

February 26, 2022
Pastoral Letter on Ukraine

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”
(Matthew 5:9, NRSV)

Dear Friends & Colleagues,

The headlines are filled with disturbing words about the scene which is unfolding before our eyes in Ukraine. They are words that clearly define the intentions of the Russian government to inflict widespread human rights abuses, and potentially worse, on the people of Ukraine. They are words that describe not only the horrific and bloody toll that has happened, but they also detail the grim realities about what leaders anticipate will happen. They are words that turns the stomachs of those who long for and work toward peace.

As United Methodists, we have words too. They are words that are born directly out of our theology and our core beliefs of grace and love. We too have words, and our stance is clear and undeniable:

“We believe war is incompatible with the teachings and example of Christ. We therefore reject war as an instrument of national foreign policy. We oppose unilateral first/preemptive strike actions and strategies on the part of any government. As disciples of Christ, we are called to love our enemies, seek justice, and serve as reconcilers of conflict. We insist that the first moral duty of all nations is to work together to resolve by peaceful means every dispute that arises between or among them. . . . We believe that human values must outweigh military claims as governments determine their priorities.”

(2016 United Methodist Book of Discipline, Social Principles, ¶165c)

These words leave little doubt as to where we stand and how we respond when acts of violence and war threaten the higher road of peace. These words have deep meaning for United Methodist pastors and churches in the Ukraine and in Russia and are words they long to be converted into action.

At times our “Social Principles” are criticized for being too political. And yet, when it comes to war, our Social Principles point to two very deeply spiritual matters: the teaching and example of Christ and the response of Christ’s disciples.

The way of Christ is not a way of war. The response of Christ’s disciples is to love enemies, seek justice, and serve as reconcilers of conflict. This is our standard, our baseline, our directive, and our call to action. War is not compatible with the belief system that informs the way we think, the way we pray, and the way we act.

For the last two years, we have been fighting a war with a killer disease called Covid. That war has come very close to our homes, our safety, and our livelihood. It has taken no prisoners and ripped our norms from the very fabric of our being. As a result, we have

earnestly prayed, genuinely cried, and eagerly longed for a better day to emerge.

The war in Ukraine is not knocking on the door of homes today. It is not closing our churches. As a result, it is easy for us to simply focus on ourselves and the problems we face at home. It is easy to focus simply on ourselves. But as we safely worship in our churches and lay our heads on pillows in warm homes on cold winter nights, there are people just like us whose dark night of the soul is lit up with a bomb or a gunshot from a country that outweighs military aggression over human life.

This is unacceptable, intolerable, and incompatible with the teachings of the faith which we embrace.

When times like these arise, our default statement is to say that “our thoughts and prayers are with the people of Ukraine.” But yesterday on Facebook, Rabbi Victor Urecki wrote these words: *“Now is not the time for thoughts and prayers for the people of Ukraine. Now is the time to pray that thoughtful nations and an all too often silent world will not look away when another people are being viciously attacked.”*

Covid has turned us inward. Now is the time to focus outward and intercede in prayer for the people of Ukraine and for the leaders of the world who have the power to bring an end to this war.

May it be so.

The Journey Continues, . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas J. Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thomas J. Bickerton
Resident Bishop