



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NEW ECUMENICAL STATEMENT BACKS CHRISTIAN ACTIVISM ON ISSUES AFFECTING HUMAN DIGNITY

WASHINGTON--A major new ecumenical document, drafted jointly by Roman Catholic and Presbyterian-Reformed church leaders in the United States, gives strong backing to civic and political activism on the part of Christians whenever the dignity of human beings is at stake.

The 42-page document, entitled "Partners in Peace and Education", was approved by the Roman Catholic/Presbyterian-Reformed Consultation at a meeting in May and released to the press this week.

The Consultation is sponsored jointly by the Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Caribbean and North American Area Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Presbyterian and Congregational). The dialogue between the two traditions has been going on uninterruptedly in the United States since 1965, and the latest document is the result of three years of study and exchange.

"It is right, we claim, for us to act as citizens in the political order on the strength of the perspectives and criticisms that our religious affords us," says the document. "...We have

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not accepted the liberty to believe as we will at the price of cloistering those beliefs in the privacy of the church. We cannot be faithful Americans except as publicly and articulately Christian."

"It is in the public order that we fulfill the Lord's relentless call to feed, house, clothe, heal, defend, and in every needed way, to sustain our sisters and brothers," the document explains. "Our energetic participation in the civil state and its policies and institutions is an indispensable sequel to our love of neighbor for the love of God."

The document hails the 1983 pastoral letter of the Catholic bishops of the United States, "The Challenge of Peace", as a high-water mark in treating national issues of deep moral significance, and it calls that pastoral "one of the most discerning and prophetic statements on the issue (of war and peace) in recent years". The new ecumenical document forecasts that the bishops' 1983 peace pastoral "may well do for this issue in the American context what Martin Luther King, Jr. did for the issues of racism: the conscience of the nation, and not only that of a specific communion, is given a new level of cogent expression by religious leadership."

"In modern life, the instruments of coercive power reach devastating proportions," says the new document. "The traditional vocation of the church to see that the use of military power be restrained is intensified."

The document lauds the fact that the process by which the bishops' peace pastoral was drafted "involved open hearings with Protestants as well as Catholic theological and ethical scholars, circulation of several drafts with open invitations for comment, discussions with laity in government and defense, experts in

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political and nuclear affairs, and discussion at congregational levels."

Praising such wide-scale cooperation as a model for the future, the document says "we strongly recommend to our respective denominations that other churches be consulted, their representatives be integrated into the drafting process, and that wherever feasible we speak together in joint official statements on peace and other major social issues."

The document also examines the topic of religion and schools, as an example of an area where churches might cooperate in dialogue when they share an underlying unity of vision even though differing on particular policy judgements.

Catholic and Presbyterian/Reformed churches agree, in the document, that education about religion should play a more prominent role than it currently does in public school education in the U.S.

"Although the historical, literary, cultural, and philosophical study of religion is permitted, the common, although dubious, interpretation of the separation of church and state makes such a study rare", the document observes. "Thus most American children attend state-sponsored schools which are funded by all taxpayers and which are not only prevented from promoting any particular religion, but which avoid those permitted treatments of religion which are surely necessary for a complete education."

"Children who are not exposed to the great faith traditions of the world with at least as much objectivity and detail as they are now exposed to economic and political ideologies, to artistic

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perspectives, and to scientific theories and hypotheses," it adds, "are educationally deprived."

Regarding tax relief for parents of children enrolled in religiously sponsored schools, the document sets forth the arguments for and against such relief. "There is need for proponents of both positions to listen carefully...", says the document. "Both of us must assess the roots of our differences: Are they theological, or historical-sociological? Is change possible?"

On the matter of sex education in public schools, the document says that such education should be "positive, accurate, and prudent, guided throughout by fundamental ethical principles necessary to the formation of personal responsibility and viable relationships in all sexual behavior."

"Our traditions agree that sex is never, for humans, simply a matter of physiology, or even of psychology," the document observes. "We agree that human sexuality involves moral and spiritual values at every point, and that, according to the teachings of both our traditions, sexual activity is to be carried out in the context of stable, loving, monogamous, heterosexual relationships that are sacramental or covenantal in character. Insofar as these perspectives are not allowed or emphasized in sex education courses in the public schools, tension will remain between them and the churches."

The Consultation which approved the document is co-chaired by Most Rev. Ernest L. Unterkoefler, bishop of Charleston, S.C. and Dr. Andrew Harsanyi, dean of the Hungarian Reformed Church in America. Other members of the Consultation, appointed by their

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respective parent bodies, are: Rev. James T. Burtchaell, University of Notre Dame; Dr. Dorothy Dodge, Macalester College; Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, National Conference of Catholic Bishops; Rev. Daniel Harrington, S.J., Weston School of Theology; Dr. Monica Hellwig, Georgetown University; Rev. Anne Ewing Hickey, Louisville, KY; Rev. William J. Hill, O.P., Catholic University of America; Rev. Elizabeth Johnson, Charlotte, N.C., Rev. John T. Pawlikowski, O.S.M., Catholic Theological Union, Chicago; Rev. Cornelius Plantinga, Calvin Theological Seminary; Rev. Gerard S. Sloyan, Temple University; Prof. Max Stackhouse, Andover-Newton Theological Seminary; Dr. Ronald Stone, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; Rev. Robert A. White, President, New Brunswick Theological Seminary; and Dr. Ronald C. White, Jr., Princeton Theological Seminary.

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