

## UMMA UpDate #29, Christmas 2004

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*"Linking mission workers worldwide"*

### **IN THIS CHRISTMAS PEACE ISSUE:**

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### **[1] CHRISTMAS GREETINGS FROM SOME OF OUR MEMBERS**

Thinking on how to wish each of you Christmas Greetings, many descriptive words raced through my mind last evening and on throughout the night. Colors, words, designs, logos, grow each year telling the age old words: **Merry Christmas to you and yours! In love and grace which equals peace**, Carolyn Belshe Cowen

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Accept Your Christmas Gift! **Freedom from Fear**. Christ has told us: "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*" John 14: 27. Christ has come that his people might not live in fear and anxiety, but accept God's love and grace freely. **Why not accept Christ's gift of acceptance and forgiveness to live in freedom from fear during this Advent Season.**

Peggy and I have lived for many years among the marginalized of the world in under-developed countries. They live hard lives struggling to survive, yet many have a relaxed nature and openness to others that is not felt in our country. The God they worship is very personal and involved in their daily lives helping them to face a multitude of difficulties. Their faith in Christ giving them courage to live their Christian convictions has helped us live our life in a more simple way.

Robert McAfee Brown in his book *Theology in a New Key* attributes our Christian faith to "where we stand" in our educational, political, and economic understanding of life. Formed within our country's culture, our life experiences have a tremendous influence on how we view, judge and apply our Christian belief to our daily living.

Since 9/11 we have increasingly lived in a culture of fear. Is this the life Christ has called us to? Is this "where we stand" or is there an alternative? Throughout the Gospels Christ encourages not to be afraid but to turn to him for strength in our daily living. Freedom from fear is the gift we should claim this Advent Season. "**Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.**" Peace, Howard Heiner  
*[Christmas Greetings are continued on the last page]*

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[2] **IS PEACE POSSIBLE?** by Pharis J. Harvey

*Pharis and his wife Jane were short-term missionaries and later regular missionaries of the GBGM in Japan and Korea. Pharis was co-founder of the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) and executive director from 1990 to 2001. They are UMMA members. For more information click <http://www.pelc.net/harvey.html> He delivered this keynote address at the Pacific Northwest Annual Conference Older Adult Convocation Wesley United Methodist Church, Yakima, Washington, October 2, 2004. Bold highlighting was added by the editor.*

On behalf of Jane and myself, I want to thank you all very much for the honor of asking us to participate in this convocation. We are very pleased at the title of the Convocation, “**The World is Still our Parish**”, because it reminds us just how important it is that we be active in the whole mission of God to the whole of God’s world, and not settle for some small part of it – increasingly these days a real temptation! Jane and I have a habit of waking up in the morning listening to the Morning Report on National Public Radio for about an hour prior to our getting up. Lately, by the time a half hour or so of news has passed, we both feel like turning off the radio, pulling up the covers, and going back to sleep – perhaps in the hope that if we did, we could wake up to a more peaceful less troubled world a little later on! But no, the troubled world outlasts our desire to avoid it, and no matter how long we postpone, it’s still there – and still our parish! So we’re very honored that you share our hope and our concern that our lives, as Christians, witness powerfully to the whole of our world.

The topic you have chosen for the keynote is forbidding indeed! “**Is Peace Possible?**” I would like simply to answer out of my faith and hope and say unequivocally “Yes.” But I also don’t want to oversimplify what that means, or fail to speak meaningfully to how we get there. For the world is in a terrible mess right now, and peace seems, in the wake of 9/11, very far off if not lost forever. And **if we are to find peace again, we must take actions on a number of fronts for quite a long time.**

**First, a few troubling facts:**

1. **In Iraq**, the situation worsens daily. The July National Intelligence Estimate, which has been leaked to the press, has articulated the most likely outcome of the war in Iraq is civil war, with the best we can hope for is a highly volatile standoff among insurgent forces and political parties. Violence is occurring daily in every one of Iraq’s provinces, and large segments of the country are outside the control of the interim government or U.S. military forces. The prospects are almost zero for holding elections under these circumstances that can satisfy the many different tribal, religious or political groups in Iraq that they are fair. Foreign militant Islamists, Jihadists, who had no standing or presence in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, now number in the hundreds or thousands and have turned Iraq into a recruiting and training ground for their global war against what they perceive as the “enemies of Islam” – namely the US.

