

Introduction

The World Council of Churches has declared the decade beginning 2001 as a Decade to Overcome Violence, and this declaration was recently affirmed by the United Church of Christ's General Synod XXII in Kansas City, Missouri.

Together with churches around the world, we have been called to witness that the ending of violence is a central part of our mission.

We are invited to work to end violence against women in our homes; to end the violence of war; to end the culture of violence found in movies, music, videos and computer games; and to end violence in whatever form it appears in our own communities.

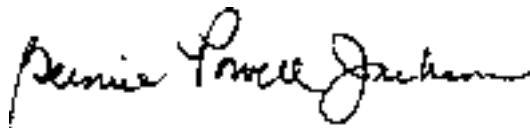
What if every one of our UCC churches declared that ending violence would become a priority emphasis during the next decade? What if we prayed for peace, worked for peace, wrote letters for peace, and helped children to be agents of peace? What if we made our local churches sanctuaries of peace for battered women and children? What if we worked to end gun violence in our communities? What if we worked to end the violence of war, militarism, poverty, or police brutality?

Every local church can do something to end violence. Together we can be a strong voice for change, a powerful network of prayer for peace, a strong example of doing justice in our world today.

In recent months, the staff of Justice and Witness Ministries has been engaged in a time of Bible study focused on overcoming violence. Each of our ministry teams has been praying, studying, and reflecting together in order to discern God's word for us today.

Overcoming Violence is the tangible result of our spiritual search. We offer these pages to you and your congregation, encouraging you to use this resource in your own discernment process concerning violence—either during Lent or another appropriate time during the Christian year.

Let us join together with churches around the world in a covenant to overcome violence. Let us do justice in our own communities, knowing that we join others in this same mission. With God, all things are possible.



Bernice Powell Jackson
Executive Minister, Justice and Witness Ministries

Violence Wears Many Disguises

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. MATT. 27:27–31

Read: Matt. 27:27–31

If you have ever been belittled by arrogant thugs, or dehumanized by those in positions of power, or humiliated because of who you are, or betrayed by close friends, or dismissed by someone who said they loved you, then you know it's true: Violence is so much more than a good whipping.

Just as the story of Jesus' death does not end at the cross, neither does it begin there. The torture began long before the nails ever pierced his hands and feet.

The saga of Jesus' passion and crucifixion underscores the complexities of violence. The oppressor's tools are emotional, spiritual, and psychological weapons—as well as physical ones. Sticks and stones do hurt the body, but words can attack the soul. No matter the form, violence destroys.

In Justice and Witness Ministries, we work to expose violence and its many wicked disguises, because we know that injustice is both the cause and effect of violence. For example, did you know that communities with greater levels of poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy have significantly higher infant mortality rates? Did you realize that racial profiling and discrimination, as well as social class distinctions, still have a significant impact on arrest and conviction rates, as well as the severity of punishment and the length of prison sentences? Did you know that most perpetrators of violence against women and children were highly likely to have been victims of abuse or neglect when they were children?

And so, too, the programs and policies of nations and governments can either encourage peace or foster violence.

Did you know that, in Afghanistan, the United States military is fighting against weapons given to the Taliban in the 1980s by our own government? Did you know that nearly every armed conflict in the world involves U.S.-provided weapons? Did you know that our government consistently maintains that it has no additional dollars to pay for summer lunch programs for children, but an enormous amount of money has been proposed for a major military budget increase? Did you know that instead of spending tax dollars to fund proven methods of treatment for youthful offenders, young people are now immersed in a criminal culture by being housed in adult prisons? Did you know that, while HIV/AIDS infection rates continue to soar among young people, our government funds “educational” programs that forbid discussion of contraception, reproductive health care options, or sexual orientation?

Violence does not begin with the striking of a fist, or the firing of a gun, or the dropping of a bomb. Violence is inevitable whenever and wherever inadequate social conditions are tolerated, even encouraged. Injustice is the fertile ground where hatred, disease, crime, and poverty take root.

In the closing chapters of Jesus’ life, the gospel’s depictions of humiliation, dehumanization, mockery, and betrayal are closely intertwined with Jesus’ physical suffering and death. And sadly, our Savior’s painful life story is being relived over and over by millions of people in this country and billions around the world. Violence, rooted in the devastating legacies of racial, economic, and social injustice, is witnessed all around us.

