

# Faithful Conversations: Tolstoy Would've Loved the Disciples



The Council on Christian Unity, in partnership with Disciples Peace Fellowship, engaged Assembly participants in vigorous, robust discussion on the challenges of putting faith into practice in relation to the issues of unity, war and peacemaking with a new model known as “Faithful Conversations.”

The process was introduced at the first business session on Sunday, July 10 by Robert Welsh, president of CCU, and several speakers who shared personal reflections as young adults, congregational pastors, laypersons, seminary professors, and military chaplains. On Monday afternoon, July 11, three standing-room only conversation sessions took place, which allowed participants to explore a variety of perspectives around issues of war and peace.

In one of the sessions, Sharon Warner, a professor at Lexington Theological Seminary, presented information on the three historic Christian positions related to war: “holy war,” “just war,” and pacifism. This was followed by Craig Watts, minister of Royal Palm Christian Church in Coral Springs, Fla., and co-chair of the DPF, reviewing the anti-war origins of the Stone-Campbell movement. “As early as 1823, Campbell wrote he was appalled Christians would go forth with a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other,” Watts said. “He couldn’t understand why Christians would first create as many widows and orphans as possible, then proceed to minister to them.” Newell Williams, president of Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, also shared information about Barton Stone’s position on war.

Down the hall, another conversation began with a “fish-bowl” presentation among Disciples who hold very different perspectives -- as a pacifist (Rita Nakashima Brock), as a military chaplain (Steve Doan), as a young adult working on peace education (Christa Johnson), and as a congregational pastor ministering to families of military personnel (Landa Simmons) -- seeking to engage in tough discussion while respecting the other’s position. Doug Skinner, pastor of Northway Christian Church in Dallas, then read a letter from the father of a U.S. Marine deployed to Iraq, who said too many Christians are forced to choose between their love of the church and their pride in their sons, daughters, and other relatives who embrace the task of defending the nation. How can a church comfort its children, the father asked, when it condemns them and takes sides in political debates?

Ultimately, the speakers argued the decision to take up arms against fellow human beings is one of the most complex and difficult decisions Christians can undertake.

In a closing reflection on Wednesday, July 13, John Richardson, regional minister of North Carolina, who had served as a recorder at the Monday afternoon sessions, identified some of the learnings from the conversation model, including: there is a clear and urgent call for Disciples to educate themselves both to the historic Christian positions around war and peace, and especially

to our own Disciples understandings, and that peacemaking is a bigger topic than what is simply identified as situations of conflict and war. The challenge is to address critical issues and challenges of peace among all people, peace in the community, the marketplace, and in care of creation.

A major recommendation from the process was a call to continue the conversations started in Nashville across the life of the church, especially within congregations, and the possible creation of a “faithful conversations” website with specific resources for study and worship.

“Somehow, somewhere, we need to model honest, genuine disagreements as Christians, and still claim each other as one family,” said Welsh, CCU president.

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