

THE URGENCY OF NOW
A Pastoral Letter on Nuclear Weapons Production in our Community
From Leaders of Faith Communities in East Tennessee

ON THE EVE OF THE 70TH ANNIVERSARY of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we call for renewed reflection and serious dialogue about the morality of nuclear weapons and the proposed modernization of nuclear weapons production facilities in our own backyard.

From many traditions, we speak with one voice out of a profound sense of gratitude for life and deep compassion for all creatures. These dual imperatives, to live with gratitude and with compassion, compel us to speak to our community about nuclear weapons.

Seventy years ago the city of Hiroshima, Japan was destroyed by the world's first atomic weapon, followed three days later by Nagasaki. Today, in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, we continue to produce thermonuclear cores for US bombs and warheads, and the government has announced plans to spend as much as \$6.5 billion to construct a new nuclear bomb manufacturing facility to continue this work for decades to come. This continued pursuit of new and more powerful nuclear weapons now poses an urgent existential threat to creation itself: The more than 17,000 thermonuclear weapons deployed around the globe could, in one afternoon, kill billions of people and render the Earth uninhabitable.

As people of faith, dedicated to lives of gratitude, service and love, we ask ourselves: Is it right for us to support the production of weapons of mass destruction designed to be used against other human beings with our money, our votes, or our silence?

As citizens of a country that proclaims a commitment to the rights of all people to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, we ask ourselves: Is it right to dedicate such massive resources to the production of these weapons—in the words of Pope Francis, “squandering the wealth of nations”—when we know there are so many other pressing needs in our nation—from the alleviation of poverty, disease, and the national debt, to improvements in education, healthcare, and economic development.

As global citizens who are increasingly aware of our dependence upon the well-being of creation itself, we ask ourselves: Is it right to take the power of life and death into our own hands, to threaten the very fabric of creation itself with these weapons?

As citizens in East Tennessee, where plans call for spending many billions of dollars to modernize the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex, fueling a resumption of the global nuclear arms race while other urgent needs go unmet, we ask ourselves: Is this the best we can do?

A Tipping Point

We believe it is imperative that we speak and act now, while there is time. We are not alone. Military and diplomatic leaders who once embraced nuclear weapons as part of a policy of deterrence are now calling for their abolition. We recognize there are hurdles to achieving nuclear disarmament, but they are not insurmountable.

The threat of nuclear weapons appears to be contained, but this is a dangerous illusion. The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty has failed to constrain the spread of nuclear weapons. Since it was signed in 1968, the number of nuclear-armed states has doubled. Military, diplomatic and political leaders from across the political spectrum and around the globe have recognized the growing threat of nuclear terrorism, and called for nuclear weapons states to disarm. George Shultz, former Secretary of State in a Republican Administration, recently wrote, “We are at a tipping point. We can not continue in the same direction.”

International institutions have proven themselves effective, when given funding and support, in constraining the spread of nuclear weapons and even turning back the clock in some cases. It is not preordained that the United States will forever rely on nuclear weapons for our security—in fact, achieving nuclear disarmament is our national policy and our legal obligation.

Our Unique Responsibility

As people who live in the shadow of the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex, our primary concern is not the past, but the present and the future. We believe it is time to think in new ways about the production of nuclear weapons in our midst.

There is no legitimate moral stance that permits us to absolve ourselves of the responsibility for the role our community plays in the nuclear arms race. Discussions of military and diplomatic policy take place elsewhere, but they rely, ultimately, on individuals who do the hands-on work of producing thermonuclear weapons of mass destruction.

We acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: the purpose of the weapons being built in our backyard is to threaten the mass extermination of whole populations of innocent men, women, and children. Each of us bears the weight of responsibility for our individual actions; each of us decides whether or not to participate in the production of nuclear weapons; each of us decides whether to speak or to remain silent.

