

## **PEACE DISCERNMENT FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES CONSULTATION HELD AT MONTREAT, January 18-20, 2013**

### **Summary by Chris Iosso, ACSWP Coordinator**

Teams from 27 Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) related colleges and universities met at Montreat Conference Center for two and half days over the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend to get an in-depth look at the church's Peace Discernment process currently underway. Along with chaplains and faculty from 5 other colleges, 5 military chaplains, and 10 persons from presbyteries also engaging in the study approved by the 2010 and 2012 General Assemblies, most teams included a faculty member teaching peace-related subjects, a chaplain, and a student—and a number brought additional students. The goal was to present scholars and activists doing “new thinking” on “new approaches to peacemaking and nonviolence,” so that teams going back to their academic communities could better lead their own discernment groups.

The Peace Discernment process was prompted by overtures from 8 presbyteries calling for “strengthening” of the church's Peacemaking Program through a re-visioning of both policy and program. Unlike many special committees and study teams of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, this effort broadens the input process to invite congregations and individuals to respond experientially as well as thoughtfully and prayerfully to a brief study of Christian and Presbyterian positions on war, peace, and nonviolence. The General Assembly also took specific action to invite input from the colleges and universities related to the church that are often not engaged with church programs. Thus this consultation represented a new opportunity for young adults to understand how the Presbyterian Church understands “the Gospel of Peace.”

The program kick off was given by Andrea Bartoli, an Italian Catholic scholar who directs an institute for conflict resolution at George Mason University. He spoke to the Discernment document itself in light of 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges to peace, helping to bridge distances in language between Presbyterian reports and the good percentage of non-Presbyterian participants. Peacemaking itself, he pointed out, is in the Greek more like peace-creating, even including peace poetry in the transformation of conflict and hatred with love and justice. Nonviolence was also seen to include “unviolence” or “de-violencing” social relations, as Jesus was seen to exorcize or draw out evil in the Gospels.

He was responded to by Charles Amjad-Ali, from the Church of Pakistan, who underlined the need to engage Islam constructively and theologically, and who emphasized how much warfare has *not* been caused by religious factors. Since the setting up of the state system in Europe in the 1540's, the vast majority of wars have been fought among nations, though sometimes with religious bodies co-opted along. Amjad-Ali, who also preached the closing worship, sees fundamentalism, including secular fundamentalism, as a challenge to the three monotheistic faiths.

The second session was given to Open Space, a way that participants can focus discussion on topics of their choosing within the theme of gathering. This was originally envisioned to allow for more engagement with the study material but it brought new topics into the consultation. The agenda was changed to accommodate small group and other discussion time; one recommendation was that the response form for the discernment process be re-done for the college and university groups. It also became clearer that the model of discernment used by the church includes hearing from a variety of voices. To enrich the church-wide process, both speakers and students were interviewed by two

younger Presbyterian Mission Agency staff and an all-video issue of *Unbound* ([www.justiceUnbound.org](http://www.justiceUnbound.org)) is being done to introduce the conference themes. A resource book is also being prepared of edited presentations and other aids to peacemaking.

Contrasting views were then given by Tommy Ross, a Senate Senior Defense and Intelligence Aide, and Paul Chappell, a West Point trained veteran of the Iraq war now training groups in nonviolence for the Nuclear Age Foundation. Ross emphasized the need to balance real current dangers and the moral goals of the church and other groups. He drew on Reinhold Niebuhr and affirmed the way the church's Peacemaking and Just Peacemaking thinking has included both pacifist and just war elements. Chappell pointed to the limits of military operations and the need to support nonviolent strategies that have often been proven successful. He argued that peacemakers have to be as strategic and results-oriented as war planners and even more oriented to the long view.

Contrasting angles of vision on the pursuit of peace were given by Allan Boesak, visiting professor at Christian Theological Seminary and Butler University, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, professor of ethics at Duke Divinity School. Boesak, a former President of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and leader, with Desmond Tutu, of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, spoke to the struggle to keep that process of liberation nonviolent. He spoke of the way Mandela reentered a changed context due to the work of nonviolent resistance and external divestment and other pressure. Addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's work, he noted efforts to build in hope of reconciliation that were actually not being served by an individualistic model that left social complicity unexamined and to some degree, still unchanged. Fulkerson spoke to the dynamics of structural violence around gender as well as race and economic position, emphasizing the cultural dimensions of domination in most societies.

