elimination of both country’s nuclear arsenals (1986)
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- Congratulated the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. on achieving an agreement in principle (later carried out) to eliminate intermediate nuclear forces from Europe (1987)

In 1999, the NCC General Assembly adopted “Pillars of Peace for the 21st Century, A Policy Statement on the United Nations.” It enunciated the following Bible-based principles:

- 1) the transcending sovereignty and love of God for all creation and the expression of that love in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, whose mission was to reveal understanding about that divine presence, to proclaim a message of salvation and to bring justice and peace; 2) the unity of creation and the equality of all races and peoples; 3) the dignity and worth of each person as a child of God; and 4) the church, the body of believers, whose global mission of witness, peacemaking and reconciliation testifies to God’s action in history.¹²

These formed the theological foundation upon which seven “pillars of peace” were affirmed. Among them was “Peace and Conflict Resolution,” that called for the “end of the unrestrained production, sale and use of weapons worldwide.”¹³ This document formed the basis for then-General Secretary Bob Edgar’s presentation “Ecumenical Witness for Peace, Justice and Sustainability” at the Millennium Peace Summit at the United Nations in 2000, and it still informs our work today.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of compelling reasons why it is appropriate for the National Council of Churches to revisit the issue of total nuclear disarmament at this time:

- While the Council has a long history of involvement with this issue, it has not spoken directly about it since 1988. Much has happened since then to change the world. There is a strong consensus among experts in the field, that, given developments already underway towards acquiring or perfecting nuclear weapons in North Korea, Iran, and elsewhere, now may be the last time that the world can realistically come together to ban the bomb through diplomatic measures. However, influence can only be brought to bear on the “rogue” states if those who already have the bomb agree to fulfill the binding agreement made under the Nonproliferation Treaty--(emdash)to accept a gradual but constant draw-down of their nuclear stockpiles until none are left. As Brazil’s former Ambassador Sergio Duarte said in 2005: “(O)ne cannot worship at the altar of nuclear weapons and raise heresy charges against those who want to join the sect.”¹⁴
- There is a growing movement both worldwide and here in the U.S. to move towards elimination of nuclear weapons. It has gathered a lot of momentum because of the prominence of some of the key figures, such as George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger and Sam Nunn. It has strong support in the religious community as well as among various non-governmental organizations. World leaders, such as Presidents Barack Obama and Demetri Medvedev (Russia) have taken notice and have spoken favorably of this prospect. Public pressure is key to the success of this effort, however,

230 since it is reported that there is significant resistance to this campaign being exerted,
231 especially from the military.

- 232
- 233 • 2011 will mark the end of the World Council of Churches *Decade to Overcome Violence*.
234 A strong NCC witness, based on action for education and advocacy here at home, would
235 be a most welcome contribution.
- 236

237 Is it possible to put the genie back in the bottle? Yes, because, once the current worldwide
238 stockpile of weapons is eliminated, it will become extremely difficult to assemble the raw
239 materials to make a new one without the rest of the world taking notice and forcing an end to
240 such efforts. This would require continued support for the U.N.'s international inspection
241 system. This would also keep nuclear devices out of the hands of terrorist organizations--the
242 technology and construction of a nuclear device is so extremely complicated and energy-
243 intensive that it is not feasible to imagine that a terrorist group could actually make and employ
244 one on their own successfully.¹⁵

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246 The prospect for what might happen if we do not act is too terrible to contemplate: nuclear
247 winter, the end of all human life on earth, and the transformation of much or all of our planet into
248 a radioactive hell. This far outstrips the potential damage that could be done by any other
249 environmental threat. The end of the Cold War did not make the world safer; quite the opposite.
250 It is time to finish what Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev began in Reykjavik. It is time to
251 realize that we cannot ensure our own security by force of arms, even if they be the most
252 powerful weapons ever created. Our lives are in God's hands. For once, let us put our trust in
253 those hands as well. "*Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*"

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257 RESOLUTION

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259 THEREFORE, let it be resolved that the member communions of the National Council of the
260 Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., speaking together through the Council's Governing Board,
261 hereby reaffirm the goal of the total elimination of nuclear weapons and commit themselves:

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- 263 • to make their voices heard in the halls of Congress and the White House;
 - 264
 - 265 • to participate fully in the remaining programs and events of the World Council of
266 Churches *Decade to Overcome Violence*.
 - 267
 - 268 • to support the work of the NCC staff and the appropriate working groups/committees in
269 carrying out an effective program advocating for nuclear disarmament, including but not
270 necessarily limited to: 1) producing new educational materials; 2) designating this issue
271 for special attention at future Ecumenical Advocacy Days; 3) drafting a letter from
272 council and church leaders to the members of Congress and the President; 4) sponsoring a
273 special conference, including the publication of the proceedings for wide dissemination.
274 The Justice and Advocacy Commission will be charged with oversight responsibility for
275 these efforts.
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- 277 • to provide the financial support needed in order to carry out this mandate as well as to
278 assist the Council in obtaining funding from outside sources.
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280 Be it further resolved that the President and the General Secretary of the NCC be instructed
281 to communicate this commitment to the President of the United States and Congressional
282 leaders.
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NOTES

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