Yet, as people of the Resurrection, we are the inheritors of Jesus’ power to overcome violence. With God—and a thirst for justice—we can transform our culture of death into a life-sustaining community of grace and peace. This is the Easter moment of our faith, the exact instant where the cross and the empty tomb meet, the place where giving one’s life for Jesus’ sake means finding one’s abundant life along the way.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Think about how Jesus was humiliated, dehumanized, mocked, and betrayed. How does this same type of violence continue in your community? in your church?
2. Consider the forms of violence around you. Are there injustices that contribute to the continuation of this violence?
3. Can you name specific ways that your congregation is working to alleviate or reduce violence by addressing a specific issue(s) of injustice?
4. Are there forms of violence being expressed right in your own congregation? Do people ever feel threatened emotionally, spiritually, psychologically, or physically within your congregation? Do young people feel safe among peers and/or adult leaders? Are differences embraced, ignored, discouraged, or not tolerated?
5. Consider some forms of violence that are generally never discussed by members of your congregation. What is the healing value of publicly naming a previously unmentioned injustice, pain, or hurt experienced by a member of your church?

Prayer:

God of grace and love. Teach us to be a community of peace and nonviolence. Show us how to overcome aggression with words of kindness and acts of justice. Help us to root out every form of violence that has found fertile soil in this community and in our congregation. Give us patience, understanding, and compassion. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Offered by the Administration Team / Office of the Executive Minister, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

Uncovering Hope in the Midst of Violence

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace. JER. 6:13–14

Read: Jer. 6:13–14

Violence is where we all meet. Regardless of our age, class, race, nationality, political affiliation, each of us knows violence—if not firsthand, then second hand. It is frustrating when we realize that we cannot fully escape personal or institutional violence. In those moments when the abstract “problem of violence” breaks in on us, we feel betrayed by God. We are unwillingly reminded once again of the core human condition echoed in Jeremiah’s cry that “they have treated the wound of my people carelessly.” Violence hurts, in the initial experience, in the memory, everywhere. We want the wound to be treated seriously and to heal quickly. Often neither happens to our satisfaction.

Many of us in the UCC work as advocates with members of Congress and others who set the policies which decide who will suffer institutional and personal violence, and who will not. The nation declares war on some nations and not on others. Congress funds some health services for women but not others. Governors allow some to be executed and some to live. The Supreme Court protects the right to keep guns in the home but not the right to an adequate income for every member of those same households. Food stamps are given to legal immigrants, but not undocumented immigrants. Often the workings of violence seem arbitrary, but more often they seem unfair.

The fate of those who suffer violence inside prison walls, on the borders, in clinics, shelters, school hallways and classrooms, police squad rooms, family living rooms, and neighborhood streets is discussed daily in Congress. Sometimes, surprisingly, the voices may sound quite similar—when a member of Congress testifies on her experience with domestic abuse or another testifies on his experience of the horrors of war. No one is immune to the touch of violence in their lives. But more likely, the voice of those affected by violence is a distant voice, a voice that those in power hope they won’t have to hear. In our best moments, people of faith act as peacemakers by working to bring that hidden voice to the forefront

of the policy debate, church meetings, the local newspaper, and even family conversations. Only violence exposed can be violence healed.

Recently, in a workshop entitled “Peaceful People in a Violent World” attended by a staff member from our Washington, D.C. office, the first questions the facilitator asked were: “So which one are you? Are you one of the peaceful people, or part of the violent world?” Most of us would like to think of ourselves as one of the peaceful people—or at least among those working our way to becoming more faithful to such an identity. The truth is, we are both. We long to be peaceful people in a violent world. Yet we are inextricably linked to a world defined by violence on so many levels. And it becomes a part of us. Or, in the words spoken by a 10-year-old, “If everybody in the world says that they want peace, how can we have bombs? Someone in the world must be lying.”

We cannot offer the possibility of healing until we are willing to get a clearer sense of who is hurting, what is causing the hurt. We are called to have the courage to ask the questions that lead to real healing.

Biblical scholars note that it was Jeremiah’s call as a prophet of God to bear witness to painful truths, to tear down walls of false security and comfort. It was Jeremiah’s role to speak the unspeakable in counsel with the king—to verbalize words no one wanted to hear, to name the injustices no one else wanted to discuss. Not unlike the role of the Public Life and Social Policy Team in Washington D.C., his words were often scorned by the king and the priestly class (perhaps, President Bush and Congress, in today’s world). Equally important, his words were just as scorned by many of his own people. His task was unenviable. This may explain why no one has yet found evidence in the biblical record of Jeremiah winning a popularity contest.

