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Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)

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Dear Church,

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Resolution 0728 adopted at the Fort Worth General Assembly asked that I write a pastoral letter to the congregations about the pain to the nation and to the church related to the war in Iraq. As we surpass the 4000th American death in that war, as at least one of those deaths is a Disciples young man from one of our churches in the Northeast Region, as we pass the unnumbered tens of thousands of Iraqi deaths, I write out of deep sorrow. The families and congregations of those who have died are living with a depth of loss that is unimaginable for those who have not traveled that road. And yet, there is also a depth of pride for the courage displayed by men and women who serve their country through military duty.

As General Minister and President, I have the privilege of participating in conversations with a broad range of persons and partners in mission. Recently I convened a table of persons to reflect on issues raised by the war in Iraq. There were military chaplains present, as well as retired military officers now involved in the church. There were peace and justice activists, representatives of Global Ministries, and two Iraqi refugees – a doctor and a chemist. There were local congregations represented, including a congregation that has been outspoken in its opposition to the General Assembly resolution on Iraq. Personal stories were shared, tears shed, anger expressed and connections made among individuals who ordinarily expect to find themselves on opposite sides of a cavern of divergent opinion. The meeting ended with a strong sense of hope growing out of the oneness in Christ that flows deeper than human opinion.

The meeting also revealed the breadth of the pain that comes with war – any war and this one in particular.

There is the pain of separation from loved ones during deployment – and the deep grief when the service member does not come home. There is the pain of re-entry, including the often unmentioned reality of tens of thousands wounded physically and spiritually through their military service. Their families and congregations bear the load of helping them put the pieces of a civilian life back together. The church and the nation will have to address the needs of these brave persons and their families for many years to come.

There is the pain of chaplains who minister to service men and women and their families. Who see, in the flash of an eye, “the difference between a human being and a human body” (as one of the chaplains present phrased it) not once but many, many times. Who counsel with officers and enlisted alike about their fears, their faith, their doubts. Who remain strong and comforting in the face of danger and uncertainty. And some of whom, after three, four, five rotations are beginning themselves to wear down and experience compassion fatigue. Chaplains are often the unsung heroes of any war.

There is the pain of the Iraqi people. More than a million have had to leave their country. Two million more are internally displaced. Middle class people who were building a life in peace with neighbors of all religions are now homeless or moved into ethnic enclaves, living in fear of the next wave of terror. Christian leaders have been brutally assassinated. People wonder out loud if Christian presence in the birthplace of Abraham, Ezra and Nehemiah is finished. Islam, a religion of peace and discipline, is now associated in the eyes of the Western world with the fanaticism of a few and finds within it, differing communities of practice hardening into enemy camps.

There is the pain of those among us who view peace not only as a point on a distant horizon, but who insist that non-violent interaction is a way of life to be lived right now.

Who believe that the Kingdom of God is among us. Who take seriously Jesus' admonitions against violence and call us to live already as though God's commandments to love our enemy actually apply in our own time. Their pain is multiplied as their faithful insistence on waging peace causes their love of country and patriotism to be questioned.

There is the pain, as well, of those who absolutely believe it was and is right to have entered Iraq – that the cost is an acceptable cost – though difficult in human terms. There is pain for those who have served in conflict and watched a fellow soldier die or to live in fear of the unknown while hidden in a fox hole reciting the Lord's Prayer or the 23rd Psalm. For those who believe at the core of their faith that we must defend liberty and justice in all places and times, there is the pain of being labeled warmongers or lovers of hatred.

There is the painful ambiguity in which we all live right now. While a majority of Disciples attending General Assembly voted their conscientious objection to the war, we're there now, and in spite of the good that many of our compatriots have tried to do, the place is a mess. Do we leave it that way? A Christian has to grapple with the ambiguity of what we do from here. As citizens we need to engage the political process, participate in the conversation about how to reconstruct the nation, about how to promote reconciliation, how to care for our returning soldiers with their enormous medical and physical and spiritual challenges, how to care for their families. As Christians we need to advocate for peace and justice from all across the political and theological spectrum – to address the immediate humanitarian concerns of Iraqis – to hold our own government accountable to established rules of international conduct in times of war. These are American values, but more importantly they are Christian values.

As your general minister and president, I am working with David Vargas and Peter Makari of Global Ministries and our counterparts with the United Church of Christ, to review resources and information as to how we can actively support our troops and their families as they serve and when they return. I am well aware of the trauma and suffering endured by countless men and women who struggle to reintegrate into lives that have been abruptly halted by their call to active duty. In my own office, we have recently amended our personnel policies to comply with the new Family Medical Leave Act related specifically to military personnel and their effected family members during times of active duty and return.

During the next year, I am calling each of us to continue our prayers for those whose lives have been disrupted or lost, to continue our prayers for peace and understanding, and to continue to be engaged in meaningful dialogue that seeks first to understand those who differ from us, before we seek to be understood. Disciples' earliest witness was to reach across the divides of human opinion and find a deeper unity in Christ. The pain of division over this war will continue – even in the church – but the challenge of finding a respectful way to speak to each other through our differences will bring out the best in us. Engaging each other respectfully, lovingly, as brothers and sisters in Christ, is in itself a witness. It is a place to begin as we seek to acknowledge our pain and to seek together the things that make for a just and lasting peace.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sharon E. Watkins". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sharon E. Watkins