

# Methodist **ACTION** Program

A ministry of Methodist Mission and Church Extension Society  
900 Washington St, Wilmington DE 19801  
302-383-3424; [www.mapde.org](http://www.mapde.org); [mapde.org@gmail.com](mailto:mapde.org@gmail.com)



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Grace and Peace to you!

You may remember that the last article included a link to an upbeat TED talk about climate change. I hope you enjoyed it. Now, I have something rather less upbeat to convey.

First, allow me to suggest that you view Methodist Action Program's tribute to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on our website, [mapde.org](http://mapde.org). You will hear MAP's board members speak on the topic of "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," a quote from Dr. King's famous *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.

Perhaps it is because I've been spending so much time with Dr. King lately, so to speak, but I have come to feel very strongly about something akin to the matters Dr. King wrestled with 60 years ago. I believe he would be greatly concerned, were he among us now. The urge to share my thoughts with you all has been growing in the recent weeks.

In fact, I have never felt this urging more strongly. Inspired by the words and vision of Dr. King, I need to deliver a prophetic message to the Church. Not the white christian nationalist evangelicals who currently claim too much of the nation's attention. I am talking to the true Church, those who are actual followers of the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, for they are the only hope we have to retain our faith and our democracy.

First let me say that I am not a literalist where the Bible is concerned. I certainly do not believe the Book of Revelation is predictive of "the end times." However, I do believe the text contains rich allegory that can be quite instructive. For example, here is a section of the Book of Revelation which I believe speaks (or SHOULD speak) to true Jesus-followers today.

**2** "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. **2** I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. **3** You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

**4** Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. **5** Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. **6** But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

**7** Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Who are the Nicolaitans, whose deeds the LORD hated? They were those who convinced Christians that what was impure was instead acceptable. They spoke bravely about evil acts as though they were to be honored because of their courage. In short, they were heretics – a disease that infected the Church, and which grieved God so greatly that he "sent an angel" with the message.

Today, it is unfortunate that a kind of contagion may have begun to infect many who claim to be Christian, some even in the true Church, in much the same way. At the very least, there seems to be a malaise (or, perhaps, fear?) that prevents true Jesus-followers to take action that would set our society on a healthier, more just, and more peaceful path. It is tragic to watch, and I am struggling to find a reason why this is happening.

That is not to say that there are not those who are working day and night to uphold the words and teachings of Jesus and also to retain our democracy. It is just that I believe there needs to more of us hopping onto Jesus's bandwagon.

It makes me very sad to have to say this, but there are many reasons why I believe there is a real danger in this country that we will repeat a very dark chapter of our past, and very soon. First, oligarch-run corporations have taken over policy decisions to the point where the rich get obscenely richer by paying less and less in taxes, while ordinary consumers are beset with higher prices due only to corporate greed. Second, Congress has been seized by white christian nationalist extremists and other power-grabbing narcissists who are bent on stripping rights from everyone who is not a white cisgender "christian" male. Third, an authoritarian, narcissistic, fascist leader is determined to enrich only himself and to remove all manner of rights from specific groups. This leader has made no bones about the idea that he intends to become the American Dictator, and he has even published the plan whereby this will be accomplished with the help of his followers. If you are unaware of this, there is a rational, nonpartisan analysis of the plan that can be found at <https://medium.com/@wjcornelius/an-independents-analysis-of-the-2025-presidential-transition-project-s-mandate-for-leadership-f2388fdd55d1>

Now, let's take a look some people's assertion that life under a fascist American Dictator would be better than life in an egalitarian democracy where everyone has concurrent rights. There are plenty of dictatorships around the world that negate that assertion. If life under a fascist dictator is so great, why have so many Cubans risked their lives in leaky vessels on the open seas to get to Florida? Why are Central American and South American refugees crowded into immigrant holding facilities? Why are the people of tiny Ukraine standing against humongous Russia? Why are the South Koreans resisting unification with (and the rule of) North Korea? A little research will reveal that the only person truly thriving in a dictatorship is the dictator himself, along with a possible few oligarchs whom he may allow to prosper, albeit less than himself. The people under the rule of a dictator in ANY country you can find are (eventually, if not initially) poor, oppressed, overtaxed, often starving, and subject to government-approved violence, especially if they dare to complain about their situation.

In the online newsletter *Above the Law*, New York journalist Alaric Dearment writes: "People in countries like China and Tajikistan don't have the option of voting out incompetent, corrupt and abusive leaders or even protesting against them, even if they generally support their governments. Regimes like that demand unquestioning obedience and absolute conformity, while protest or expression of difference brings poverty, harassment, detention, torture or even death."

From Andrew Carnegie Fellows Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman we hear: "(T)oday's strongmen realize that in current conditions violence is not always necessary or even helpful. Instead of terrorizing citizens, a skillful ruler can control them by reshaping their beliefs about the world. He can fool people into compliance and even enthusiastic approval. In place of harsh repression, the new dictators manipulate information... These days, the map is mainly shaded in gray. Except for a few strongmen like Kim Jong-un and Bashar al-Assad who oblige by playing the villain, most are harder to place. They blend in and erode international society from within."