Why? The people of fifth century B.C.E. Judah were confident. Some 100 years earlier, Isaiah had proclaimed that Jerusalem would be saved from certain destruction by the Babylonian army—and miraculously it had come to pass. The people were sure that God had indeed defended the city as God promised, and God was now fulfilling the promise to make God’s dwelling there. Life was good.

But as time wore on, the people’s covenant with God, based in justice and righteousness, now seemed more and more like a distant memory. The consequences of this forgetfulness were swiftly becoming apparent in the common life of the people of Judah, and Jeremiah bore witness to this: “From the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated

the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:13–14). Greed was replacing cooperation. Suspicion was replacing trust.

Fear breeds disconnectedness. Modern scholar Cornel West has observed that in the United States today, gripped by this same personal ethic of isolation and distrust, we are essentially abandoning public space. Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration, names the spiritual and moral crisis of this day as our drive to privatize everything and to retreat to gated enclaves where our needs are met to the exclusion of everyone else.

The places where people of diverse backgrounds used to encounter each other are eroding, and society is becoming increasingly polarized. This reality is revealed, for example, in how hard the United Church of Christ has to fight in Washington, D.C. and in each state on issues that were not too long ago taken for granted—a solvent social security system, adequate funding for public education, protection of the natural environment, voter rights, financial safety nets for the poor, policies that welcome rather than criminalize immigrant families. There is less room for engagement with any who might be different from ourselves. In our political dialogue, it is tempting, even a false comfort, to seek answers through false dichotomies of “us and them,” with rigid boundaries defining who is in and who is out, who counts, and who is expendable.

This confusion over who we are as a biblical people—or for the secularists, as a people of democracy—makes it imperative that each of us personally and as a church seek to discover what lies beyond the cries of “peace, peace.” What are the hidden wounds? How do we bring about healing and reconciliation grounded in justice? What are we trying to heal? Healing violence requires identifying and understanding the connections, living at the intersections of issues and realities.

In a sermon preached during the 19th General Synod, the Rev. Yvonne Delk described the work of hope as “the ability to see that God’s future stretches beyond one’s own generation—where we are therefore willing to risk our resources in times of despair to invest in God’s reign.” God can speak to us in the words and images of Jeremiah—don’t run away, don’t try to do it alone. In the face of violence, holy trust in the one who is free to reshape us, restore us, and redeem us is the first step toward our own freedom.

Questions for Reflection:

1. In what ways have you been shaped by your personal experience of violence? In what ways have you been shaped by your role in perpetuating violence?
2. What does safety and security mean for you? What do you think it means for others?
3. What do you most fear losing? How would a world which truly practiced peacemaking allay that fear?
4. Name areas of concern for you in public policy, legislation, or the society at large where violence needs to be addressed. What are some of the wounds in our world today that are being treated lightly?
5. The prophet Jeremiah warns of the temptation of false peace, in which the wounds of the people are treated carelessly. Many obstacles can keep us from moving beyond the temptation of a false peace to authentic healing. Can violence be resisted? How?

Prayer:

God of mercy, open our eyes so that we can see the pain of injustice. Open our ears so that we can hear the torment of violence. Do not let us become cowards and turn away, but with faith, let us be followers of Christ who are not afraid to listen for the too-often hidden voice. May we boldly proclaim your prophetic word for peace and justice. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Offered by the Public Life and Social Policy Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

The Violence of Hoarding

Jesus' Economics of Abundance

Then the Lord said to Moses, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. EXOD. 16:4

And taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. And all ate and were filled. LUKE 9:16

Read: Exod. 16:1–36; Luke 9:12–17

Parallels may be found in Matt. 14:15–21; Mark 6:35–44; John 6:1–15

These two stories, taken from two different eras, give testimony to God's providing ways. They tempt us to focus on their seemingly miraculous nature. Food falling from the sky, satiating the hunger of thousands with a couple of fish and pieces of bread—these are not events many of us have experienced! God does work miracles, but by their very nature, cannot be regularly duplicated. One cannot imagine a food policy based on anticipating God performing miracles!

But these stories do ring out with truth about God's economy. Consider these passages with an ear to hearing what they proclaim about God, humans, and our relationship to the created order.

