

Just Peace Presentation
"Difficult Choices"
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Thank you for inviting me to speak about my denomination's identity as a Just Peace church. I need to begin with confession: I am not a theologian, academic or pacifist. Until recently I was a pastor and I remain a passionate practitioner and advocate of just peace.

The United Church of Christ makes, what might seem to many, an audacious claim: that peace is possible. Audacious because of what is going on in the Ukraine. Audacious because of our country's entanglement in perpetual war. And yet the Church was born out of the audacious, improbable claim that "God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, that who so ever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

About ten years ago I was in Washington meeting with an aid of my senator, Dan Coats. We were talking about how the United States was mired in perpetual war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

-I said, we could sweep any battle field and yet didn't seem to be able to translate battlefield victories into a satisfactory ending to the conflict. The aid agreed.

-I said, we spend huge amounts of money in the development of weapon systems to win these battles. Wouldn't it be prudent to invest some resources in the research, development and implementation of practices that could transform violent conflict into a just, sustainable peace?

-He said it probably would. I asked, "Then why don't we?" He said, "Because there's no constituency for it."

I decided then to spend the rest of my ministry working to make the Church the constituency for Justice and Peace.

I served the same two rural congregations in Southern Indiana for forty-two years. For twenty of those years, I was deeply engaged in a just peace ministry in Sri Lanka. The Indiana Kentucky Conference entered a partnership with the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India at our 1989 annual meeting. At the time, Sri Lanka was embroiled in a Civil War. The Indiana Kentucky Conference declared itself a Just Peace Conference that same year. Our partners said a priority of the partnership was for us to share the plight of war-affected civilians with the US government in Washington and international institutions in New York. My conference minister asked if I would chair the partnership committee. None of us had ever done any advocacy work before, so it was a steep learning curve.

At the 15th General Synod in 1985, the body adopted the pronouncement “Affirming the United Church of Christ as a Just Peace Church.” The Pronouncement and [Susan Thistlethwaite’s](#) book [A Just Peace Church](#) describe the three foundations of Just Peace as:

Friendship

Justice

Common security from violence

These three pillars of just peace are woven throughout the Old Testament prophets’ dream of shalom and Jesus’ teachings about the Kingdom of God. Just peace is meant to be the antidote to the persistent, corrosive effect violence has on community.

Some of the more powerful lessons I’ve learned about just peace, I learned from working for more than forty years with domestic abusers. I was a seminary student in 1975 when I first recognized the insidious and pervasive nature of violence. We were working to establish a

shelter for victims of domestic abuse. At the time many people thought what happened in a person's home is none of the business of anyone outside that home. What we discovered was that the violence sends damaging ripples deep into the community.

- Domestic violence calls were the most dangerous situations police answered.
- It was one of the leading causes of preventable deaths of women 18 to 45.
- Young men raised in violent homes were much more likely to become batterers or commit violent crimes.
- Women that grew up in violent homes were much more likely to become battered partners.
- A California study found 93% of women incarcerated for murder killed an abusive partner.

The impact of domestic violence has on the community is significant; making this the community's business. It is also difficult work.

We've discovered the criminal justice system alone is not sufficient to deal with this complicated problem. The best way to address domestic violence is with a comprehensive community response.

- Safe spaces are needed to be provided victims wanting to get out of toxic relationships.
- Churches need to talk about equality and respect in relationships of those sharing a household.
- Medical facilities need to recognize signs of domestic violence and refer patients to victim services.
- Universities need to research what are the best practices in addressing partner and domestic abuse.
- Our public schools need to invite victim advocates to educate kids about the problem and what can be done to break the chain of dysfunctional families.

-Community mental health facilities need to provide programs for victims of abuse and for perpetrators who recognize they are tearing apart their homes.

-We need to find ways of addressing the pervasive culture of violence that permeates our society in entertainment and social media.

Just as a community needs a more comprehensive response to violence in a family; I contend the same is needed for addressing violence at any other level of society: street violence, political violence and international violence.

The Indiana Kentucky Conference (United church of Christ) began to explore how we might mitigate the effects of Sri Lanka's civil war on civilians. We recognized the three hallmarks of just peace: friendship, justice and common security from violence were foundational to the advocacy ministry in our partnership with the Sri Lankan church.

- We worked to create a network of relationships (friendship)
- in order to engage in conversations about how felt wrongs might best be addressed (justice)
- in-order to provide better tools to resolve the conflict (common security from violence).

