

Peace and Justice and the 2023 World Conference

By Rick Sarre



The World Conference body in April 2019 gave the church a significant challenge for the future: **Resolved**, that, over the next three years Community of Christ members and leaders discuss the role nonviolence plays in the pursuit of "peace on and for the Earth" (Doctrine and Covenants 165:1d) and in the life and mission of the church; and be it further

Resolved, that, scriptural, theological, and historical discussion resources on the principles of nonviolence be produced and suggested for members and friends of Community of Christ as part of our continued commitment to peace education and advocacy; and be it further

Resolved, that, the position of Community of Christ on nonviolence be referred to the First Presidency for a report and/or statement to be presented to the 2022 World Conference.



Photo by Chad Godfrey

Of course, the conference has now shifted ten months later to April 2023, but the challenge (referred to now as World Church Resolution (WCR) 1319) for the church remains solidly in frame.

After the conference, the First Presidency sent WCR 1319 to the Peace and Justice Team of the church (which I chair) to start the process that will finally result in a report or statement for the 2023 conference. In the first part of 2020 our Team fashioned a position paper (of some 3,000 words) and then sent it to the other World Church teams for responses. I am not sure that the existence of these other eight Teams is well known in the Australia church, so here they are:

- Earth Stewardship Team
- Human Rights Team
- Diversity & Inclusion Team
- Ecumenical & Interfaith Team
- Church History & Sacred Story Team
- Health & Wholeness Team
- Spiritual Formation Team
- Theology Formation Team

Each Team was directed to provide a paper by the end of 2020 that discussed, from the perspective of that Team, the role nonviolence plays in the life and mission of the church. I received all eight responses and forwarded them to the Peace and Justice Team for our consideration. We then produced a final version after further discussion.

On 17 and 18 April 2021 (there are two dates because we have to accommodate international time-zones for members located in Hawaii, across mainland US and Canada, England, Belgium, Kenya and Australia) we met by Zoom with the three members of the First Presidency to discuss this latest version. It was a productive time together. We now await their response after they take the paper to the World Church Leadership Council and the Council of Twelve.

This is a long and comprehensive process precisely because the task is an important one. Indeed, it was Joseph Smith III who said that "peace is eminently our mission". But the church has long struggled with how to profess peace (as we find it in the Church Seal) while reconciling the various interpretations of peace and non-violence held by members of the world-wide church. At the same time as we uphold the contribution of pacifists to the work of our organisation, we simultaneously recognise the close association that the US church (especially) has always enjoyed with members who serve in the military. (Of historical interest is the fact that the church was established in Korea after the Korean War when members of our church (from the US military) met

for religious sessions with those whose security they had been fighting for.)

I am not, of course, at liberty to share the contents of the current version of the paper with a wider audience, as it has not gone through all of the processes as required. However, I can say that the Peace and Justice Team position paper provides background details on the theories of holy war, just war, just peace and pacifism. It links our striving for peace to matters concerned with, amongst other things, human rights, the ecology of the earth and inclusive societies by highlighting the importance of justice, reconciliation, well-being, wholeness, the inalienable worth of all persons and sacredness of creation in the mission of the church. The quest for peace, we affirm, includes challenging "cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God" (D&C 163:3b). Importantly, the document addresses the need for our advocacy for the protection of those who are vulnerable to violence.

In essence, we say, the challenge is to bring about right relationships on and for the earth.

Members may recall that another action of the 2019 conference was to adopt a resolution from the Australia Mission Centre on "Domestic and Sexual Violence" (WCR 1317).^{*} The final resolved reads as follows:

"The conference requests that the First Presidency develop or make available culturally appropriate study materials regarding domestic and sexual violence and abuse with the intent that such material will become part of the required course curriculum for all current priesthood members and candidates for priesthood office."

This task is in addition to the materials developed under WCR 1319.

We await with great anticipation the outcome of the next steps in these important quests.

^{*}Footnote: every WCR passed by conference action is now available on line here: <https://www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/WCR-Texts-July2019.pdf>