

Overture on Afghanistan War

The Presbytery of New York City overtures the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to:

- 1) Declare itself in opposition to further military operations by the United States in Afghanistan.
- 2) Call upon the United States Government to:
 - a) pursue non-combative actions, and only those, in vigorous pursuit of stability, prosperity, and peace in Afghanistan and in the region;
 - b) cooperate with the United Nations and Afghanistan's neighbors in the stabilization process; and
 - c) cooperate with the United Nations in providing and overseeing greatly expanded aid to Afghanistan for the delivery of humanitarian services and economic development assistance.
- 3) Direct the Office of the PC (U.S.A.) General Assembly, in conjunction with ecumenical partners, to take the following actions, where appropriate assigning responsibilities to the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, the Presbyterian Washington and UN Offices, or other entities of the General Assembly Mission Council:
 - a) Communicate to the United States President and Congress the position of this Assembly as set forth in Paragraph 2 above;
 - b) Further urge the President and Congress to commit the United States government to the use of peaceful means for the making of peace and for the pursuit of national interests, concentrating upon diplomacy, international collaboration, and material aid for education, the reduction of poverty, and the broadening of political enfranchisement in Afghanistan and elsewhere;
 - c) Encourage congregations and individual Presbyterians to pray for the people of Afghanistan and all fighting forces there, particularly those who have been wounded or who have lost loved ones and to engage in advocacy and actions for peace;
 - d) Call upon the United States Government to provide adequate healthcare and rehabilitation, including psychiatric care, trauma therapy, and substance abuse

programs for members and veterans of its armed forces;

- e) Ask the United States Government to tabulate Afghanistan war casualties among all parties, civilian and military, and make a general inventory of destruction so that the human and material costs of the war may be assessed and the moral obligations of reconstruction and restitution be kept before the conscience of the nation;
- f) Provide congregations and presbyteries with materials appropriate for studying the effects of the present war in Afghanistan and of non-combative actions the United States might take in pursuit of the region's stability, prosperity, and peace;
- g) Direct the General Assembly Mission Council, through its Peacemaking Program and the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP), to convene a seminary- and college-wide review of peace studies, including peacemaking opportunities appropriate to the need to demilitarize U.S. international relations, and to report the results of this study to the 221st General Assembly (2014).

RATIONALE:

Afghanistan is frequently called “the graveyard of empires.” Today it has become an illustration of Jesus’ saying that “those who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52). There is widespread opinion, in military as well as civilian circles, that the war cannot be won on the battlefield. Whether any modern war can truly be won is debatable, but there is scant reason to think the United States can find military victory where so many empires of the past have failed.¹

The war being conducted in Afghanistan as a NATO operation with major participation by United States forces does not have the support of most Afghans. Such support as there has been is declining.² This works to the long-range advantage of the Taliban and Al Qaeda, whose defeat is the apparent aim of the United States Government. This war, like most, is counterproductive.

Although the war in Afghanistan is by no means the largest in recent times, its human costs are immense. At least 18,000 Afghans have been killed³ and tens of thousands more have been injured – mostly non-combatants – since the U.S.-led international intervention began in 2001. As of late 2009, Operation Enduring Freedom, as it is called, had cost the United States some 800 fatalities plus more than 2,500 seriously wounded.⁴ There is also a rising and alarming rate of drug and alcohol usage by our fighting forces, doubtless a reaction to stress, and perhaps related to ambivalence about the mission they are being asked to pursue.⁵ Furthermore, there is widespread

corruption among Afghan leaders, often related to the opium trade; and the August 2009 election was marred by considerable voting fraud. The use of US unmanned drones has accounted for many civilian casualties and has led to increased resentment among Afghans.

