

AMERICAN BAPTIST POLICY STATEMENT ON VIOLENCE

Situational Analysis

Violence is a global human experience. In our society violence is deeply rooted and constitutes a hazard to our public health and well-being. It demands both a prophetic witness and a pastoral response by American Baptists.

Individuals and communities experience violence in a variety of forms. Gang and criminal violence pervade many communities. Domestic violence afflicts communities regardless of economic, ethnic or racial identity. Violence is projected into homes by means of both the entertainment and news media.

Modern U. S. society was born through violent ways, through the subjugation and exploitation of many of its peoples. The multiple horrors of the destruction of native peoples, the enslavement of African peoples, and the exploitation of immigrants are major strands of a web of economic, cultural, political, and societal commitments that have inevitably led to violence.

The culture of violence is manifested both in the pervasiveness of overt acts of physical force and in the more subtle dynamics by which harm is persistently done to people. This culture of violence is reflected in such ways as: the glorified role of violence in historic frontier communities; violence in the family; violence of sexual abuse, incest and rape; violence in the workplace; violence in the schools; violence in the streets; violence in the criminal justice system; violence in the use of guns, knives, and other weapons of assault; violence in the military; violence in war; violence in the marketing of weapons; violence of industries that profit by harming others; violence in the media; violence in music; violence of hate crimes; violence of the systematic destruction of the earth; and the existence of nuclear weapons, wherein we have seized the divine prerogative to determine the destiny of humanity.

Violence finds expression in every human culture. The increasing interconnectedness of the global community has brought us in contact with the breadth and variety of human experiences of violence. Our missionary calling has required us to minister in the very midst of these life threatening situations at home and abroad.

As Christians we are conscious of the violence around us, but we have often been numbed by its frequency and enculturation in our lives. Too often we exhibit our conformity to the world by the vicious disputes in our churches. Rather than being witnesses to Christ's transformative power, we have made choices that reflect our own

rootedness in a violence-ridden society. This sad reality requires continuing reflection, confession and committed action as disciples of Christ.

Biblical/Theological Background

The theological convictions of the Christian community are derived from the biblical revelation that depicts a God who affirms the sanctity of life and who calls us to be dedicated to the vision of shalom, the well-being of all creation. The God revealed in the Bible is the God who purposefully creates and sustains life and pronounces it good (Genesis 1:31). The biblical witness, while acknowledging violence in society, consistently communicates God's desire that the human community be characterized by life-giving relationships (Psalm 34:12-14; John 15:12; 2 Timothy 2:24; Romans 12:18). Within the context of life-giving relationships, violence against one's neighbor is a fundamental violation of the covenant with God (Genesis 4:10; Mark 12:28-31; Matthew 5:21-24; Romans 13:10). In addition, the new covenant established by God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ provides the Christian community with a vision of human relationship that affirms life (Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 25:39). According to the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life; he has come into the world to bring abundant life (John 14:6; 10:10). Jesus' life and public ministry demonstrate his decision to reject violence as a way of life. His example and teaching call his followers to make peace in the world (Matthew 5:9; Mark 9:50). It is clear that both the Old and New Testaments provide us with a witness that affirms the well-being of the creation, peacemaking and life.

Conflict in and of itself is a natural part of human interaction. However, conflict can be holy ground on which revelation takes place and we come to know ourselves, others, and God more clearly. On the other hand, our sinful natures can make conflict an occasion in which we embrace violence, deny the sanctity of life and reject our covenantal connections. The Bible recognizes the existence of violent conflict as a part of the culture of fallen humanity; it also affirms that God's will for life, peace and wholeness is at work amidst the fallenness of creation. Therefore, God's challenge to the people of faith is that we bring a witness to the world that is both prophetic and pastoral in its proclamation of life.

The biblical vision calls the Christian faith community to live by a hope that it does not yet see but that nevertheless shapes its values, commitments, actions and witness. This means that the Christian community must provide a prophetic witness for life and shalom. The Christian ideals of justice, peace, mercy and love demand prophetic critique of the idols of death (Hosea 10:12-14; Luke 16:13; Isaiah 31:1) while affirming the value and sanctity of life within the creation (Isaiah 65:17-25).

The Christian community is required to do more than bring a prophetic word. It is called to embody in its very life "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). In other words, the Christian community must incarnate this faith and hope within its values, commitments and actions as it seeks to minister and witness to the world. This incarnation is pastoral action wherein the Christian community

lives out its commitment through evangelistic witness (1 Timothy 1:12-16), making peace (James 3:18), and overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21).

The Policy

It is with a sense of divine leading that we acknowledge that the God of the Bible is the God of life who calls us to shalom, the well-being of all creation. We affirm a belief that, through the biblical vision of shalom and the example of Jesus Christ, the Christian community is called to respond prophetically and pastorally to the existing reality of violence in the world. When the ambiguities and moral complexities of a situation demand that we make difficult choices, we must act as faithfully as we know how, with a humble dependence upon the grace of God.

Therefore, as a sign of our prophetic calling, we call upon all American Baptists, American Baptist churches, and American Baptist organizations to do the following:

1. To be peacemakers, builders of God's shalom;
2. To work for the prevention of violence, the peaceful resolution of conflicts and just reconciliation;
3. To advocate for a more responsible media;
4. To challenge ideologies, structures, politics and policies that lead to violence.

As a sign of our pastoral commitment to stand against violence, we as members of the General Board commit ourselves and call upon American Baptist churches and other American Baptist organizations to do the following:

1. To call on our churches to preach the life-transforming power of Christ, applying this message concretely to our tendency toward violence;
2. To educate ourselves on the constructive use of conflict;
3. To educate ourselves about the violence in the media and culture and to advocate for corrective measures as part of our responsibility as disciples of Christ;
4. To facilitate the development of conflict-resolution teams, violence prevention strategies and nonviolent means of political and social change;
5. To promote the inclusion of victims in the process of creating solutions to issues of violence;

6. To identify and utilize effective models of healing for those who have been victimized by violence;
7. To advocate for further regulations on the manufacturing and use of life-threatening products;
8. To join with other organizations to act locally and nationally to curtail violence.
9. To avoid investments in companies that are involved in the manufacture and/or distribution of life-threatening products.

Adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches - June 1998
101 For, 12 Against, 7 Abstentions
General Board Reference #7046:6/98
