



**Mennonite
World Conference**

A Community of Anabaptist
related Churches

**Congreso
Mundial Menonita**

Una Comunidad de
Iglesias Anabautistas

**Conférence
Mennonite Mondiale**

Une Communauté
d'Églises Anabaptistes

Statement

Declaration on Conscientious Objection (2022)

*God shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.
Micah 4:3 (NRSV)*

*We must obey God rather than any human authority.
Acts 5:29 (NRSV)*

The God of Christian scriptures longs for us to participate in God's peace, a peace that engulfs all of creation, a peace that determines the way we live in the world. Unfortunately, our world continues to be violent, led by an ever-constant belief that further violence—and preparing to act violently—will somehow bring peace. History, however, demonstrates how violence begets violence, hate begets hate,¹ and death begets death.

Using violence runs contrary to our understanding of Jesus Christ, what he taught, and the example he offered throughout his life. Jesus' witness offers a wholly different response to the realities of violence: dying for the sake of others. This example—Jesus' example—brings true and lasting peace—or *shalom*.² We as Mennonite World Conference are dedicated to Jesus and his example and understanding of peace. He forms the foundation on which the church is built. We want to live and die in our dedication to Jesus and his example. His example also forms the foundation for our understanding of conscientious objection—objecting to participation in mechanisms, systems, and actions that lead to war, violence, and death.

Mennonite World Conference is a worldwide Christian community of followers of Jesus who trace our spiritual roots back to the 16th century Anabaptist movement of the Protestant

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1958), p. 74. This phrase is a redacted version of a longer quote where Martin Luther King Jr. says that “[t]he ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral, begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. Through violence you may murder the liar, but you cannot murder the lie, nor establish the truth. Through violence you may murder the hater, but you do not murder hate. In fact, violence merely increases hate. So it goes. Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that” (Martin Luther King Jr., *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community* [Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1967], 62).

² *Shalom* is a Hebrew word that is often translated into English as “peace.” However, it has a broader meaning. *Shalom* can refer to relationships—both interpersonal as well as inter-communal (between different groups and/or nations), moral well-being, as well as material and/or physical well-being. It is an all-encompassing word that refers to holistic well-being, which points to a lack of suffering, oppression, and injustice in all its forms. See Perry Yoder's *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

Reformation in Europe. We now are a world-wide communion of faith dedicated to ways of life that transcend boundaries of nationality, race, class, gender, and language.³ As stated in our Shared Convictions, *we seek to live in the world without conforming to the powers of evil, witnessing to God's grace by serving others, caring for creation, and inviting all people to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord.*

Witness in suffering

Some within the Mennonite worldwide communion of faith who live according to this all-encompassing vision suffer because of it. They suffer because they are not willing to participate in mechanisms of war and death. Over the centuries members of our faith communion have endured imprisonment, torture and death rather than take up arms in war. Entire communities have migrated to other countries to seek exemption from military service and opportunity to live out their commitment to peace.

A member of one of our South Korean churches was sentenced in 2013 to eighteen months of prison for being a conscientious objector. As a student at a Christian college, he was introduced to the idea that killing others is not compatible with being a disciple of Jesus. Given that military service was mandatory in South Korea, conscientious objection led to his imprisonment.

Another member of one of our church in Colombia was detained in 2015 by the army. Army officials stopped his vehicle and asked for his military documents, even though they did not have administrative or legal grounds to do so. They forced our brother into a military truck used to detain men who do not have proper documents. He explained that he was a conscientious objector, a university student, and that he was involved in religious training—legal statuses that exempted him from service in the military. None of these, however, were taken into consideration, and he was driven against his will to a military base where he was detained.⁴

These are two recent examples of a long history of Anabaptist Christians who, because of conscience, decided that they cannot serve in the military.

Jesus' way of peacemaking

As followers of Jesus we seek to build our lives and communities on two significant commandments found in scripture (Luke 10:27; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5):

- to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength
- to love our neighbors as ourselves

Jesus called his followers to live out these commitments in the midst of an oppressive social context dominated by the power and violence of the Roman Empire and an elite religious establishment. Throughout the biblical story we encounter a God ready to liberate people from systems of violence and oppression and welcome them into an alternative community built on mutuality, justice, love, and peace. Jesus understood this community to be a sign of a new authority, that of the Kingdom of God. This is a place where all can live in just relationship, where power is redefined to enable all to experience of the fullness of life that God intended.

Jesus' most radical and compelling teachings are in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Here Jesus teaches his followers that God loves them deeply, cares for their well-being and

³ As of 2018, there are approximately 2.1 million Anabaptist Christians around the world, 1.5 million of which in 58 countries form Mennonite World Conference.

⁴ Taken from personal interview in Augsburg, Feb. 2017.

urges them to extend that love to their enemies, relying on God for security. Jesus urged his followers not to seek revenge, but to resist oppression with courageous and surprising acts of love.