First, these stories both bespeak a theology of abundance. In truth, the people of the exodus did not begin with an understanding of God's bounty; but instead, they began with a theology of want. Chad Myers, in his writings on what he calls Sabbath economics, observes that the people were captive to the oppressive economic system they had just escaped, even as they were being delivered from it. At the first challenge of faith, they began to long for their former lives. Myers concludes rightly, "The ancient Israelites—like modern North Americans—couldn't imagine an economic system apart from the Egyptian political-military-technological complex that enslaved them."¹

Similarly, the disciples, faced with a hungry crowd at the end of a long day, act within that same captivity to the prevailing culture: "Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions . . ." (Luke 9:12).

Both sets of actors operate under an assumption of scarcity. There is not enough. The Israelites are tempted to turn to the comfort level of a former oppression in their illusion of scarcity. The apostles fall into a “let everyone fend for themselves” mentality in their denial of God’s abundant ways.

Both stand in direct contradiction to the vision of the God of Moses and Jesus, which is of a creation of abundance. From the opening creation story of Gen. 1:1–2:4, and throughout the Bible, we are given the good news that abundance reigns. It makes a difference in how we live if we believe that God blesses the creation with enough for all, rather than there is not enough.

This leads to the second point for our consideration: no hoarding. Or, to put it in a more positive sense, if we believe in a God who meets all needs sufficiently, then we need take only enough for our present needs. God will take care of the future. Moses passes on God’s admonition: “This is what Yahweh commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents’” (Exod. 16:16). The story continues, that even as those who did not obey gathered more manna than they needed, whereas others gathered less, in the end, they all had the same—just enough! In the feeding of the multitude, all in the crowd were able to eat and be filled, and what was left over was collected. No goodie bags to take home. No hoarding.

Here is the point: we place our trust in a God who provides what we need. To use more than we need, or to hoard more than we need, belies that faith.

Finally, these stories envision an economy in which everyone has enough. Thus, this story is about distribution. There is a radically egalitarian sense to both stories. Neither establishes a “pecking order” of who gets fed first, or that some got “better manna” than others. In the Lukan narrative, all got fed, all were filled. Sufficiency extended to all.

When one judges the shape of the global economy according to the vision of these stories, we can easily see a radical disjuncture between them. If our present global economic system is to be judged according to these three standards, then it is readily apparent that it falls short. We live in a day when the chasm between rich and poor grows exponentially. One of the most blatant excesses in that regard is the pay given to corporate executives as compared to what is paid to the average worker. According to the latest figures, the CEO’s average salary stands at 531 times the

average worker. This does not even take into account the most marginalized workers, such as migrant farm workers or sweatshop labor. It is clear that the criterion of sufficiency for all is not being met by the present economic system.

Does the present economy work out of a theology of abundance? At first blush, it may seem so. We keep appropriating the resources of the creation as if there is no end. But if we look at what is happening, it is apparent that an ideology of scarcity lies hidden in it. What is happening is an expropriating from developing countries out of a sense of scarcity within ours. When we see the oil scarcity driving up prices, for example, we do not judge that there will be enough for all. We do not ask hard questions about consumption or lifestyle, but rather seek other sources.

As the disparity between rich and poor grows, it would be some consolation—not much, but some—if the rich would practice generosity and charity toward the poor. But we can see that this is not the case. Take the tightening of welfare, or the frightening giveback of taxes to the rich, or the resistance of companies to the rights of workers to unionize, and we see that the hoarding of goods is still regnant.

Are we captive to Egypt? Do we still want to send the poor away to fend for themselves? Or do we allow our theology to move us to a radical faith, over against the prevailing culture? Hear theologian Walter Brueggemann's encouragement: "When we gather at church each Sunday, we should ponder the stories that declare scarcity to be false . . . And a question should be burning in our hearts: What if it is true? What if one of the links between the Creator's generosity and the neighbor's needs is us, this community?" If that is not true then scarcity rules and we are in sorry shape. But if it is, and if we believe it is, we can begin life anew as stewards of God's abundance."²

Questions for Reflection:

1. Think of ways in which we can move from a framework of scarcity to one of abundance. Be as specific as you can.
2. Where are some specific places where the just distribution of resources is being practiced? What are some creative ways you as an individual, your family, or your church can be a part of the solution?
3. In the story of the manna from heaven, the Israelites were commanded to store an extra day's provisions on the sixth day and not collect any on the seventh. What does this say to you, in light of our economic system?
4. The disciples were commanded by Jesus to take what was left over after feeding the crowd. Why would you imagine he did this? What does this tell you about our economic systems?