A Time to Speak

In December of last year, Pope Francis, in a statement titled *Nuclear Disarmament: Time for Abolition*, noted that “rather than providing security, reliance on a strategy of nuclear deterrence has created a less secure world.” The Pope’s leadership provides an opening for a conversation that engages all of us.

In the same spirit, we call on our community to think of nuclear weapons from the perspective of our core values of gratitude and compassion. If we are truly grateful for the gifts of creation, for the life-sustaining power of Earth, and for the relationships we have with other living things and one another, how can we countenance the threatened destruction of that life-giving capac-

ity by weapons of mass destruction? If we are truly committed to treating others as we would be treated ourselves, how can we maintain a posture that threatens them with complete and utter extermination by our nuclear weapons?

We do not speak today for our congregations or our community. Instead, we invite them to join us in an honest public conversation—in places of worship and in the public square, in the media and in professional associations, in book clubs, in kitchens and living rooms—about our responsibility to one another, to future generations, and to the planet. A world free of the threat of nuclear weapons is possible, but only if we create it. We should begin by addressing the moral and spiritual implications of the role we play in this existential drama.

A Place to Begin

We are fortunate to live in a place that is rich in resources, human and natural, physical, mental and spiritual. These qualities made East Tennessee an attractive place to pursue the daunting challenges of producing the Bomb in the dark days when the nation felt threatened by the power of a great evil.

The resources and beauty of the Tennessee Valley and her people are, if anything, even more attractive today. We are uniquely positioned to pursue development that enriches the lives of all who live here and the world beyond. Determining the future is our right and our responsibility. It begins with a conversation about who we are and what we do. To that conversation, we call our community.

Rev. John Gill, Sr. Pastor
Church of the Savior, United Church of Christ
Knoxville, Tennessee

Rev. Chris Buice, Pastor
Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church
Knoxville, TN

Rev. John Mark Wiggers, Pastor
St. James Episcopal Church
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Anne D. McKee
Campus Minister, Maryville College
Maryville, TN

Joan Barnette
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Assistant Clerk, West Knoxville Friends Meeting
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Paige Buchholz
Knoxville, TN

Guy Larry Osborne, PhD
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Professor Emeritus (ret.)
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN

Mary Dennis Lentsch, PBVM
Sisters of the Presentation
Knoxville, TN

Ross Brummett, Ph.D.
Vice-President for Student Affairs and
Professor of Religion
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN

Jon Coffee
Ministerial intern
Tennessee Valley Universalist Unitarian Church
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Erik Johnson
Minister of Presbytery of East Tennessee
Presbyterian Church, USA
Maryville, TN

William Blevins, PhD
Professor Emeritus (Ret)
Carson Newman University
Jefferson City, TN

Rev. James R. Green
Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church
Knoxville, TN

Sandy Long, Ph.D.
Elder, First Presbyterian Church
Associate Professor of Education
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN

Rev. Merrill Hawkins, Ph.D.
Pastor, Mt. Pleasant United Methodist Church
Professor of Religion
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN

Dave McNeely, M.Div.
Baptist minister
Coordinator, Faith & Justice Scholars Program
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN

Bill Nickle, M.Div.
United Methodist minister (ret.)
Founder, Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center
Washburn, TN

Marjorie Richardson
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Clerk, West Knoxville Friends Meeting
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Joyce Hollyday
Circle of Mercy Church
Asheville, NC

Carol Nickle, J.D.
Civil Rights lawyer (ret.)
Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Harwood Schaffer
United Church of Christ
Knoxville, TN

Tonya L. Barnette
Seminary Intern
Church of the Savior UCC
Knoxville, TN

Rev. John R. Lackey
Pastor Emeritus
Church of the Savior, UCC
Knoxville, TN

Carol E. Green
former Peace with Justice Coordinator
Holston Conference, United Methodist Church
Maryville, TN

Rev. Marcia Free
United Church of Christ
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Ralph Hutchison
Presbyterian Church, USA
Knoxville, TN

Rev. Randy Shoun
Church of the Savior, UCC
Knoxville, TN

* NOTE: affiliations listed for identification purposes only