Jesus modeled his teaching by, for example, building respectful relationships with Samaritans, who sometimes were despised by the Jews. When a teacher of the law asked Jesus who was included in the command to “love your neighbor,” Jesus told the story of a Samaritan who saved the life of a stranger who had been beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10). In this story, Jesus casts the social enemy of his disciples as the unlikely hero who offered grace and healing to a wounded traveler. Here Jesus taught his hearers that love of neighbor cannot be confined to one’s own race, ethnicity or religion, but like God’s love must extend even to the enemy. Jesus challenged the social constructs of his day that legitimated exclusion and violence.

The Apostle Paul mirrored this story as he urged early Christians to offer food and drink to their enemies and “not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

Prophetic teaching on reconciliation

The apostle’s teaching stands in the prophetic tradition of the prophet Elisha, who ordered the king of Israel not to kill the captured army of Aram, but to set food and drink before them and release them to return to their homes (II Kings 6). Similarly, the prophet Samuel challenged the people of Israel not to seek a King who would build up a military force, but rather to trust in God for their security (I Samuel 8). The reluctant prophet Jonah journeyed to Ninevah to offer forgiveness to Assyria, the great enemy nation of Israel.

These prophets and the teachings of Jesus went against the prevailing human wisdom that our security comes from military power and that violence can be redemptive. Instead we find in the biblical story a call to love God, neighbor, and enemy so that we can build a world of justice, peace, and reconciliation. Mennonite World Conference Shared Convictions expresses the vision like this:

The Spirit of Jesus empowers us to trust God in all areas of life so we become peacemakers who renounce violence, love our enemies, seek justice, and share our possessions with those in need (Shared Conviction #5).

Implications for military conscription

Based on these foundational understandings, we have sought to live out the meaning of Christ’s way of peace in the diverse contexts in which we find ourselves around the world. Throughout the centuries, a recurring question has been, *How do we respond to Christ’s call to love our neighbors and our enemies in settings where there is military conscription?*

Most of our earliest Anabaptist forbearers in Europe (1525 and following) rejected the use of the sword and participation in military service, declaring that the world is “armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God.”⁵ Menno Simons, an early Anabaptist leader, wrote that the regenerated are called to be “children of peace who have beaten their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and know of war no more.”⁶

⁵ Taken from the 1527 Schleitheim Confession.

⁶ Menno Simons, “A Fundamental Doctrine from the Word of the Lord, of the New Birth” in *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. by John F. Funk (Elkhart, Ind., 1871).

They are to be “seeds of peace.”⁷

The story of a Dutch Anabaptist named Dirk Willems has become an inspiration and challenge to many. Imprisoned for his beliefs in the year 1569, Dirk Willems escaped from his captors and fled across a frozen pond, pursued by his jailer. His pursuer fell through the ice and cried out for help. Dirk Willems abandoned his escape and turned back to save his jailer from drowning. He was immediately recaptured and shortly thereafter burned to death at the stake. From this story we do not learn meek submission to oppression, but radical trust in God and redemptive response to violence.

Dedication to the ways of peace is not simply an Anabaptist trait, but is an integral element of what it means to be Christian. Such practices have been present throughout the history of the Christian church.⁸ Within our community of faith and our history, there have been significant examples of our forebears avoiding or refusing military service.

- **Russia:** From the late 1700s through the 1800s many Mennonites emigrated from Prussia to Russia, accepting Catherine the Great’s invitation to settle there with no obligation to perform military service. The Russian government provided German-speaking Mennonites the option of forestry service in lieu of military service from 1881-1918.
- **The United States/Canada:** During World War I, many members of our faith community declared themselves conscientious objectors to war and refused to take up arms. They were sent to army camps where many were treated harshly by military authorities. Some suffered lengthy periods of isolation in solitary confinement and some died from torture. In World War II the historic peace churches joined with other church groups to negotiate an alternative service program with their respective governments which allowed conscientious objectors to do work of national importance under civilian direction.

Since World War II conscientious objectors from the United States and Canada have performed alternative service in many places, providing food and assistance in war and post-war settings such as Korea, Jordan, Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, Vietnam, Colombia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Congo, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Rwanda and Uganda. There is currently no military conscription in the United States or Canada, but members of the armed forces who become conscientious objectors to war after enlistment may pursue an honorable discharge from the military on the basis of their new beliefs.

There are also some who choose to be conscientious objectors regarding their taxes. Because a significant amount of a person’s taxes in the United States goes to support the military, the arms industry, and war efforts in general, some have chosen to withhold the portion of their federal tax that would go towards such efforts.

- **Western Europe:** Mennonites throughout Western Europe took various positions regarding involvement in war efforts. After World War I, Mennonites in Germany and Netherlands were part of groups that advocated for recognition of conscientious

⁷ Menno Simons, “Reply to False Accusations,” found in *Anabaptism in Outline*, ed. by Cornelius J. Dyck (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1981), 280.

