

"War as a Means of Resolving Conflict is Incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ"

The Episcopal Church's Reflections on War

The Episcopal Church's position on war is very much a reflection of the Anglican balance of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason. It reflects the ongoing struggle for the church to be faithful to its Tradition as well as open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The bishops of the Anglican communion worldwide have joined the General Convention of the Episcopal Church in repeating that "War, as a means of resolving conflict, is incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Members of the Episcopal Church are baptized into, and become, the body of Christ. They enter into a baptismal covenant with Christ in which they promise to "respect the dignity of all people" and to "work for justice and peace." Combined with the teaching of the Episcopal Church that warfare is incompatible with the Gospel, the Episcopal Church has every theological appearance of being totally opposed to war and opposed to its members being involved in war.

There have been several problems with this position historically. The main reasons for not following the church's teaching have to do with awareness of the church's teachings and with perceptions of the separation of issues of the church and issues of state.

Since the church at any given time in history is a reflection of the society around it (being made up of members of society), many people make decisions passively, following the example of those around them. If the society as a whole is open to war, many churchgoers will also be caught up in the same mood, passively following others lead. Part of the role of church leaders is to challenge passivity at all levels of life and to help church members increase their awareness of the teachings of Christ and the Church, in order to help them make conscious decisions. The Episcopal Church has recognized by recognizing that resisting military service is considered the norm of the church, and that members should only enter the military after making informed decisions in consultation with the clergy of the church. Given the passive way in which many make decisions, this is rarely recognized or followed.

The other obstacle to following the church's teaching on war comes under the guise of separation of church and state, often with the claim that one should "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's." This approach suggests that God is not in charge of all aspects of our being and that the church should have no opinion on "earthly matters," but only focus on "things spiritual." It is a way of shutting God out of parts of our lives, despite the fact that, as baptized Christians, we have promised to follow Christ in all parts of our lives.

Thus, the Episcopal Church is committed to helping members to follow Christ in all areas of their lives and seeks to help them make informed, conscious decisions about all issues of life. However, those who make decisions contrary to the Church's teaching are not discarded. The church continues to help meet pastoral needs of those in the military by its presence with chaplains. The church continues to struggle to help members understand that yielding to the temptation of hatred and revenge, which are prevalent in our society, is not following the life and example of Jesus Christ. The church tries to help members deal with complex problems in a world that seeks simplistic answers.