We began with a church relationship with Tamil congregations in the North and East of Sri Lanka dating back to 19th century American missionaries. In 1988 I had made a trip to Sri Lanka to develop a housing project for refugees and with the help of our partners was able to get into the conflict area. Members of the Jaffna Diocese had wanted to get news out about what was happening on the Jaffna Peninsula. We had tried for three days to get permission to go north into the war affected area without response. So, we decided to try and see how far we could get without formal permission.

We showed up at the first check point at noon, when the officers were away having lunch and trucks were backed up for miles. I sat in the car while one of the Diocese pastors, in his cassock, walked around the cue and showed a noncommissioned officer his papers asking if a group of pastors could return to their churches. The sergeant waved our car impatiently around the line of trucks without noticing me.

At the next check point, about ten miles down the road, a soldier came up, looked confusedly through the window at me and asked for our pass. We innocently said we didn't have one; but the authorities at the first check point said we didn't need one. He scratched his head and waved us on. And so, we proceeded in similar manner all the way to Jaffna.

Other higher-profile organizations like Asia Watch and Amnesty International, had been barred from visits to the north and east of the country. Even our South Asian Secretary of Global Ministry wasn't able to visit the area. But nobody cared about the Indiana Kentucky Conference.

Returning to the States, I next explored how we might best share what we had seen and heard. I arranged to meet with our Washington congressional representatives. It so happened, we were represented by Lee Hamilton, the Democratic chair of the House of Representatives Foreign Relations Committee and Richard Lugar, the Republican Senator chairing the Senates Committee on Foreign Affairs. This was a windfall to the work. Over the next twenty years both were vital at different times.

Next, we talked to members of other denominations and the international church community about advocacy currently taking place. The United Church of Canada, which had been leading much of the

human rights documentation to share with the United Nations was anxious to have a partner in the United States.

Glen Stassen, a Baptist Christian ethicist teaching at Louisville Baptist Seminary who worked with Susan Thistlethwaite became another just peace friend. Glen pointed out that just war was a faulty paradigm of discernment. The Church's primary function in just war theory is to judge whether or not violence is an appropriate response to a provocative act. There are criteria for both the justification and the prosecution of a just war, but inevitably the criteria for both breaks down first under political pressure and even more so in the heat of armed conflict. It is even harder to maintain these criteria in asymmetrical conflicts as most of those we've witnessed since the end of World War 2, including the Sri Lankan civil war with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Whereas, just war is a paradigm of discernment, just peace is a paradigm of engagement.

It's not hard to imagine that our voice as to whether our armed forces ought to engage in a violent conflict is like we are whispering into a hurricane. Yet just because we don't have the final word as to whether our country goes to war, doesn't absolve us of our responsibility to the faith to engage in just peacemaking. There remains a strong theological incentive, democratic responsibility and humanitarian motivation to engage in practices that address injustices that lay at the root of violent conflict. This is the call to shalom and the work of bringing in the Kingdom of God.

Glen introduced us to the ten practices in his book [Just Peacemaking: The New Paradigm for the Ethics of Peace and War](#):

- **1. Support nonviolent direct action.**
- 2. Take independent initiatives to reduce threat.

- 3. Use cooperative conflict resolution.
- 4. Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness.
- **5. Advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty.**
- **6. Foster just and sustainable economic development.**
- **7. Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system.**
- **8. Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights.**
- 9. Reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade.
- **10. Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.**

Those written in **bold italics are the practices we used most often over the twenty years of advocacy.*

I made a second trip to Sri Lanka with Robin Gibson, a member of the United Church of Canada, who introduced me to several non-governmental organizations that did their best to monitor human rights. After visiting several organizations in the South, we traveled North in an attempt to cross the Lagoon to the Jaffna Peninsula which was controlled by the Tamil Tigers. Robin wasn't able to make the crossing, so, I went on without him. There, at the suggestion of people smarter than me, I opened a conversation with the LTTE.

Before I left, they gave me the name of a reliable contact person in the States. I established a twenty-year relationship with Rudra, a New York immigration Tamil lawyer from a prominent Jaffna family, that became very important to our effort as time went on.

We discovered that both the Sri Lankan military and the LTTE are more adept at killing noncombatants than each other. 90% of the conflict's casualties were civilians either caught in the crossfire or intentionally targeted by one side or the other. The Indiana Kentucky Conference

determined our advocacy would be an attempt to mitigate the effects of the war on unarmed civilians, by bringing more international attention to what was going on in this under reported conflict.

