



Educational Statement on Pursuing Peace

Prepared by the Office of the President and the Peace and Conflict Studies Committee

The pursuit of peace is central to Messiah University's mission and identity. While "peace" can be defined in different ways, when we speak of peace at Messiah University, we are referring to the ancient Hebrew concept of *shalom* which is described in the Bible. *Shalom* is the well-being God desires for all creation. Much more than simply the absence of war or lack of conflict, *shalom* represents the presence of wholeness and wellness that individuals and communities can experience with their surroundings, each what the Bible calls *shalom* or peace. People experience this peace when their basic needs are met, when they live in safety and security, and when they are in right relationships with God and others. So, when we talk about peace at Messiah University, we are referring to this presence of holism and harmony that God has ordained and that God calls us to actively pursue.

God's call to peace and peacemaking is firmly grounded in the Scriptures. The Old Testament begins with a declaration that human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) which affirms the inherent value and worth of every individual and the need to treat every human being with dignity and respect. So, the people of Israel were not to kill one another (Exod. 20:13), but were instructed to engage in acts of compassion and care, especially for the weakest and most vulnerable members of the community. The Old Testament has a particularly strong emphasis on doing justice, or setting things right (Deut. 10:17-19; Micah 6:8). Only by ensuring justice can the community of faith achieve true peace and make people feel safe and secure. Among the Old Testament's most powerful and imaginative images of peace is the prophetic vision of a world without war (Isa. 2:1-4; Hos. 2:18). Although it was not the world Israel enjoyed, it was the one God called them to work for and to anticipate with hope and expectation.

The New Testament has a strong and consistent emphasis on peace and nonviolence. This is especially evident in the Gospels, particularly in the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus repeatedly rejected violence throughout his public ministry and called upon his followers to do likewise. Rather than hurting people, Jesus was known for healing and helping them. Jesus spoke frequently about the kingdom of God, God's reign of peace and justice over all creation. This kingdom, which Jesus inaugurated, is not dependent upon violence (Jn. 18:36). Rather, it is rooted in love and operates by grace.

Jesus' life and teachings highlight the centrality of peace and nonviolence to the life of faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says peacemakers "will be called children of God" (Matt. 5:9). Jesus' emphasis on peace and nonviolence is most clearly seen in his command to love. Jesus commands his followers to love one another (Jn. 13:35) and to love their enemies (Matt. 5:43-

45), and both were modeled by Jesus on the cross as he chose to die rather than to kill. Consequently, rather than retaliating when wronged, followers of Jesus are to forgive and, when possible, reconcile. Indeed, working toward reconciliation is crucial to the life of discipleship (Matt. 5:23-24), and it is at the very heart of the good news of the gospel (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

Many of these teachings of Jesus are echoed by the apostle Paul. Paul counsels Christians to bless their persecutors rather than curse them (Rom. 12:14). He also instructs them not to repay evil with evil but to repay evil with good (Rom. 12:17). As Christians, we should constantly be looking for ways to "overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:21).

Teaching and pursuing this biblical understanding of peace have been commitments of Messiah University since its founding. The university's founding denomination, the Brethren in Christ church, traces its roots to sixteenth-century Anabaptism, a Christian tradition which sought to follow Jesus Christ by loving its enemies and rejecting violence of every kind. The Brethren in Christ originally lived out these peaceful intentions by cultivating healthy interpersonal relationships and refusing to participate in war. While the church's early peace witness was relatively passive, over the course of the twentieth century it became a more active position. Terms like peacemaking, service and reconciliation increasingly became a part of the church's vocabulary, reflecting a desire to seek harmony and holism consistent with biblical *shalom*.

This heritage is reflected in Messiah University's foundational documents. Messiah's Mission Statement declares, "Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society." And, the university's fifth foundational value links its ethical commitment to peace, service, and reconciliation to the pursuit of justice:

Central to the Gospel is the work of reconciling individuals with God, with each other, and with all of creation. God has called us to be active agents in this work as we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and bear the fruit of the Spirit within us: love, joy, **peace**, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Prepared in this way, we are compelled to share the redeeming Gospel of Jesus with those around us, **to build bridges of understanding and peace** across the dividing lines of race, class, age, gender, religion and ethnicity, to demonstrate the love of God in service to others, to open our hearts to the poor and needy, and **to work for justice wherever injustice prevails.**

Today, Messiah University has grown beyond its Brethren in Christ beginnings into a dynamic, interdenominational Christ-centered learning community. It welcomes students, faculty, and staff from a variety of Christian traditions, and the University's peace tradition has been enriched by this ecumenical spirit and interaction. While still grounded in its heritage, the University continues to expand its peace vocabulary and practice by listening to and learning from a variety of Christian voices and traditions. As it relates to war, students, faculty and staff who do not embrace the peace tradition are welcome and invited to share their perspectives. As a Christ-centered educational community, we believe we can learn from differing perspectives.

Peacemaking which is grounded in scripture and in Messiah University's historical identity is evident Messiah University's curriculum. For example, the University's required first year

course, Created and Called for Community, is informed by multiple Christian peace traditions and the course explicitly teaches peace by "forming a working definition of Christian Vocation as it relates to reconciliation..."¹ While more obvious curricular evidence of Messiah University's commitment to peace are the majors in Peace and Conflict Studies and Sustainability Studies, all of the University's courses and academic programs that teach and cultivate peace as biblical shalom contribute to the University's pursuit of peace.

Co-curricular and extra-curricular programs also reflect Messiah University's commitment to peace. The Wittlinger Chapel Series for first year students includes emphases on peace and reconciliation. Student clubs and college-wide efforts that focus on appreciating human diversity and promoting reconciliation, justice and human rights support the peace heritage of the University. To the extent that student clubs and university-sponsored activities and programs promote holistic human flourishing consistent with biblical shalom, they are teaching and cultivating peace.

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¹ 1 Created and Called for Community Objective "d;" [https://www.messiah.edu/download/downloads/id/4765/QuEST Objectives 2017 18.pdf](https://www.messiah.edu/download/downloads/id/4765/QuEST%20Objectives%202017%2018.pdf)