Prayer:

Creator of abundance, whose love extends to all the world, help us to live up to the challenge of your word. Give us the faith to realize that you want to provide enough for all, and not too much for some. Help us to use our minds, hearts, and souls to love you enough to follow your way, even at the risk of living differently from others. May your vision reign in us, and in our world, because we live in obedience to you. Amen.

Offered by the Economic Justice Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

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1. Chad Meyers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, D.C.: Church of the Savior, 2001), 11-21.
 2. Walter Brueggemann, "Enough is Enough," *The Other Side* 37, no. 1 (November-December 2001): 13.

Violence with the Tongue

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off? JOB 4:7

Read: Job 4:1–11

We live in a world of violence. People are killed everyday through wars, on the streets, in their homes, and at other places. Some are active participants, while others are innocent bystanders. It is easy to address this as violence.

However, there are other forms of violence as well. One of those is violence through words. Words can hurt. Sometimes people hurt with intention. Other times, words are of a violent nature without that being the intent.

The story of Job is not an easy story to read. Whether one reads the book literally as a true story or as literature, it still sets off many emotions.

Job was on top of the world, then he finds himself as low as he can go. Although Job's friends came at first to comfort him, their words soon became violent acts, digging into his pain. Job's friends assumed that his pain and suffering were coming from his own violent acts of "sin." The friends of Job assumed that they were speaking words of love and justice, when to Job they were speaking words of pain, suffering, and violence.

When we speak, we must be conscious of not only what we say and our intent for saying it. We must also concern ourselves with how our words are received by the hearer.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Have there been times in your private/corporate life when you were doing the best that you knew how and your world still fell apart?
2. If so, what did people say to you that was unhelpful? helpful?
3. How you can better help to bring about a more peaceful and just society around you through what you say and how you say it?

Prayer:

Most merciful and just God, I ask today that you give your people the ability to say things that build up rather than destroy in order that we may help to create a just world. Amen.

Offered by the Franklinton Center at Bricks in North Carolina, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

Wailing and Touching to Overcome Violence

A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping.

Rachel is weeping for her children. Jer. 31:15

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them. Mark 10:13

Read: Jer. 31:15–17; Mark 10:13–16

Her sudden, loud wail cut through the prayerful silence. Her body crumpled as she leaned forward to hold on to her stomach as if it had cramped severely. Friends gathered around to lay hands upon her as tears fell abundantly and freely. Eventually, the sobbing ceased and her body was once again quiet. Our time of prayer continued, deepened and more sharply felt during our Justice and Witness Ministries staff meeting worship.

Our colleague had let go of all the pain and love and anger she had been holding inside of her for a long time—feelings which had been building up since her trip to Durban, South Africa, as part of a United Church of Christ delegation to the United Nation’s *World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* just prior to September 11. There had been no cramping of her stomach but a cramping of her heart and soul after encountering extreme poverty, thousands of children orphaned by AIDS, testimony about the affects of racism from all over the world, and then being thrust into the turmoil created when the U.S. became a target of terrorist attacks.

Somehow, sometime, release had to come, like the inconsolable weeping of Rachel for her children—children who are no more. The biblical tradition of lamentation encourages us to rend heaven with your cries!, to rage at God, and to weep for those whose lives have been destroyed by hatred, violence, and oppression. Grieve mightily and let it shatter you. God will not abandon you in your anger, nor in your grief, nor in your despair for all the lost children of the world. Our colleague was being true to her faith in weeping tears of lamentation and we, too, were drawn into her pain because we knew it to be our own.

We live in a world which conveys conflicting messages about the value and role of our children. We romanticize children, we call them “the hope for the future,” yet we fail to invest in quality education for them or provide basic needs such as health care and housing. We ooh and aah over

cute pictures of babies and children, yet too often these same babies and children are at greatest risk for injury, assault, and even death inside their own homes at the hands of those responsible for their care.