The Tigers were innovators in terrorism, which is intended to provoke. The LTTE attack on the Temple of the Tooth in 1998, the most sacred Buddhist site in Sri Lanka, was said to protest growing perceived Buddhism hegemony. Acts of terrorism are meant to get an adversary to over react. The Tigers intended to get the government to tighten constraints on the innocent Tamil population, driving them deeper into the LTTE's cause and camp. These acts of terrorism also brought condemnation and legal sanctions on the LTTE from the US Government. The State Department would not meet with acknowledged representatives of the Tigers, but were interested in the Indiana Kentucky Conference staying in touch with them.

Just peacemaking calls on non-traditional actors to find their appropriate role in avoiding violent conflict when possible; help limit the scope of the violence when it's not possible; or bring the violence to a just sustainable conclusion as soon as possible.

During the war, I made regular trips into the conflict zone. The Indiana Kentucky Conference became the US representative for the International Working Group on Sri Lanka. We were the organization that was responsible (at the request of those people smarter than ourselves) to stay in communication with the LTTE. We hosted Sri Lankan guests and representatives of the International Working Group in Washington and New York, introducing them to people we had come to know in Government, the United Nations, The World Bank and human rights organizations.

I would always visit the US Embassy after traveling to the North or East. On one visit I was met by an information officer who began the conversation with, "Reverend, I want you to know I don't see you as the

enemy.” “That’s good”, I responded, “because I see myself as a tax paying American citizen.” There occasionally were “professionals” who saw us as interfering, but people I trusted valued us as being a conduit of communication.

Working with the conflict in Sri Lanka we witnessed the importance of the just peace practices. But we also recognized they are not all-inclusive. For instance; there is a need to protect and share an honest narrative. Veracity is often the victim in a conflict at the hands of both sides. Just, sustainable reconciliation can’t happen without an honest assessment of what everyone did and suffered.

The Indiana Kentucky Conference partnership demonstrated the value of being a non-traditional actor when in 1995, we were asked by other non-governmental organizations to put together a negotiation training program for LTTE mid-level political leaders. After spending a week in London working on a prospectus, three of us traveled to Paris where we planned to present it to the European LTTE representative. When we arrived at the designated café, a man went from table to table telling the other customers to leave, then placing a guard at the door the Tiger official entered the room to speak to us. We discussed the proposed program for several hours, agreeing we would return to the States to see if we could get permission for the training to be held there.

One of my first meetings in Washington was with a long-time friend and aid to Lee Hamilton, Bob Hathaway. When I shared with him our idea for a training he said, “You know what you guys bring to this?” “No” I said, “What?”

“Sweet innocence”.

“Do you mean naïveté?”

“No.” Bob said, “I mean you are willing to try things the rest of us aren’t.”

Within a couple weeks the Tiger’s tried to kill the president of Sri Lanka, which made us look like the naïve amateurs many thought we were. It also meant that no one was going to put on a training in negotiations anytime soon. But in 2003, there was a ceasefire. The Government and Tigers were again in negotiations. Rudra, who was now one of the lead negotiators, asked if we could find someone to train the LTTE team. I called several of the better-known organizations: The Kroc Institute, Eastern Mennonite University and The Carter Center. Everyone thought because the Tigers hadn’t responded to the Government’s initial proposal with one of their own, they weren’t serious. Rudra and I would talk after each set of talks with the Government and I could tell this wasn’t the case. I told Rudra I wasn’t having any luck finding an organization willing to put on a training and asked what he would like to do. He said, “Why don’t you guys do it?”

My first response was, “We’re the Indiana Kentucky Conference. We don’t know how to do a training in peace negotiations”. My second response was remembering the program we had put together in 1995 with our British partners in the International Working Group. Together we revamped the training program, calling on experts that had worked in South Africa and Northern Ireland to do the training. The program was held in Northern Ireland for the LTTE representatives to the peace talks. The LTTE used the time to write a counterproposal, for the first time, to the one offered by the government.

The lesson here was the importance of long-standing relationships (friendship) that helped us see that sometimes it’s not broad geopolitical problems that are the stumbling block, but very personal issues. The LTTE negotiators hadn’t responded to the government’s proposals, not because they weren’t serious. Rather, the majority of the LTTE negotiation team were insurgents that dropped out of school

to fight. They were afraid their counter proposal would look foolish to the Sri Lankan Government's internationally educated constitutional lawyers.

Over the next several years the LTTE and the US State Department only communicated with each other through the Indiana Kentucky Conference.