2. **In Afghanistan**, headed for an election in just one week, the central government supported by the US is able to function only in a small sliver of the country, and only by maintaining shady alliances with warlords throughout much of the country. The cultivation of heroin poppies has reemerged as the major export of Afghanistan, with all the violence and corruption that involves. The Taliban is emerging again as a “reform” force and Al-Qaeda has retained its support in important regions along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Whether in Afghanistan or Pakistan, Osama bin Laden is still at large, still a popular hero, and US efforts to isolate or eliminate him are minimal. An election held under these circumstances is likely to settle no dispute, gain no mandate and legitimize no elected officials.

So, **after three years of the “War on Terror,” we see no prospect for peace** and little prospect that progress is being made in the effort to isolate or eliminate the threat from radical Islamic Jihadists. But more than one thousand Americans, some 20,000 Iraqis, and several thousand Afghanistan citizens are dead. An awful tragedy continues to unfold with no end in sight.

**What can we do?** I admit I don’t know what will bring us peace in Iraq or Afghanistan in the short term. We are in a quagmire there, largely of our own making, and whoever is elected president next month

will face almost impossible tasks and heart-breaking choices. But what we can do in the longer term is critical, because it may be able to keep this violence from spreading elsewhere.

In the days immediately following September 11, 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said to the press that the United States was going to take the actions necessary to, as he put it, “**drain the swamp in which terrorism flourishes**.” I took some encouragement from that comment, in the belief that it meant the administration would look into whatever legitimate complaints there might be that would be used to justify such desperate, violent acts as the attack on the World Trade Center. I was, sadly enough, far too naïve. Unfortunately, Mr. Rumsfeld only meant they would destroy physically the villages and mountainous areas in which the Al-Qaeda operatives were hiding, so they could be exposed and destroyed.

**But the poor mountain villages of Afghanistan were not the swamp that generated Al-Qaeda. And in our effort to flush out the terrorists from these mountains, we became not swamp drainers but "bigger and badder" alligators!** And by shifting the war to Iraq, where Al Qaeda was not then operating, we have created a new swamp, inviting alligators in from every disaffected part of the Muslim world. But apart from this development, for which we have only ourselves to blame, what characterizes the swamp in which terrorism flourishes?

**First, what it is not.** These radical groups are not attacking the US because they hate freedom, despite what our president has often said. That statement creates a fog of misunderstanding, that however self-justifying it may be, helps us not at all in understanding, or combating radical Jihadists. **It is not freedom they fear, but specific things we have done or are perceived to have done, with our freedom, and forces we have supported in the Middle East that are authoritarian or dictatorial that contradict our claims of freedom.** Nor is it a general cultural conflict between Christianity and Islam, as some have concluded. **Christians and Muslims have lived together in that region for at least 13 hundred years without this level of conflict,** (if one overlooks the crusades that grew out of incipient European nationalism and similar brief periods of Islamic expansionism).

No, the swamp that generates today’s level of violence is a much more basic fault line that lies across the whole globe – between the have and have-not nations, between the modern industrial world and the primitive agricultural parts of the globe where most people struggle daily to eke out a bare existence, and between the elites of the third world and their allies in the industrial world and the people who suffer the daily indignity of oppression and want. **It is not a swamp with a particular religious color; it involves Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians alike.**

In an earlier time when these worlds of affluence and poverty didn’t collide, those disparities might not have led to violent terrorist acts. But modern communications rub these differences in the face of the poor of the earth every day. And those who suffer lives of indignity and alienation are easy prey to political leaders who exploit their suffering for their own causes. We can never prevent the rise of ambitious individuals or movements for change, radical, violent or otherwise. **What we can do is lessen the appeal of violent movements by responding to the reasons they attract followers.**

**What are those reasons?**

**Poverty and deprivation of education are fundamental problems.** Poverty itself is not a force that leads necessarily to violence. Most of the people of the world are poor; more than 2 billion people live on less than \$2.00 a day. In fact, “only 8 percent of people in the world,” according to the ILO (International

Labor Organization), “live in countries providing favorable economic security.”\* But poverty leads to lack of access to education and skill building for better lives. And ignorance and illiteracy limit what people can know about the world, making them vulnerable to the claims, accusations and promises of unscrupulous political leaders. Let’s look at what this means in one country, Pakistan, for example. According to a new report by UNESCO:

Official statistics released by the Federal Education Ministry of Pakistan give a desperate picture of education for all, especially for girls. The overall literacy rate is 46 per cent, while only 26 per cent of girls are literate. Independent sources and educational experts, however, are skeptical. They place **the overall literacy rate at 26 percent and the rate for girls and women at 12 percent**, contending that the higher figures include people who can handle little more than a signature. The situation is especially alarming in rural areas due to social and cultural obstacles. One of the most deplorable aspects is that in some places, particularly northern tribal areas, the education of girls is strictly prohibited on religious grounds. This is a gross misinterpretation of Islam, the dominant religion in Pakistan (96 percent of the population), which like all religions urges men and women to acquire education.