The war's financial costs are also huge: more than \$273 billion, according to the Center for Defense Information.⁶ To bring about peace, stability, and the reduction of terrorism, such a sum would produce far better results if spent on goods and services of benefit to the people of Afghanistan and its neighbors: education, health care, economic development, food security, poverty reduction, and the like. The Rand Corporation has determined that political work, local law enforcement, and peacekeeping would be more effective than increases in military force.⁷

The current situation in Afghanistan provides an opportunity to shift American resources and strategy in a far more productive direction than at present. It is too costly and breeds too much resentment. The long-range interests of the United States require less reliance on military strategies for spreading democracy, reducing terrorism, and providing for our own safety. The root of war, especially in our time, is injustice, usually expressed as severe economic inequity. Hunger and desperation do not nourish peace.

Jesus' warning that one cannot serve two masters is highly relevant in international affairs. A nation cannot pursue peace while waging war, nor justice through militarism. The centuries-long attempt by many churches and Christians to justify war as a strategy of peace is coming apart in our time. Wars such as the one in Afghanistan increasingly result in the rape and killing of civilians, the destruction of their homes, and the devastation of lands, economies and social structures.

The gospel of and about Jesus Christ is a gospel of peace and peacemaking. There is no more appropriate time for a church to proclaim the peace of Christ and to pursue its mandates than when a country and its government are pursuing the horrors and futility of a misbegotten war.

It is not the province of a church to devise a template of government strategies; we are not a political party. But it is our responsibility to call the nation and the world to the way of peace and to resist the logic of war. That is at the heart of the biblical vision and the gospel of Christ. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Corinthians 1:25, NRSV)

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Endnotes:

1. Powerful armies that met defeat in Afghanistan include those of Alexander the Great in the 4th Century BCE, the British in the 19th Century CE, and the Soviet Union in the 20th

2. ABC News/BBC/ARD National Survey of Afghanistan, ANALYSIS by GARY LANGER, Feb. 9, 2009. "In 2005 ... 83 percent of Afghans expressed a favorable opinion of the United States – unheard of in a Muslim nation. Today just 47 percent still hold that view, down 36 points, accelerating with an 18-point drop in U.S. favorability this year alone." – URL: <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/story?id=6787686&page=1>

3. United for Peace and Justice, Fact Sheet #1, online at <http://unitedforpeace.org/article.php?id=4019>

4. See: <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/casualty.pdf>

5. "... figures shows that by the end 2005 of the 104 000 who had sought medical help after serving in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan 32,010 were suffering from post traumatic stress disorder depression drug addiction or alcoholism... Proportionally, that's three times as many as those who returned from Vietnam.... A Pentagon health study found that the rate of binge drinking in the Army shot up by 30 percent from 2002 to 2005 and they concluded, that it may signal an increasing pattern of heavy alcohol use in the Army'.... 3,057 veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars were diagnosed with potential drug dependency from 2005 to 2007, according the Veteran Health Authority. From 2002 through 2004 only 277 veterans were diagnosed with a drug dependency." Center on Conscience and War, *Reporter*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (2009), p. 3.

6. Precise figures are not available. According to the Congressional Research service, almost \$143 billion had been appropriated for Operation Enduring Freedom by the end of 2008. OEF principally refers to Afghanistan, while including some operations in the Horn of Africa, the Philippines, and "elsewhere." See the Center for Defense Information, <http://www.cdi.org/friendlyversion/printversion.cfm?documentID=4072>.

Outlays increased considerably with the increase in troop strength in 2009, although the amount is not available at the date of writing this overture. In May, 2009, the Department of Defense announced that in 2010 the cost of running the war in Afghanistan would exceed the cost of the conflict in Iraq. It requested \$130 billion for "overseas contingency operations," mostly for Afghanistan. See "Sign of the Times: Afghanistan War Costs Higher Than Iraq," By Nathan Hodge, May 7, 2009. URL: <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2009/05/sign-of-the-times-afghanistan-war-costs-higher-than-iraq/>

Taken together, these figures suggest that the cost of waging war in Afghanistan has been at least \$273 billion, not counting whatever was spent in 2009.

7. United for Peace and Justice Fact Sheet #1, online at <http://unitedforpeace.org/article.php?id=4019>