The dialogue model of presentations then led to two professors of international relations, Emily Welty, from Pace University (NY), and Stephen Zunes, from University of San Francisco. Welty lifted up nonviolent peoples' movements, including an analysis of Occupy in the United States. Zunes looked at the relation of peace and justice in relation to specific conflict zones and strategies. He also provided a workshop on Western Sahara, a little known territory controlled by Morocco, on which the General Assembly called for a limited study.

The second evening session included three professors who teach peace studies. Cris Toffolo, Co-Chair of the Peace and Justice Studies Association who teaches at Northern Illinois University, gave a passionate why-and-how to develop peace studies as a minor or a major, even in smaller schools. Kathryn Poethig, a professor at California State, Monterey Bay, gave much of her time for more group interaction, but underlined the practical aspects of peace studies from her work in Cambodia and the Philippines. Poethig is also one of the 6 members of the Peace Discernment Steering Team guiding the discernment process for the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy and the Peacemaking Program (both of which operate within the Compassion, Peace and Justice ministry area of the Presbyterian Mission Agency).

The third speaker in that section, Paul Magnarella of nearby Warren Wilson College, outlined some of the key themes in peace studies curricula, including the nature of violence and the role of human rights and international law. Warren Wilson also hosted an optional Green Walkabout and panel of students from conflict areas on the first afternoon. Their campus involves all students in sustainable practices and also has a peace studies program. College President Steven Solnick also greeted the walkabout group.

On Sunday morning the gathering heard from two scholars of New Testament and early Christianity, Margaret Aymer (Oget) of Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, and Richard Horsley, recently retired from the University of Massachusetts. Both challenged the emphasis in the Peace Discernment study document on the nonviolence of Jesus and his movement in the New Testament. Aymer emphasized violent metaphor and imagery in parables and particularly the Book of Revelation, noting that some of this was to be expected even when language from a slave empire was being transformed, as in the case of the cross. Horsley maintained (in some contrast with Walter Wink, among others) that Jesus was focused on justice, liberation, and healing social as well as personal conflict. Both felt that the early church's nonviolence was an aspect of its social location as much as a form of witness, often understood as martyrdom. Thus both scholars put as much emphasis on Jesus' violent context as on his teaching and personal example.

In the concluding worship, Amjad-Ali preached and Boesak gave a prayer and charge, both linking faithfulness, peacemaking, the example of Martin Luther King, and the need to change not just the US role but an international order both unsustainable and unequal. Both have worked with the Accra Confession of the World Communion of Reformed Churches to illuminate the global struggle for peace with justice.

The final session featured three chaplains, Terry McGonigal of Whitworth University, Walter Tennyson of Rhodes College, and Lucy Forster-Smith of Macalester College. McGonigal, who also teaches on Shalom, spoke to the relation of peace education, mission trips, and the theological grounding of Christian engagement with the world. Tennyson spoke of the awareness of injustice and lack of opportunity illuminated through diversity of experience and among students, which in his case include a Bonner Scholar program. Forster-Smith spoke to how Christian efforts at peace and other forms of witness interact with the often-secular ethos of questioning everything in academic communities. She also opened up the room to discussion of future steps on campuses, including the peace discernment process and beyond.

Among the final recommendations of the students were to bring them together again to report and reflect on what would develop on their campuses. Several campuses in the same region have already planned an exchange of visits and study/action efforts. Among the faculty, there was great diversity and considerable curiosity about the church's strategy and emphasis on young adults. The Peace Discernment steering team hopes to involve a number of the faculty members in future thinking on peace other issues. The chaplains are key to the relationship with the church and yet know how complex each campus setting is. Can the invitation to peace discernment help invite morally concerned students, including veterans, see a church that points to a peaceful kingdom?

Can the consultation be summed up? Perhaps above all it was to show that to be a Presbyterian Church (USA) related institution is to be involved in an on-going discussion of peace and justice.

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