

KENTUCKY COUNCIL OF CHURCHES
STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE IN SOCIETY
Program Unit on Peacemaking/Racism
Approved by the 49th Annual Assembly, October 24-25, 1996

RECONCILIATION: THE CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSIBILITY AMID THE VIOLENCE OF OUR TIME

"Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy ...

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God." Matthew 5:7, 10

"Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding." -- Romans 14:19

"... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." -- 2 Corinthians 5:19

The escalation of violence and acts of vengeance in our time, in American society and across the globe compels the member churches of the Kentucky Council of Churches to renew their commitment to the ways of peace. As churches who make up a "household of faith, a family of God's children, living in this Commonwealth", we "believe ourselves to be called together to live out our hope, to bear witness to the work of Christ in our presence, and in the world, and to seek justice, peace and reconciliation." [From the Statement of Vision of the Kentucky Council of Churches]. We are churches gathered by the story that is **good news**, the gospel of Jesus Christ! Not only did Jesus teach us to love our enemies, he himself prayed for his enemies even as he experienced the violence of crucifixion, confirming God's peacemaking and reconciling nature: "...for while we were enemies, we were reconciled through the death of his Son " [Romans 5: 10].

Violence multiplies across many dimensions of our lives. A Federal Building in Oklahoma City is bombed. Militia groups are proliferating, and members are practicing for armed combat within our own nation. Churches are burned and places of worship and cemeteries desecrated. Gun related deaths are one of the highest causes of death among teenagers. More and more citizens believe they need to own and to carry handguns in concealment.

Violence does not discriminate on the basis of gender, age, race, creed, income, or place of residence. The public's sense of safety and security has eroded from the exposure to real and fictionalized crime, murder, assault, and vengeance that make up the "news" and "media presentations" on any given day in America. Despite the fact that violent crime rates have been dropping in the mid-1990s, the perception that violent crime is increasing leads many people to call for the expansion of the death penalty and excessive prison sentences, extending these even to children in their early teens. At the same time, the continued racism of our culture has been proven to play a significant role in the uneven application of these punishments.

Violence is simple and brutal, yet its roots are complex. Persons who are subject to arbitrary or abusive authority seem particularly vulnerable to violence. Abuse of drugs and alcohol may provoke violence. Violence may be exacerbated by the prominence given to violence in films, television, and even children's games. We must also recognize that physical violence may erupt as a result of verbal abuse, and may be aggravated by inflammatory political rhetoric. Poverty wreaks its own violence upon the lives of the innocent, spawning anger, and providing an environment in which hatred and a desire for vengeance may develop.

Violence--whether physical, or verbal, whether oppressive or lethal--cannot be reduced to one cause. Vengeance taken for perceived hurts, slights, neglect, or overt acts of physical violence rarely ends the violent impulse. Violence induces only more violence, spawning an ever-growing spiral of fear, animosity, hostility, and aggression.

However, just as violence is a learned behavior, the attitudes and actions of non-violence and peacemaking, of self-control, can be taught. Violence can be unlearned. The things that make for harmony and good will among people can be inculcated, instilled, practiced, and be made habitual.

As Christians, we must acknowledge our complicity in the currents of violence which can be found throughout our society, especially if we do not work to counteract these things which initiate or add to the climate of fear and

aggression which leads to violence. We cannot be blind to the incidents of violence which we think will not affect us. We cannot ignore the continued racism in our culture. We must hear and respond to the hurt and anger of people who believe they have suffered injustice and prejudice. We must be the balm in Gilead to heat the ruptured and broken lives in our society.

Therefore, be it resolved:

The Kentucky Council of Churches calls upon Churches and Christians throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky to give witness through their words and actions to the power of Christ's way of reconciliation.

We call upon families, churches, schools, communities, public officials and molders of public opinion to teach and learn together new ways of handling conflict, resolving disputes, and acknowledging mistakes and offenses against others.

We urge churches to offer specific classes for children, youth, and adults in the management of conflict and handling of angry emotions. If "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control; against which there is no law", then we must help our members develop these gifts, and empower them to share these behaviors with others.

We call upon ministerial associations to work to establish mediation centers in their communities where individual conflicts, domestic quarrels, business disputes, and interpersonal conflicts may be worked out in a spirit of mercy, forgiveness, peacemaking, and reconciliation. If a wrong has been done, we urge such centers to develop principles of restitution, rather than inflicting punishment upon the wrongdoer. We urge Christian attorneys to facilitate the development of these mediation centers, and to encourage their use by their clients.

The Kentucky Council of Churches endorses the gun control measures of waiting periods for purchase and the licensing of persons who own or wish to purchase handguns. We will continue our opposition to assault weapons. The Council opposes legislation to permit the carrying of concealed weapons, with or without licenses. When such legislation has been enacted, we will work to make it as strict as possible and to make serious penalties for carrying concealed deadly weapons into places where they are expressly prohibited.

The Kentucky Council of Churches deplores and condemns those acts which inflict injury and death upon innocent people and destroy their property. Particularly heinous is the wanton destruction of property dedicated to the good of all people and the desecration of houses of worship. The Christian response to the perpetrators of the crime should be redemptive rather than punitive. And so we recommend that the judicial consequences as a minimum should include restitution and mandatory community service, directly benefiting those who have suffered the harm. At the same time, in the case of arson or desecration of houses of worship, we would encourage that a portion of the punishment be restitution and community service alongside the people whose worship home may have been destroyed.

In an effort to limit the violence we urge all families to supervise the television shows, films, and video games that their children watch or play, to limit their exposure to violence. In particularly crude displays of violence or disrespect of persons in the media, we encourage people to protest to the network, and the commercial sponsors of the particular offending show. Further, we suggest that parents and churches present their children with heroes and heroines whose lives are worthy of emulation, and to avoid toys, books, and games which encourage adulation of those whose chief characteristic is fighting or violence.

God calls the churches to intervene in this spiral of fear, violence, and aggression. The Kentucky Council of Churches, through its Program Unit on Racism and Peacemaking, pledges its ongoing efforts to provide resources for community and church programs which share these convictions. We will continue to monitor those resources which we believe will be helpful to parents, churches, and community groups whose aim is to reduce the violence in our world, and to establish peaceful communities of care and opportunity for all citizens.