

TESTIMONY OF BISHOP C. DALE WHITETo the Commission on
Wartime Relocation and
Internment of Civilians

It is a privilege for me to address this statement to the Commission in its important deliberations. I speak as one of the Bishops of the United Methodist Church, with specific responsibility for the New Jersey Area of that denomination. I also speak as one who represents a denomination of Christians who have traditionally believed in reaching out to the needs and concerns of God's world.

Our heritage is rich in efforts to meet the social, moral and ethical needs of all of God's people. We especially believe in supporting and advocating for the needs of those people who have been slighted, wronged, harmed, injured, or who in any way have had their God-given humanity assailed.

The relocation and internment of the Japanese Americans during World War II is a sad example of being so assailed. The actions taken against these persons was a clear violation of their basic human rights. While this is so by strict standards of American justice and law, since no Japanese American was ever arrested for espionage or sabotage, we attribute even deeper import to the violation of their rights.

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The affirmation and belief that all people are of equal worth in the sight of God, and thereby possess equal human rights, has taken a long time to evolve. It stretches over many centuries of thought and experience. This concept of human rights was dramatically influenced by the teachings of the Judeo-Christian heritage. In those teachings it is asserted that since all persons are created in the image of God, every person has the right to personal dignity and responsible freedom. Those rights should be protected.

With the establishment of the United States, the conviction that all persons are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights became law. These were specified in our Bill of Rights, the defense of which has often taken much of our national commitment and energy. Yet, it is sad to note that seven of the ten articles of our Bill of Rights were violated with the internment of the Japanese Americans.

Human rights are the basic standards to which every human being is entitled, simply by virtue of being born and of living in this world. Since we live in a world created by God, and must therefore trust Him, it is always dangerous when persons in positions of strength or leadership tend to act as if they possess ultimate power or authority. Since the eternal God has created us and given us those rights, no individual or group has license to take them away from others.

Ultimately, therefore, the human rights of God's people are inviolable, both by God's intent and by our best human understanding of God's created order. That understanding is represented by both our national commitment to human rights and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. Tragically, the acts committed against the Japanese Americans violated these, and every standard of human rights which we so firmly say we hold dear.

Thus our country, founded upon religious impulses, ought to guard diligently the rights of all peoples, for it is the same God in whom our fore-parents trusted whom we are called to trust....and obey. If our belief in the God-given rights of all of God's people is to continue, we must take care that this act against the Japanese Americans, which has clearly tarnished our country's commitment to human rights, is rectified as fully as possible. This is the responsibility which goes along with the rights, even if our rectifying acts are difficult, misunderstood or unpopular.

When the biblical patriarch Moses stood before the tyrannical Pharoah and demanded, "Let my people go" he was advocating for their human rights. Their subsequent forty-year trek through the wilderness to a new home may be seen as a symbol of the overall human struggle toward the destiny of freedom from domination by others. Our Japanese American brothers and sisters who were interned have long since been

set free in body, but theirs has been a forty-year trek to this moment, when they ask for a complete sign that this land is truly their home. Many still bear in the recesses of their minds a binding slavery to the emotional wounds of having their human rights taken away based solely on the grounds of their ancestry. It is to be hoped that an act of restitution recommended by this Commission would both aid symbolically in the healing of those wounds, as well as help to insure that such an event could never again occur in this great country.

We Christians believe in the historic and continuing role of God as the liberator of all persons who are bound and fettered. We affirm that the promise of the abundant life intended by God for all persons is met through the full development of our personhood. The internment of the Japanese Americans clearly hindered and blocked the development of their individual personhood, and thus blocked God's will for their lives.

We of the church boldly speak out about such issues as this because we take the example of Jesus Christ seriously. We believe that to follow Him is to reach out in any way that we can to those who are in need; that the rule of selfless love forces us to become our brother's brother. We believe that to struggle for human rights for all people of God represents a continuing unfolding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As a United Methodist Church we have witnessed to our commitment by adopting the following statements from the 1980 Book of Resolutions:

"We affirm that all persons and groups are of equal worth in the sight of God. We therefore work toward societies in which each person's or group's worth is recognized, maintained, and strengthened. (We) urge governments - nationally, regionally, and locally - to accord basic human rights to all persons residing within their boundaries, regardless of citizenship. These rights include the right to an education, adequate health care, due process and redress of law, and protection against social and economic exploitation."

Based upon these principles, it becomes my obligation - and that of other thoughtful and concerned Christians - to speak out on behalf of the Japanese Americans who were interned. This is a moral, ethical, and spiritual problem which demands a just and final solution. That solution must include some definitive act of redress. Through such redress all persons, both now and in the future generations, will know that our government acted in good faith and conscience to correct a major error in our history.

In the critical time when Abraham Lincoln was deliberating the issue of freeing the slaves, he said to a group

of concerned citizens,

"I believe that God will compel us to do right, not so much because we desire it, as that it accords with His plan of dealing with this nation, in the midst of which He means to establish justice. I think He means that we shall do more than we have yet done in furtherance of His plans, and He will open the way for our doing it."

May the deliberations and decisions of this Commission be under a like mandate. May you who deliberate know that God is always compelling us to do what is right in the establishment of justice, and that, as always, He will open the way for its accomplishment, in this, and in every situation.