The situation is the most critical in North West Frontier Provinces and Baluchistan, where the female literacy rate stands between 3 percent and 8 percent. Some government organizations and non-governmental organizations have tried to open formal and informal schools in these areas, but the local landlords, even when they have little or nothing to do with religion or religious parties, oppose such measures, apparently out of fear that people who become literate will cease to follow them with blind faith. **Unfortunately, the government has not so far taken any steps to promote literacy or girl’s education in these areas.** It is even reluctant to help NGOs or other small political or religious parties do the job, because in order to maintain control, it needs the support of these landlords and chieftains who, as members of the two major political parties, are regularly elected to the national assembly.\*\*

So poor parents turn to the *madrassahs*, the hundreds of fundamentalist Muslim schools where children are taught only the Koran, and only through an interpretation that excites religious hatred and fervor. They get free boarding and food, along with this education. That’s why poor parents send their children to them. What they don’t get is a world-enlarging understanding or any skills to advance their families, except military-type training. **With the *madrassahs* a primary source of education in Pakistan, it is not surprising that extremely militant Islamist parties are on the rise in that country.** Their graduates form many of the shock troops of Al-Qaeda, as well as the ranks of suicide bombers throughout the region. Religious fervor feeds terrorism; it doesn’t cause it. And the basic reason it is appealing is the lack of alternatives for poor families.

**A second cause, perhaps growing out of the first, is alienation from western commercial values.** In very conservative Islamic countries, western culture – as seen primarily on television – is an affront to their sensibilities. We see the excesses of commercial culture in our country as one of the prices we pay for freedom of expression. They see it as an outgrowth of lack of respect for women, lack of due decorum and general crudity. When, due to the effects of globalization, our cultural exports – music, entertainment, movies, etc. – pervade and overwhelm their own, our ability to persuade them of the superiority of our brand of freedom is almost completely lost.

To worsen the situation, the failure of US forces – and their leadership – to adhere to our own standards of behavior in the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo has made any claims we make in

the Muslim world about the superiority of our democratic values sound hollow indeed. Some of these elements of alienation would not be so severe if it were not generally perceived around the world that the United States arrogantly exercises its power as the only superpower in the world. When we ignore international treaties, scorn the United Nations, turn our backs on our traditional allies, we add to the resentment of others and give credence to our most radical critics.

This is true in spades when it comes to the Middle East, where the US is seen in the Muslim world as the only prop for Israeli oppression of the people of Palestine. **Peace in that region cannot be achieved without justice in Palestine.** Almost all Islamic nations now agree on the right of Israel to survive, but not its right to repress the Palestinian people. By turning our backs on that struggle in recent years, we have added fuel to the fire of those who accuse us of anti-Islamic intentions and policies. The US is, in fact, the essential leader in any peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. As long as we are perceived in the Muslim world as unfairly biased toward Israel, any role we might play as an honest broker for peace is severely compromised.

**Finally, the dominance of oil in US policy toward the Middle East (and elsewhere) hampers our freedom to play a more balanced role.** The need for Saudi oil creates a tolerance of Saudi authoritarianism; the need for Iraqi oil may be playing an equally important role in limiting the kinds of freedom and autonomy we want for post-Saddam Iraq. Clearly, Venezuelan oil was an important factor in US efforts to get the democratically elected populist president Hugo Chavez overthrown earlier this year. Democracy is a goal, but if our need to control the flow of oil is more important, democracy will be the first victim, not the result, of our efforts. **If these are the major elements of the swamp that breeds terrorism, what can we do to drain it?**

**For a start, we must take serious steps to understand Islam better.** What we know in the general public is mostly negative, that Muslims oppress women, that Muslims believe in religious violence, that Muslims are intolerant toward non-Muslims. While there are, of course, Muslims for whom each of these stereotypes is accurate, just as there are Christians who fit these stereotypes, there are also important strains within Islam that challenge these. One of my dearest friends is a Pakistani Muslim in a sect, the Amadhis, which has distinguished itself by a refusal to believe in jihad, or holy war. There are important reform movements in Islam to re-examine the role and status of women. The majority of Muslims in the world live in countries with no major conflicts between Muslims and persons of other faiths. But we don't take enough effort to understand these, our brothers and sisters who share with us the fatherhood of Abraham. And we don't engage in a serious, two-way dialogue with Muslims in our midst to find and preserve our common ground.