Violence against children comes in many forms: physical and sexual, psychological, socioeconomic, religious, emotional, and the ways we neglect creating environments in which all children can thrive, learn, be healthy, and realize the gifts God has given them. Our hearts, too, should be shattered when we encounter children whose kindness has been ripped from them and whose bellies swell with malnutrition. Like Rachel, could our weeping be heard across the land so that hearts of stone could be turned into hearts of flesh?

Jesus rebuked the disciples who attempted to keep the children from coming near him so that he might touch them and heal them. How different an approach he offers us! Not only does he welcome the children, but he goes on to say that if we are going to receive the realm of heaven, we, too, must become like little children. What? Not like smart, savvy, grown-ups who have studied and worked and been righteous for a lifetime?

Aren't there dues to be paid if we are to receive the realm of God, the wonderful promises for new life and all the blessings of God?

No, we are to become like children ourselves. What does this mean to you? How do you become like a child again? What qualities would you have to have in order to be like a child? Do children know something we don't know?

In touching the children, Jesus makes connection with them and they receive his blessing. Although children in South Africa who are living with HIV/AIDS are far from us, what are the ways we can touch them, be connected with them? How can we reach out to and make connections with children who are harassed by bullies and classmates who regard them as "different?" What can we do to extend the love of God to children orphaned by wars? How do we touch the children around us who experience violence in their lives?

The General Assembly of the United Nations declared an International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World, 2000-2010. Nobel Peace Prize laureates made an appeal on behalf of the children who are "silently suffering the effects and consequences of violence" to world leaders which resulted in this declaration. But it won't become reality unless we all contribute to creating and building, as the laureates encourage, "A New Culture of Nonviolence." (You can read the entire statement at <http://www.nobelweb.org/eng/>).

This Lent, perhaps you and your family can participate in a “fast from violence.” Talk together about what television shows family members watch and whether or not they include violence. Decide not to watch those shows or go to movies which contain violence. Consider the ways you talk with each other and with friends or schoolmates, especially when you are angry. During Lent, pay extra attention to words that can cause hurt to someone else—words that are not respectful, name calling, taunting and teasing which is unappreciated, etc. Refrain from using such words, and discover together ways to express anger and to work through differences of opinion.

A Lenten “fast from violence” could start you and your family on a journey of creating and building that culture of nonviolence our communities so desperately need. It could change your lives as you become aware of the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of violence around you. Maybe your family could covenant with other families to “fast from violence” during Lent and when it is over, come together and talk about what you experienced, and what changes you may want to make.

Questions for Reflection:

1. When have you felt like Rachel?
2. What is needed to build a culture of nonviolence?
3. What are the needs of the children in your neighborhood? How can you touch them?
4. What does God require of us when it comes to our children?

Prayer:

Loving God, we give thanks that even in the moments of our deepest pain, you are with us. Help us to not run away from the wounds of our world but to seek your guidance and assistance in healing them. Help us confess our complicity to violence, particularly violence against children, and then move us into positive action on their behalf. Fill our hearts with your peace and your passion for justice for all so that our lives become a blessing to others. God of our lives, keep the children safe. In the name of Jesus who invites us to become like children, we pray. Amen.

Offered by the Human Rights, Justice for Women and Transformation Ministry Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

The Violence of Oppression

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, because, she said, "I drew him out of the water." EXOD. 2:10

Read: Exod. 2:1–10

The Lenten season is a 40-day period of reflection and preparation for Christians the world over. It is a time punctuated by prayer, penitence, praise, and fasting. During Lent, we take time out to shift our focus inward and to take stock of our outward witness. We do this in preparation for Easter when we welcome the spirit of the resurrected Christ into our lives.

Many centuries ago, an infant boy was born to a Hebrew couple living as refugees in Egypt. The child was named Moses, which means "to draw out of water" for he was retrieved from a basket laid amongst the reeds by Pharaoh's daughter. She rescued him from a certain death resulting from a government edict that all Hebrew infant boys were to be thrown into the Nile River.

Moses was a member of an ethnic minority group which practiced a different faith than the majority group of Egypt. He was born in Egypt at a time when it was being ruled by an unjust and fearful new king. A king who had no allegiance to Moses' ancestor Joseph, nor to the Hebrew nation. Moses was born into a society where violence and xenophobia (fear of foreigners) was a part of the dominant culture. The ruling Pharaoh institutionalized a system of oppression aimed at overworking and undervaluing the Hebrew people, Egypt's fastest growing minority group. Pharaoh's unjust policies were based on his fear that the new immigrants would soon outnumber the Egyptians, and with their strength, perhaps rally against Egypt by banding with her enemies. Despite their bitter and brutal enslavement, the children of Israel continued, even under the harshest oppression, to multiply—which alarmed the Pharaoh even more.