In 2009, when attempts from other organizations failed to get Susan Rice, the US Ambassador to the United Nations, to respond to their request to raise concern for the civilians trapped in the conflict zone, the Indiana Kentucky Conference hosted a meeting with Lee Hamilton. Lee was at that time the Director of the Washington think tank the Woodrow Wilson Center. We shared our concerns and proposed a set of conditions to protect the trapped civilians. When we finished, Lee said, "How about, if by the end of the week I have your proposal in the hands of Ambassador Susan Rice, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton?" We agreed that would be wonderful! I went back to Indiana but upon searching the internet found President Barack Obama took time in a Rose Garden press conference to share the proposal we left with Lee.

I was asked how the Sri Lankan conflict ended in 2009. Not well. Ceasefires broke down under the strain of the 2004 tsunami and the flood of international aid money that followed. Prospects of peace were hobbled by competing Sinhalese political parties. Powerful international interests were prepared to send military aid to the Sri Lankan government to prevent the creation of a Tamil homeland twenty mile south of the tip of India.

And yet over a period of twenty years, the Indiana Kentucky Conference had several small successes that we believed helped mitigate the danger to civilian populations. With persistence and patience, a small group of church folk were able to engage in a ministry

of just peace advocacy reaching high levels of our government and important arenas in Sri Lanka. We did this primarily by bringing the obscure civil war to the attention of members of the US government and international organizations in New York (The World Bank and the United Nations, both of which were regular recipients of our advocacy).

We recognized that we sometimes held a position of unwarranted privilege. For example, there was a period of time when the Sri Lankan Government declared large areas in the North and East “No-go Zones”. Anyone found in those areas would be considered an insurgent. I learned of the death of a pastor and two church workers who had gone into a no-go zone to harvest a garden a children’s home depended upon. I shared the story with a group of Indiana Kentucky women and suggested that if they sent letters to Senator Lugar, he would look into it. About a year later I was in Sri Lanka again. I learned that instead of killing people caught in the no-go zones they were fined about \$25. I asked to what did they credit that change. Our partners said a prominent American politician had questioned the policy with their foreign office. Maybe twelve women from an American church group accomplished what ten times that number from Sri Lanka couldn’t.

The World Council of Churches has embraced the paradigm of just peace, lifting four arenas of community life where injustice is likely to lead to conflict. Much of this work was done as the WCC proclaimed 2001-2010 the decade to overcome violence; calling on churches to seek reconciliation and peace. As it embraced just peace it has shared these four areas of work:

1. Just Peace in the Community: So that All May Live Free from Fear
2. Just Peace with the Earth: So that Life is Sustained
3. Just Peace in the Marketplace: So that All May Live with Dignity
4. Just Peace Among the People: So that Human Lives are Protected

This expansion of the just peace paradigm is commensurate with our growing understanding of the complexity of conflict transformation and reconciliation. Just peace isn't merely about discontinuing violence. It's about addressing the root of the conflict in a healthy way that leads to a sustainable peace. It is difficult, comprehensive and complex work.

Injustice is too often recognized only after it ignites bloodshed.
Attention to global conflict is too often measured in news cycles.
Resources to address violent conflict too often arrives late;
 Are shared miserly,
 By a limited number of sanctioned actors too often with their own
 agenda
 And are cut off too early.

John Paul Lederach talks about the need to deal with conflict stemming from injustice through reconciliation. This is complex, demanding work; that requires a wide range of gifted, often non-traditional players. It is important to recognize the disruptive nature of just peacemaking. It intentionally and aggressively engages in addressing structural injustices; sometimes woven so tightly into a culture they go almost unnoticed. This is unsettling for people who have built their lives on those cultural structures just peacemaking is calling into question.

Lederach contends sustainable peace comes when a conflicted community does the difficult work of holding seeming paradoxes in balanced tension when building peace. Conflict isn't necessarily resolved when armies stop fighting or when politicians sign a treaty. Real, sustainable peace comes with mutual compromise. When people feel their grievances are acknowledged and justly addressed. This requires parties to embrace the paradox of truth and mercy; justice and peace. But this should come naturally to the church. Christian discipleship has always required us to hold in balanced tension: law and Gospel, righteousness and grace, justice and mercy, accountability and forgiveness.

The work of just peace... the work of reconciliation isn't just the responsibility of designated professionals. It requires a community response. It is the fundamental work Jesus left to his disciples. Conflict will always be a part of human relationships; a driver of community change. But we need to do the hard work of resolving conflict without violence. Violence needs to give way to honest conversation of [common security](#). Accusations need to morph into a search for shared [justice](#). Enmity needs to be transformed to [friendship](#).

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