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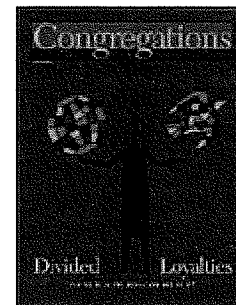
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# CONGREGATIONS

Fall 2003

## Defining a "Just Peace" Vocation

President Bush addressed the nation from the National Cathedral in Washington following September 11, 2001. "Just three days removed from these events," he said, "Americans do not yet have the distance of history. But our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil."<sup>1</sup> The speech was a clarion call anticipating much of the defining foreign policy of his presidency: overthrowing the Taliban, pursuing al-Qaida, and seeking regime change in Iraq. That the presidential call to action came from the pulpit of the National Cathedral raises the question: What is the relationship of the Christian church to American foreign policy?



### Finding an International Vocation

Plymouth United Church of Christ, the congregation I serve in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is in the process of defining its international vocation. Our church is a mainline congregation in a wealthy urban neighborhood. We are rather small: 160 people attend worship on an average Sunday. The congregation is energized by social-service mission projects such as resettling a refugee family, building houses with Habitat for Humanity, and advocating for gay and lesbian issues. As a community we seek to engage America's foreign policy in ways that are honest about our limitations and true to our faith.

In the months after his remarks at the National Cathedral, President Bush systemically redefined America's vocation as a world power in ways that particularly engaged our congregation. His speech to graduating cadets at West Point in June 2002 provided a synopsis of his national-security strategy. The president spoke of America's commitment to a "just peace," saying, "We fight, as we always fight, for a just peace—a peace that favors human liberty."<sup>2</sup> All our strength as a nation would be used to foster and protect human liberty and dignity. According to President Bush, the just-peace vocation of America is to use its power—military, economic, political—to further human liberty, even when this policy means a pre-emptive attack or unilateral action.

The redefinition of our national vocation after 9/11 coincided with, and in many ways energized, our congregation's vocational discernment. During the 1980s, as the nation engaged in an exhausting arms race with the Soviet Union, Plymouth and other United Church of Christ congregations declared themselves "just peace congregations." That designation, an intentional play on Augustine's just-war theory, signaled our criticism of President Reagan's foreign policy, particularly his military buildup and commitment to deterrence through mutual assured destruction. But we did not claim to be pacifists. As a just-peace congregation, we sought to reject the logic of war without denying the necessity of defense. Now with new wars looming, and a president who also uses the language of "just peace," our congregation became re-engaged with what it means to have a just-peace vocation.

### Challenges and Dilemmas

Our new international mission consists of several elements. As a community, we increased our foreign aid. In the past 12 months we undertook financial campaigns for parachurch organizations like Heifer Project International and World Vision. Nearly 10 percent of our member contributions go toward international projects, almost double what we

gave before 9/11. A committed group of lay members is organized for continual prayer and occasional political action. Sermons and educational events seek to address foreign-policy matters from our faith perspective. Our involvement with international issues has brought challenges and dilemmas endemic to any congregation taking such a step.

Immediately after 9/11, several women in the congregation formed a group called "Mothers for Peace." They met weekly for community prayer and vowed to pray for peace individually every day. One member, describing their practice, said they would contemplatively hold President Bush in the light of God's love, encouraging him to find peaceful ways to resolve international conflicts. They similarly prayed for leaders like Saddam Hussein, Ariel Sharon, and Yasser Arafat. Our most visible just-peace ministry was the ongoing practice of prayer.

The Mothers for Peace kept our congregation's antiwar activism grounded in lay concerns. The group provided other members with information on upcoming protests and even organized public events on Afghanistan and Iraq. Support for their work was evident among the congregation as a whole. Many members commented on a sense of congregational unanimity on foreign affairs. In spring, when we held our largest congregational education events on just-peace issues, the primary question was not "How can we agree?" but "What can we do?" Church attendance grew a dramatic 20 percent in 12 months as we increasingly took on peace issues. Our just-peace vocation is effective only because it engages the faith convictions of lay members.