Pharaoh's fears, however unfounded, caused him to command two God-fearing Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all Hebrew boys at birth and make it appear as though they were stillborn. These women were asked to do something that went against their reverence for life and God. They did not carry out Pharaoh's orders, but instead followed God's lead by allowing the babies to live. When his horrific plan did not work, Pharaoh enacted a national policy promoting a death

penalty for all newborn Hebrew males. In essence, the government promulgated a law which promoted death by drowning, thereby legalizing hate crimes against a feared and despised people. Since power and privilege were inherited mainly along gender lines in Egyptian society, male infants were to be killed while female infants' lives could be spared.

We, too, live in a violent, turbulent, and xenophobic world where fear of racial, ethnic, gender, and religious groups has often led to violence. This violence is manifested in many different forms, including, but not limited to war, poverty, starvation, slavery, racial profiling, child abuse, population control, and caste-based systems. We learn from Moses' story that violence also begets violence, for as an adult, Moses reacted to the violence he grew up with by committing murder against an Egyptian. Despite Moses' own act of violence, God still chose to use him for God's own purposes.

During the Lenten season, and beyond, let us reflect on how God wants to use us in a world where violence has become "the norm" and justice has become "the ab-norm." As Christians, how can we respond to the violence and oppression in our midst which is based primarily on fear, bias, cultural superiority, power, privilege, lack of understanding, and trust? Can our present generation, however impacted by violence ourselves, engage in the type of prophetic witness that will usher in a new commitment to justice and peace for generations to come?

Questions for Reflection:

1. Moses was born into an oppressed people. Can you look around your neighborhood or community and see oppression? What does it look like?
2. Can you identify specific acts of violence against minority groups in your neighborhood or community?
3. What does violence do to the people who are on the receiving end, and to those in power who promote it? Who are today's feared, despised, and oppressed people? How does gender get played out in this oppression?
4. In the story of Moses' birth, how do you think oppression was linked to violence? How is it linked to violence in a post-September 11th world?
5. If you were commanded by someone in power to be a perpetrator of violence as were the Hebrew midwives, what might your response be?
6. In August 2001, the United Nations sponsored the *World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* in Durban, South Africa. The purpose was to identify causes and victims of discrimination, as well as strategies for eliminating discrimination in its many forms. During this Lenten season, and beyond, what commitment can your church make to stop discrimination that leads to violence in your midst?

Prayer:

Creator God, you who led Joseph and Moses, you who heard the cries of your people in bondage—hear our cries today as we live in a world of violence, oppression, and persecution. We are thrown into the waters to drown . . . beaten and dragged because of what we look like, abused because of our gender, enslaved because of our place of origin, denied our rights because of our orientation, taunted because of our language, ignored because of our different abilities. Yet even in the midst of this, we look to you, o God, and to the power you've instilled in us to speak truth to power . . . to change this state of oppression. We pray fervently that all people will see the beauty in each other—the God in each other—and not fear each other. Give us the courage of the Hebrew midwives, that we might defy the edict of drowning, and help birth a new peace. Amen.

Offered by the Racial Justice Ministry Team, Justice and Witness Ministries, United Church of Christ.

Calling on the United Church of Christ to join the Decade to Overcome Violence

A resolution approved by General Synod XXIII
in Kansas City, Missouri.

Submitted by Justice and Witness Ministries.

Background:

At the Eighth General Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe, the World Council of Churches (WCC) named the decade beginning 2001 as the Decade to Overcome Violence. This significant call to its member churches grew out of the Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women and its plea for the church to face the issue of violence against women around the world, as well as a request from the churches in South Africa, after decades of violence in that land, for the church to help the world find new ways of dealing with conflict. Moreover, the United Nations was planning to focus its efforts to ending violence at the same time.

At the recent WCC Central Committee meeting in Berlin, the Decade to Overcome Violence was launched at the foot of the Brandenburg Gate, where the Berlin Wall once stood. Representatives of churches around the world lit candles and dedicated themselves to finding ways to end violence in their homes, in their churches, in their societies, and in our world.