**Second, we must turn around the economic disparities that lead to the swamp of hopelessness and illiteracy. It would cost less per year to assure that every child in the world is enrolled in school than it has cost the US to make war in Iraq.** As you can see in the film "*Stolen Childhoods*,"\*\*\* countries like Kenya spend more repaying foreign debts to the World Bank and IMF than they can generate, and have insufficient revenues to support the education of their children. Since most of these debts were made by international agencies that knew at the time they were throwing money down a rat hole of corruption, the only moral response now is to relieve that debt, in part or in whole, under conditions that direct the funds that would be used to pay the debt toward building up the educational and social infrastructure of these poor countries.

**Third, we must put our resources and our energy into efforts to liberate and educate women.** In much of the world, women lead lives of quiet desperation because of long-held traditions and prejudices. When women are freed to participate fully in society and to have some control over their own lives, they bring dignity and hope to their families, and to their children. In India, it has been found by a pioneering effort in Andhra Pradesh State that when mothers are given basic education, the health, education and welfare of their children improves dramatically. And with few exceptions, the educated children of educated mothers don't become terrorists.

And **we must attack directly the epidemic of child labor.** Again, I will defer to the film to make this point more directly, but with 246 million children – about 1 of every 6 children – living lives consumed by hard labor at a very tender age, the possibilities for producing alienated adults is overwhelming, as is the destruction of hope for them and their families. The madrassahs of Pakistan feed on this alienation, and the consequent desperation is found in the ranks of Al-Qaeda's foot soldiers. We can stop this horrific waste of human potential if we but have the will.

Also, we need seriously to examine the way by which our trade practices and policies sustain poverty around the world. It is common to leaders of both parties to support "free trade," and the elimination of trade barriers. But we are not honest as a nation in this endeavor. For we provide immense subsidies to our own agribusiness to export agricultural products into much of the world at the cost of driving subsistence farmers off the land and destroying local agricultural markets in poor countries. Further, both Democrats and Republicans have supported freeing markets around the world from government restraints that are used to foster local industry or strengthen social services. This has been very destructive to efforts by poor countries to meet social needs and build up competitive strength in the global market. Free trade, when it is practiced in this way, benefits the strong and punishes the weak. **We need to seriously challenge the dogma about free trade so that trade strengthens equally the economies of advanced and developing countries.** The simple notion that trade restrictions hamper development is totally inadequate.

Speaking of trade, there is no doubt that if we are to have a foreign policy that is independent of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, we need to lessen our dependence on oil from that region. And that means **we have to look to other sources of energy than oil and learn to live a less oil-soaked existence.** We can probably never be totally free of Middle Eastern oil, but we can weather political troubles in that region far more successfully if we are not subject to political blackmail by unsavory governments in order to keep the oil flowing. Conservation and alternate energy sources are an important part of bringing peace to this troubled world.

**Finally, as a country, we need to put away the attitudes of moral superiority with which we sometimes deal with the rest of the world.** We live on a tiny planet, and we are all in this together. We have our share of elements in our past, and present, that are not worthy of this nation. Can we learn to look at ourselves with the same critical eye that we apply to others? Making peace depends on it, for where there is no mutual respect there can be no peace. And where there is no recognition of our own faults, there can be no basis for mutual respect. Arrogance and moral superiority have no place in the quest for peace.

**We have as a nation championed human rights around the world. We have played a major role in advancing international institutions, treaties, and the development of international law. In recent years, however, too many of us have turned our back on this heritage, claiming that we can go it alone because of our moral superiority or our overwhelming military superiority.** But even as we have

done this, we have also committed some of the most serious breaches of international law in the treatment of prisoners, in the conduct of war. If we seek peace, we must re-establish in this country a commitment to international norms, standards of behavior that we are willing to subject ourselves to as well as to hold other nations accountable for. Only then will our bid for peace be based on justice; only then will we be able to negotiate with others in good faith toward a more peaceful, just world.

We are hearing a lot about “security” in the presidential campaign, but very little about “peace.” **Security and peace are not the same.** We can, temporarily at least, make ourselves secure from attack by strong protective measures, whether in homeland security or in military actions. But we cannot build a world of peace if our own safety is our only concern. **Peace, as Martin Luther King reminded us, is not the absence of war but the presence of justice.**

I apologize for having concentrated my remarks on fairly abstract policy matters. But I believe that we have to think about these things as citizens, if we are to help our nation set a better, more peaceful course in this difficult time. But in addition to thinking about and advocating for policies that lead toward peace, as people of faith we need to adopt a stance that grows out of our belief that God is still in love with the world, and that it is our parish to minister to. We must not allow a feeling of helplessness to prevail in the face of these great burdensome issues. At the same time, we must not allow a narrow sectarian version of faith to triumph over real ecumenism. **When we say the world is our parish, we mean it is ours to love, not just to mine for converts.** And that means accepting, loving, and understanding those who see God with a different face, whose stories of faith differ from ours, whose names for God are strange, and whose practices of faith are alien to us. Peace in our time must be built on mutual acceptance and respect.

