

Religious statements for disarmament

Excerpted from David Cortright, *Peace Works: The Citizen's Role in Ending the Cold War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 56-58.

The religious cry for peace during the 1980s was heard not just from Catholics but from all believers. Protestant churches went further than the Catholics in condemning the very existence of nuclear weapons. The uneasy acceptance of deterrence that had characterized the Protestant tradition prior to the 1980s gave way in many instances to an explicit endorsement of disarmament. Not only the use but the very possession of nuclear weapons was declared unacceptable.

The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church of America passed resolutions urging the elimination of nuclear weapons. The executive ministers of the American Baptist Church called the existence of nuclear weapons and the willingness to use them “a direct affront to our Christian beliefs.” At the world Council of Churches sixth assembly in Vancouver in 1983, the delegates adopted a statement of virtual nuclear pacifism: “We believe that the time has come when churches must unequivocally declare that the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and that such activities must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds.”ⁱ

Perhaps the most far-reaching condemnation of nuclear policy was that of the United Methodist Church. Their statement, *In Defense of Creation*, explicitly rejected not only the arms race but the whole concept of deterrence. The bishops declared that nuclear deterrence “must not receive the church's blessing even as a temporary warrant.” The Methodist statement also addressed the economic consequences of the arms race. The statement read, “justice is forsaken in the squandering of the arms race while a holocaust of hunger, malnutrition, disease and violent death is destroying the world's poorest peoples.”ⁱⁱ

A number of Protestant denominations translated their words into action. The United Presbyterian Church, an early endorser of the nuclear freeze, established a peacemaking program in 1980 that continued for many years afterwards. A special collection each fall in Presbyterian churches provided funding for a staff at church headquarters in Louisville KY and supported peace education programs both nationally and in local presbyteries. The National Council of Churches, the United Church of Christ, and other Protestant denominations also established peace advocacy programs. Many of these church offices

participated in lobbying efforts and were actively involved in campaigns for the nuclear freeze, against the MX, and for peace in Central America.

The Jewish community also raised its voice for peace during the 1980s. Although many individual Jews were actively involved in the freeze movement, the mainline organizations of Judaism tended to be more cautious. The major exception was the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which at the time represented approximately one-third of the Jewish community in the United States. Led by rabbis Alexander Schindler and David Saperstein, the UAHC was an early supporter of the freeze proposition and a vigorous supporter of local educational campaigns in synagogues and community organizations all over the country. More conservative groups also spoke out against the nuclear threat. In 1982, the Rabbinical Assembly of America, the largest of the three groups within Judaism at the time, issued a statement endorsing the nuclear freeze. In February 1983, the synagogue council of America, an umbrella group embracing all branches of Judaism, adopted a similar resolution urging the US and the Soviet Union to implement a bilateral mutual cessation of the production and deployment of nuclear weapons.ⁱⁱⁱ

African Americans traditionally are opposed to military interventionism and are strong supporters of peace,^{iv} but black churches tend not to be involved in the organized peace movement. During the 1980s many black churches and religious leaders were supporters of the freeze and nuclear disarmament, but their organizational energies and personal commitments were focused elsewhere, in opposition to the institutionalized violence of poverty and injustice within their communities.

A number of prominent black ministers played a role in the peace movement, following the earlier tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s membership in SANE. Reverend Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Council, was a co-chair of Clergy and Laity Concerned and was involved in numerous peace campaigns. Perhaps the most active black leader for peace during that decade was Rev. Jesse Jackson. He was an early endorser of the nuclear freeze, a sponsor of Jobs with Justice, and a member of the board of directors of SANE. Jackson addressed many events, including the Peace Sunday concert of 90,000 people in California in June 1982. He remained actively committed to speaking out for peace throughout his life.

ⁱ Quotes from Bruce van Voorst, "The Churches and Nuclear Deterrence," *Foreign Affairs* 61 (Spring 1983).

ⁱⁱ Citations from The United Methodist Council of Bishops, *In Defense of Creation: The Nuclear Crisis and a Just Peace* (Nashville TN: Graded Press), 1986.

ⁱⁱⁱ Van Voorst.

^{iv} Frances Beal and Ty dePass, "The Historical Black Presence in the Struggle for Peace," *The Black Scholar* 17 (January/February 1986), p. 2.