Introduction:

The Decade to Overcome Violence, then, is an opportunity for the United Church of Christ—our local churches, our Associations and Conferences, our seminaries, our affiliated institutions, our national setting—to become a part of a worldwide movement to end violence in the world in our lifetime. The church has a particular role to play as moral agent and as the church of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.

This is an opportunity to make real in our everyday lives our United Church of Christ commitment to ecumenism and to make a difference in the lives of those we serve at the same time. Each setting of the United Church of Christ is invited to find ways to make the Decade to Overcome Violence a reality in our own place of mission. Each of us will find a different way of fulfilling this mandate, but in joining with other churches we do have the power to make a real change in the world.

Summary:

This resolution calls upon the various settings of the United Church of Christ to take an active role in the Decade to Overcome Violence and to join together and with other denominations and organizations in doing so. Doing so, we shall overcome some day . . .

Resolution:

WHEREAS the psalmist wrote, “Seek peace, and pursue it” (Ps. 34:14), and the prophet Isaiah wrote “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; . . . They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (Isa. 65:25), and Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.” (Matt. 5:9);

WHEREAS we recall with thanksgiving the history of saints and martyrs of the church who gave their lives as witnesses for God against the powers of violence and at the same time we confess the role that the church has too often played in adding to the violence and injustice of the world;

WHEREAS the world’s Nobel Peace laureates have appealed for a “Decade for a Culture of Nonviolence,” and a “Year of Education for Nonviolence,” with special emphasis on children and youth;

WHEREAS the United Nations has designated the years 2001–2010 as the Decade for Nonviolence and a Culture of Peace for the Children of the World;

WHEREAS the World Council of Churches, meeting at its Eighth Assembly in Harare, called upon its member churches to observe a Decade to Overcome Violence from 2001 to 2010, calling upon its member churches to provide a clear witness to peace, reconciliation, and nonviolence, grounded in justice;

WHEREAS the U.S. Conference of the World Council of Churches began this observance with a Lenten fast from violence in 2001, requesting member churches to pray the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, “Lord make me an instrument of thy peace;”

WHEREAS the United Church of Christ has designated itself as a “Just Peace” church and many local churches have designated themselves as “Just Peace” churches;

WHEREAS violence is fracturing our world, destroying our culture, and takes many forms—from the violence of war and genocide, to the violence due to the use of land mines and the proliferation of small arms, to the systemic violence of poverty and racism, to violence in the home against women and children, to the violence done to the whole of God’s creation, to the violence of hate crimes and police brutality, to the violence of gangs, to the violence which erupts in U. S. schools and is found in our churches;

WHEREAS as Christians, we are called upon to recognize that our cultural addiction to violence is a spiritual challenge that calls us to prophetic witness;

WHEREAS we have heard the call to nonviolence as an active alternative to violence from modern prophets such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and as a way of living out Jesus’ teachings and bearing witness to God’s promise of peace with justice; and

WHEREAS the culture of violence surrounds us all and is found in our entertainment, our sports, our worldview, and is embedded in our history;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon every local church to act to overcome violence in our world and especially in its own community by being a witness for peace with justice and reconciliation, through Bible study and theological reflection, and through dialogue and prayerful consideration of how it can be active participants in the Decade to Overcome Violence;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon the Conferences and Associations of the United Church of Christ to affirm the commitment of the United Church of Christ to support a Decade to Overcome Violence and to discern how they might become active participants in the Decade;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon the seminaries of the United Church of Christ and the historically-related seminaries to include education on issues of violence in the curriculum for the preparation of pastors and in continuing education programs;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon Justice and Witness Ministries to coordinate work in the national setting of the church around overcoming violence and to provide leadership training on nonviolence and conflict resolution and violence prevention education, to work with youth and young adults in programs to end violence, to advocate for an end to land mines and the proliferation of small arms, and to work to overcome the institutional and systemic violence of racism and poverty;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon Wider Church Ministries to explore appropriate ways for the United Church of Christ to participate in the United Nations Decade for Nonviolence and a Culture of Peace and to develop necessary resources for such participation;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon the Office of General Ministries to coordinate the promotion and information for the United Church of Christ's participation in the World Council of Churches Decade to Overcome Violence, and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED that the Twenty-third General Synod calls upon Local Church Ministries to produce the appropriate bulletin inserts and curriculum resources for local churches to participate in the Decade to Overcome Violence.

Funding for this action will be made in accordance with the overall mandates at the affected agencies and the funds available.

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