Facts.net offers "10 compelling facts" about dictatorships (Google it). Perhaps the most compelling fact is dictatorship's Impact on Society, which reads: "Dictatorships can have profound impacts on societies, ranging from economic stagnation and corruption to human rights abuses and social polarization. The lack of accountability and transparency often leads to the mismanagement of resources and the perpetuation of inequality."

My hope is that there are enough of us true Jesus-followers teaching the young folks what they have not learned by experience. We in the older generation who have lived through the 20<sup>th</sup> century have witnessed how bad it can get. Younger generations do not necessarily have this understanding, and so they do not know how bad life can become under a dictator. The wanna-be American Dictator has plainly stated that he takes as role models the more violent dictators of the

past and present who significantly and blatantly harm their populations by means that include indefinite imprisonment and execution.

For those who agree with the mistreatment or stripping of rights from groups currently under the would-be American Dictator's hostile surveillance, a warning: You can be next. History instructs that oppressors often must expand their assaults to new groups, frequently for invented reasons, so they can maintain their hold on power. This occurred during WWII, when a myriad of groups came under Hitler's brutality. At that time, the Church was warned by resisters like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to no avail. This strategy of retaliation against various cultural groups, individuals within specific ethnicity, or particular occupations/positions already has been stated by the aspirant American Dictator. Has the Church learn from its failed history?

For those who may believe that God certainly would not allow American democracy to be usurped by a fascist dictator, a question: Were European nations attacked by Hitler's Nazis any less worthy of God's protection than is America? We have seen it happen there, and yes, it can happen here. But it does not have to happen. Is it not true that God has always expected the Church to stand up to the evil forces around it, to be a voice for justice and peace? "For what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8) Nations and populations have paid a horrendous price when the true Church failed to live up to its responsibility in the past. Will this happen again, or will the true Church this time fulfill one of its most important purposes?

In searching for an answer to the question of why the true Church is once again reticent to act in the face of crisis, I stumbled upon something I had forgotten. There is a psychological mechanism that can cause humans to become indoctrinated and thereby be swept along with a crowd. In the past it probably was a survival mechanism, but now it has become downright dangerous. Like lemmings, we can follow a leader right off a cliff without a second thought. If the leader speaks and acts pathologically, that kind of contagion spreads quite easily and quickly, first to those most susceptible, and eventually even to the mentally healthy. Exposure is the germ that results in the spread, but when exposure is limited or eliminated, most citizens will revert to their previous mental state. If you doubt this contagion assertion, you can easily find confirmation in the psychological healthcare community. Here is a quote from Dr. Bandy X. Lee in *Scientific American*:

"When a highly symptomatic individual is placed in an influential position, the person's symptoms can spread through the population through emotional bonds, heightening existing pathologies and inducing delusions, paranoia and propensity for violence—even in previously healthy individuals."

Having at least a partial answer to the question of why people are not understanding the danger we ALL are facing does not make the risks any less consequential.

For those who may feel that the Church does not encourage members to become involved in politics, here is a quote from our Social Principles:

"While we do not believe churches should affiliate with particular political parties, we do encourage churches to speak out boldly on social issues from a Gospel perspective. We further believe churches have a right and a responsibility to educate and equip their members to be effective advocates for justice in the wider world."

You may be familiar with a famous poem written post-WWII by a German Lutheran pastor that begins, "First they came for..." and lists several groups that the Nazis rounded up while developing "The Final Solution." Today, I suggest, the sequence might go something like this:

“First they came for the Blacks.

I did not speak up because I was not Black.

Then they came for the immigrants.

I did not speak up because I was not an immigrant.

Then they came for the LGBTQ+ citizens.

I did not speak up because I was not an LGBTQ+ citizen.

Then they came for the environmentalists.

I did not speak up because I was not an environmentalist.

Then they came for the teachers.

I did not speak up because I was not a teacher.

Then they came for the college students.

I did not speak up because I was not a college student.

Then they came for the Jews.

I did not speak up because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for the Muslims.

I did not speak up because I was not a Muslim.

Then they came for the true Jesus-followers.

I did not speak up before because Jesus-followers do not get involved in political matters.

But now there is no one left to speak up for me.

The question remains: What are the true Jesus-followers going to do now? Are we going to side with the oppressed or with the oppressors? Are we going to stand up for our neighbors and against those who would rip away their rights... and eventually our rights, too? If we don't speak up and confront evil, we will ultimately pay the price – and countless people right along with us.

I wish there was some way I could say that this is all a shared bad dream; that we will wake up and the Church will be back to the business of sharing the teachings of the Prince of Peace, and our democracy will be able to safely advance toward its highest manifestation – true liberty and justice for all. But I cannot. That's not how it is right now. And we'd ALL better face it. We all need to find ONE THING that we can *consistently* do to counter the threat of oppressive authoritarian fascism – before it's too late.

Peace, my brothers and sisters -

Donna