⁸ One can explore the teachings of the early Church Fathers, such as Origen, Justin the martyr, and Tertullian, as well as later examples such Francis of Assisi. More recent examples include: Ronald M. Gusto, *The Catholic Peace Tradition* (New York, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), Paul Alexander, *Peace to War: Shifting Allegiances in the Assemblies of God* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), and Jay Beaman, *Pentecostal Pacifism: The Origin, Development, and Rejection of Pacific Belief among the Pentecostals* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989).

objection. In the Netherlands several Mennonites were put in prison in the 1920s for their refusal to bear arms. In the interbellum several countries including Germany and the Netherlands adopted legislation that made conscientious objection on religious grounds possible. After World War II, the Dutch Mennonite Peace group organized support for young men who wanted to object to conscription. Over the years hundreds of Mennonite men objected to military service and instead participated in civil service. Conscription was largely abolished in most European countries during this time (although some re-instated it later).

- **Colombia:** While conscientious objection to war is recognized as a legal right by the Constitutional Court in Colombia, there still is no regulatory law providing for its implementation. Since there is obligatory military service for young men, conscientious objectors face difficulties, including imprisonment. While armed conflict is now in a time of transition due to the peace accords, young men in some areas are still subject to recruitment and harassment from illegal armed groups. Members of Anabaptist faith communities in Colombia who have declared themselves to be conscientious objectors have experienced these difficulties.
- **South Korea:** From 1959-1971 North American workers, some of whom were conscientious objectors to war, provided relief and development assistance to help Korean citizens recover from the war. These conscientious objectors provided food and clothing, as well as vocational training, sanitation and health care. Until very recently, the right of conscientious objection was not recognized in Korea, with more than 600 conscientious objectors serving prison sentences because of their beliefs. Following completion of their prison terms, conscientious objectors continue to face economic and social obstacles as a result of their criminal records.

Since 2018, South Korea recognizes the right to conscientious objection. Many have been granted full pardons for refusing military service, which was considered a criminal act. This is a positive step. The alternative service provided for conscientious objectors, however, continues to be problematic. “South Korean conscientious objectors were promised a genuine alternative service. Instead, they are confronted with little more than an alternative punishment,” reported Amnesty International.⁹ Previously, conscientious objectors would have received eighteen months of jail time for not serving in the military. Now they must serve thirty-six months in a jail or correctional facility. “Confining people to work in a prison—and for almost twice as long as the typical military service—does not respect their right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief.”¹⁰ Although the recognition of conscientious objection is a positive step, the implementation of alternative service still requires significant work.

- **Congo:** In the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries where armed groups and government forces frequently clash, many in our community of faith have had to flee violence, experiencing homelessness, displacement and fear. In these insecure settings, forced recruitment of young men into armed groups creates great burdens of conscience and no opportunity for legal alternatives to participation in armed conflict.

⁹ Arnold Fang, Amnesty International’s East Asia Researcher. [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/south-korea-alternative-to-military-service-is-new-punishment-for-conscientious-objectors/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/12/south-korea-alternative-to-military-service-is-new-punishment-for-conscientious-objectors/). Retrieved on Jan. 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Although Mennonites usually have remained committed to nonviolence, we acknowledge that sometimes we have failed to live the way of Jesus. In various times and places, some Mennonite individuals have taken up arms. Some of our churches or church agencies have aligned with idolatrous nationalism. We regret and confess these failures and claim our long heritage of peacemaking as the standard for our lives. Because of this commitment, we believe that:

- Conscientious objectors should not participate in war, armed conflict or military training because of deeply held religious convictions about the sanctity of life and thus an unwillingness to take human life. Many of us will choose to suffer harm, imprisonment and social exclusion rather than take up arms.
- Conscientious objectors need not object to humanitarian service. We are eager to contribute to the well-being and common good of all in our communities and nations. We desire, however, that our service be used for life in all its fullness, not to destroy life or to threaten others with harm.

Our Hope

In the world today there are still some countries that have mandatory military conscription,¹¹ and there is a wide variety of policies toward conscientious objectors. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 18) states that *everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion*. In addition to the Christian foundation for exemption from military service expressed in this document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a legal framework for protecting conscience against war.

As members of a worldwide faith community:

- We long to freely live out the meaning of our deeply-held commitments to peace and nonviolence without fear of legal sanctions or social intimidation. Exemption from military service through a clearly outlined process is our sincere request.
- We hope that we will be afforded the opportunity to perform peaceful service—or service towards peace—among our neighbors and fellow citizens as an alternative to military service.

Our hope and desire is for these provisions to be made accessible to all members of society who for reasons of conscience cannot take part in military service or training.

*Mennonite World Conference Peace Commission
February 2020*

Date Approved: December 2022
Approved By: MWC Executive Committee on behalf of MWC General Council*

*The MWC General Council decided to delegate the approval of this statement to the MWC Executive Committee, due to unexpectedly shortened meetings in July 2022.

¹¹ As of January 2020, there are approximately 26 countries that still require mandatory military service.