### **Hope-Filled Activists**

The congregation as a whole equipped Mothers for Peace for their ministry. One group member observed a difference between our church ministry and the activism of secular peace groups: secular activists seemed weighed down by discouragement and anger while church members were buoyed by hope. Another member suggested, "World peace comes from a lot of people having inner peace." The congregation cultivated inner peace in our activists by helping them name their own sins and graces. It provided a place for peace activists to transform anger into hopeful action and to recognize themselves as both sinners and saints.

The discussion of foreign policy in sermons and educational events was largely driven by the questions of lay members. The pastors responded by addressing foreign-policy issues from a biblical perspective. At the most basic level, sermons and educational events provided information on what was happening in the wider world. Their editorial component often motivated members' activism. At their best, the preaching and education events led people back into our biblical and theological traditions as they sought ways to understand contemporary problems. Lay members were engaged by the public preaching and education because these did not shrink from foreign-policy concerns.

### **Piety and Partisanship**

As the congregation increasingly responded to issues of foreign policy, identity questions arose. The primary question involved the tension between our spiritual membership in the body of Christ and our worldly identity as American citizens. The question has both a practical and a theoretical dimension. Practically, any description of the congregation must admit that we are heavily Democratic in voting patterns. As Barbara Brown Zigmund, formerly of the Hartford Institute, said, someone giving directions to our building might well say, "They're the last house on the left."<sup>3</sup> When the nation split its vote between Bush and Gore, our congregation split between Gore and Nader. We come to matters of foreign policy as both Christians and liberals, a practical amalgam that cannot easily be separated but that must be honestly acknowledged.

The distinctive political affiliation of our members raises the possibility that our foreign policy commitments are rooted more in partisanship than in spirituality. Indeed, it is troubling that the congregation's engagement with just-peace issues is strongest when a Republican is in the White House. President Clinton used the military for extensive foreign involvement without provoking comment from our congregation. We must ask if we would support the current national-security strategy if it had been proposed by a President Gore. Is it the gospel of Jesus Christ, or the bitterness of Gore Democrats, that governs our reaction to President Bush? The danger that our passion is partisanship wrapped in piety must be faced and confessed.

The greatest lay concern in this regard is to keep the pastoral office separate from a distinct political agenda. Lay members are wary of preachers holding a newspaper in one hand and the Democratic Party platform in the other. Instead, they seek a focus on education and consciousness-raising that may motivate activism but does not direct it. This concern grows out of a commitment to maintain community dialogue about important issues. An unspoken sense among members suggests that the congregation is one of the few civic venues still available for rigorous discussion and dissent on political matters. Our congregation spans the spectrum from a young man entering military service to longtime war protesters; our challenge is to balance openness to discussion with prophetic witness.

### **Balancing Global and Local**

Just as it might be said that international crises are primarily an interruption of the overall domestic focus of our national government, it is hard for the congregation to maintain constant attention to international concerns. Engagement with foreign policy competes with our commitment to local mission projects. Continually some suggest that the congregation redirect international-aid projects to help local recipients. At its best, this proposal represents a desire to help nearby neighbors, to attend to the men or women in the ditch instead of walking past them. Yet it can also manifest a long-standing American isolationism, a yearning to help our own kind first. Do we address segregation and racism in Milwaukee or civil war and atrocity in Liberia? Can we do both? Discerning where the congregation is called to witness involves a steady negotiation between legitimate, compelling possibilities.

Sorting out our identity as partisan citizens and faithful Christians and balancing international and domestic priorities poses a theoretical question. Recently a new member expressed shock at how openly progressive politics are preached from the pulpit. Few members are confused as to how the ministers vote; some lay members champion even greater political activism. Theoretically, we are working out what H. Richard Niebuhr dubbed the "Christ and Culture" question.

### **A Congregation in Transition**

Plymouth, as a congregation named for a civic experiment instead of an exceptional saint, traditionally manifested the ecclesiastical version of noblesse oblige. In earlier years, our congregation founded many of Milwaukee's important cultural institutions. In recent decades this close relationship with the city changed as a result of two trends. First, our congregation became more liberal than the surrounding culture, most notably in our support of women's reproductive freedom and the acceptance of gays and lesbians. Secondly, the movement of people between denominations, not to mention the conversion of unchurched people to our faith, eroded any Congregationalist understanding of the role of church in society. How a former Quaker views our role in society will differ greatly from that of the former Pentecostal and the former agnostic. Our congregation is in a transitional period as we seek to develop a new consensus on how we can relate to American society and the state.