And we as people of faith must be able to look with courage at our own complicity, either by silence or support, in mass violence. Such self-examination is not easy, and is possible and fruitful only when it takes place within the framework of faith, in the knowledge that we are accepted and forgiven when we acknowledge how we have sinned and when we move toward repentance and renewal (*metanoia*).

**Under those conditions, renewal is possible, and with it, peace. “The World is still our Parish.” And we can only minister to this world if we relinquish the desire to Be the Messiah and instead witness to the power of love and justice to make peace real, in the service of the Messiah.** Remember that Jesus said to his troubled disciples when he was about to enter Jerusalem to face great danger and death on a cross, **“Peace is my parting gift to you, my own peace, such as the world cannot give to you. Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears.”** (Jn. 14:27) If we act on such a promise, Peace in our world is indeed possible. Thank you and **Shalom**.

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\*ILO, Economic Security for a Better World, September 2004. see [www.ILO.org](http://www.ILO.org)

\*\*UNESCO, Education for All, published Sept. 29, 2004. (UNESCO website)

\*\*\* “Stolen Childhoods,” produced by Galen Films for the International Labor Rights Fund, was shown at the convocation. See [www.stolenchildhoods.org](http://www.stolenchildhoods.org)

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**Christmas Greetings** *continued from the first page*

I write this on December 7 as I look out of my window at the tall steeple of our neighborhood Methodist Church silhouetted against a glowing setting sun. I think of this day which in my childhood

marked the start of horrific wartime involvement between my homeland and the country which is neighbor to Korea where I am living as a missionary.

**Today Korea is a divided land in a state of truce, with no peace treaty to end the devastating war that began here 54 years ago. In the midst of these thoughts of war and longings for peace, the Advent Season asks us to prepare the way for the Prince of Peace.** I am not sure how to do that here where 37,000 US troops are stationed with many Korean troops on the DMZ.

**I know HOPE is all we have, but it must be a hope with legs and arms and mouths to make a difference. I pray that all of us can BE that hope for our neighbors here - and throughout God's world.** Blessings, Sonia Strawn, Korea

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*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.”* Luke 4:18-19. With these words from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus begins his ministry and thus sets the tone for how we must understand him as the Prince of Peace, a light to a world that lives in darkness. If we are to walk in his footsteps faithfully, we must do likewise.

I'm delighted with an enthusiastic incoming group of eight students, full of questions in her Old Testament class...The challenge is to be faithful in terms of the socio-religious context of the text, yet be ready to contextualize according to their reality (Mexico, 21st Century!). May the Prince of Peace lead you in His ways this Christmas and always, and may we each be a light in a world of darkness and war. Shalom and Blessings for 2005! - Cherie White & José Luis Velazco, and Family, México

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**Advent is a very important part of my church life**, a time of expectation, waiting, and yet, eagerness to once again prepare myself to receive the fullness of the “Good News” of Jesus’ birth. This year, I am using three sets of Advent Devotions, but am especially encouraged by this one by Thomas Merton, Trappist monk. Merton’s comments are particularly meaningful this year in the midst of war in Iraq, conflicts and strife in Nepal and Sudan; lack of peace in Palestine and many other manipulations of events by the free will of humans.

“It is only the infinite mercy and love of God that has prevented us from tearing ourselves to pieces and destroying God’s creation long ago. On the contrary, consider how in spite of centuries of sin and greed and lust and cruelty and hatred and avarice and oppression and injustice, spawned and bred by (our) free wills, **the human race can still recover, each time, and can still produce men and women who overcome evil with good, hatred with love, greed with charity, lust and cruelty with sanctity. How could all this be possible without the merciful love of God, pouring out His grace upon us?**” From: The Seven Story Mountain by Thomas Merton. Thanks be to the merciful love of God. - Norma Kehrberg

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**Peaceful Advent, Christmas and Epiphany Greetings from the rest of the UMMA leadership team** who are serving various mission responsibilities around the world as we work together toward making world peace possible. For Justice & Shalom, Richard Schwenk, editor