

Very Rev Dr John Hall
Dean of Westminster Abbey

Dear Dean Hall,

Service to recognise fifty years of continuous at sea deterrence

We are writing as Leaders of the Iona Community, and on behalf of our members, to raise our grave concerns and serious disquiet about the above service taking place in Westminster Abbey on 3rd May.

The Iona Community is an international, ecumenical Christian movement founded in Scotland in 1938 by Rev Dr George MacLeod, Lord MacLeod of Fuinary, based in Glasgow, Iona and Mull, and with a dispersed membership bound by a common Rule of faith and life.

The Iona Community has since 1967 required its members as a condition of membership, and an integral part of our Rule, to actively oppose the use or threatened use of nuclear weapons, to work for a policy of their renunciation by our own nation and other nations. As the first clause of the Justice and Peace Commitment of our Rule states:

We believe that the Gospel commands us to seek peace founded on justice and that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel.

We are not alone among British Christians in believing this. ‘Nuclear weapons are inherently evil’. This has been the stated position of the Church of Scotland (in which the Iona Community originated) for more than thirty years, and of many other churches in the UK and around the world. Its 2018 General Assembly decided to restate ‘in the strongest terms’ its belief that to possess, threaten or use such terrible weapons of mass destruction is disgraceful and fundamentally threatens the future of humanity. This position is shared by the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland and by the Scottish Episcopal Church. It is also shared by faith leaders from across the UK, who affirmed this statement in 2015:

Nuclear weapons are by their nature indiscriminate in their effect. Any use of nuclear weapons would have devastating humanitarian consequences, be incompatible with International Humanitarian Law and violate the principle of dignity for every human being that is common to each of our faith traditions. Our world faces many challenges including oppressive poverty, climate change, violent extremism and emerging national rivalry. Addressing these challenges requires strong relationships across nations, founded on mutual co-operation, trust and

shared prosperity. Security policies based on the threat of the use of nuclear weapons are immoral and ultimately self-defeating.

We must move beyond the division of our world into nuclear and non-nuclear weapons states and ensure that all states make good their commitment to negotiations on the universal, legally verifiable and enforceable elimination of nuclear weapons. We call on all nuclear weapon states to join in this endeavour. We urge these states and the international community to develop a robust plan of action that will lead us to a world free of nuclear weapons.

Like thousands of organisations and millions of individual citizens, in the UK and beyond, we oppose nuclear weapons for several reasons:

- They are in contravention of international humanitarian law.
- They are not a moral defence. Relying on nuclear weapons for deterrence means being prepared to use them on civilians, with catastrophic humanitarian consequences. This is morally indefensible.
- They are but one facet of our complicity with death through our continuing participation in the global arms industry, most currently in Yemen.
- They give their message loud and clear, that power does indeed grow out of the barrel of a gun, and that that power is overwhelmingly in the hands of the rich nations of the world.
- Their cost is an obscenity; more than £200 billion to replace the current Trident system over its lifespan. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands in the UK are forced to resort to foodbanks, and housing, hospitals and schools struggle against underfunding.

The notice about the service on the Abbey website states that it is ‘A service to recognise the commitment of the Royal Navy to effective peace-keeping through the deterrent over the past fifty years and to pray for peace throughout the world.’ We would question what is meant by ‘effective peacekeeping’. In those fifty years, the United Kingdom has taken part in wars in Nigeria, Northern Ireland, the Falklands, Lebanon, Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo, Sierra Leone Afghanistan, Iraq (again), Libya, and is currently engaged in wars in Syria, West Africa and Iraq. Hundreds of thousands, mostly civilians, have died in these conflicts. The nuclear deterrent has been of no use at all in these circumstances; we hope that the suggestion is not being made that ‘effective peacekeeping’ is only that which leaves the United Kingdom at peace.

Furthermore, we are appalled that this service effectively appears to give the authorisation of the church to a particular government defence policy, which by no means enjoys universal or even majority support among the public. You may be aware that the population of Scotland consistently polls in opposition to the nuclear deterrent; no doubt the presence of Trident forty miles from Glasgow concentrates Scottish minds—we do not have the luxury of out of sight being out of

mind. But we don't just want nuclear weapons removed from Scotland. We want them removed altogether, from everywhere.

That is why the adoption of the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in 2017 by the majority of the world's countries was so encouraging, including to those of us who live in states which actively oppose the Treaty. It is a significant shift in the global discourse on nuclear weapons and a major challenge to arguments about the necessity of these weapons for security.

The award of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons is a further stirring affirmation of the overwhelming desire of ordinary people worldwide for a world free of nuclear weapons. It is also a resounding challenge to the nuclear-armed states.

Our activism as a community is spiritually-based, and motivated above all by the desire to follow Jesus Christ and walk in his way. Christianity is a religion whose founder was unequivocal in teaching that his followers should love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them and pray for those who ill-treat them, and who died doing exactly that. Yet the policy of deterrence is prepared to kill, not only to defend their own side but to aggressively obliterate the other side, which is ultimately what the nuclear deterrent commits itself to doing.

As citizens in a democracy, we are subject to the laws of our land, and we recognise this fact. As Christians, we find this promulgation of the myth of redemptive violence, done from a position of power and wealth, utterly abhorrent. Your mission statement says that you seek to serve the nation by celebrating the distinctive witness of the Christian faith and by upholding the place of religious faith within national life. We cannot understand how threatening humankind, and the planet itself, can be seen as distinctive Christian witness. It is the complete divorce between spirit and matter. Neither, in linking their commitment to this un-Christian policy, do we believe this service is a good recognition of the service of the Royal Navy, whom we would wish to recognise, and respect.

The Iona Community believes that it is a central Christian and humanitarian value that people are not expendable as a means to an end. We can see how this event serves the state; we cannot see how it serves the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yours sincerely,

Christian MacLean
(Rev Dr) Kathy Galloway