It remains to be seen if Plymouth will renew a vocal public ministry or become a religious enclave. Many members want to see the congregation effectively organized to promote a clear vision of society, a liberal Christian voice countering that of our conservative brothers and sisters. Our congregation could, on the other hand, become a colony of inwardly focused progressives who rail against the vile culture around us. Such a possibility seemed real as members verbally dismissed people who supported the president and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Plymouth is faced with the potential to be an inclusive church in the city or a colony of the pure. Our development of a just-peace vocation forces us to confront choices as to how we regard our role in society.

### **Choosing Mission Partners**

Not only is our relationship with the state in question. We must also ask how we relate to other denominations and parachurch organizations. The youth group held a successful campaign for "Operation Christmas Child," a mission of Samaritan's Purse. The project provides a shoebox of practical items and small gifts to children in poverty-stricken communities around the world. Once the project was completed, we learned more about the mission approach of Samaritan's Purse and its top executive, Franklin Graham. We realized that Samaritan's Purse approached its mission in ways we could not support and that Franklin Graham's views of Islam did not reflect our own approach to other religions. This discovery was an important lesson. As we seek greater involvement in international work, we now

know to review carefully the theological framework of our mission partners.

Finally, as we move forward in our just-peace vocation, we need to reflect as a community on several theological issues. Our conversions about Operation Iraqi Freedom evidenced a deep discomfort with the use of military force. We clearly tend toward pacifism. Yet as Reinhold Niebuhr once remarked, Christian pacifism makes sense only if espoused along with a withdrawal from the demands and responsibilities of society. If our just-peace vocation is truly civic and engaged with society, then moving forward will require the congregation to shift from a reactive protest of military action to the active articulation of a policy and a vision of the circumstances in which military force can be faithfully used.

A just-peace vocation further requires that we take up underlying issues that create the current international instabilities. President Bush is acting out of a prescient awareness that the threats facing Americans, and all of humanity, have significantly changed. He said he believes that "the greatest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology."<sup>4</sup> We need to make our own diagnosis, specifying how we factor widespread inequality in wealth, proliferation of weapons, and the horror of genocide into our calculations of a just peace. If we are going to have a prophetic voice, instead of merely a reactive one, we must face some of the difficult moral dilemmas that President Bush is trying to work out.

Our emerging consensus seems to commit us to working on both international and domestic issues related to social justice, an active engagement in the world guided by our interpretation of the gospel. While our views may differ greatly from the foreign (or domestic) policy of our government, we still function as a very American church. Whenever possible, we seek out partnerships with other churches and parachurch organizations. An aside by Augustine might well describe our role. Writing about empires in *City of God*, Augustine said, "Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies?"<sup>5</sup> The vocation that excites our congregation is reminding the state of its obligation to justice, so that the United States not become a "great robbery." This is a uniquely American and civic vocation, but one that calls us to comment on policies ranging from foreign military action to the detention of domestic terror suspects to the funding of public schools. Plymouth Church will continue its just-peace vocation, praying for President Bush to be held in the light of God's love and preaching the biblical demands of justice.

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#### NOTES

1. President George W. Bush, Washington, D.C. (remarks at National Cathedral, September 14, 2001). Presidential speeches are available online at [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov). Search the current news section of the Web site by the date of the address. Copies of the National Security Strategy (September 2002) and the National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (December 2002) are also available on the White House Web site. The Quadrennial Defense Review of September 2001, which concretely outlines President Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive military action, is available from the Defense Department Web site.
2. Bush, speech at West Point, June 1, 2002.
3. Barbara Brown Zigmund, speech before the Wisconsin Conference (UCC) Annual Meeting in Stevens Point, Wisconsin, June 2000.
4. Bush, speech at West Point, June 1, 2002.
5. Augustine, *City of God*, IV, 4 (NPNF Vol. 2, p. 66).

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