

Presbyterians Say No Child Soldiers

Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

Matthew 19:13-15

Who is a child soldier?

UNICEF defines a "child soldier" as any child, boy or girl, under 18 years of age, who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group in any capacity, including, but not limited to: cooks, porters, messengers, and anyone accompanying such groups other than family members. It includes girls and boys recruited for forced sexual purposes or forced marriage. The definition does not only refer to a child who is carrying, or has carried, weapons.

How many child soldiers are there?

It is difficult to know how many children are used as soldiers at any given time. UNICEF estimates that some 300,000 children – boys and girls under the age of 18 – are involved in conflicts worldwide. The UN Secretary-General reports that, in 2012, 55 armed forces and groups from 14 countries used children as soldiers. Most are abducted or forcibly recruited; others are driven to join by poverty, abuse, and discrimination or to seek revenge for violence enacted against them or their families.

What does international law say about using children as soldiers?

On February 12, 2002, an international treaty, the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict* entered into effect, banning the use of children under age 18 in war. Some 140 Nations Member States, including the United States, have ratified the treaty. However some 50 nations have yet to ratify the treaty.

How are the nations and peoples of the world addressing this issue?

- Since 2002, the international "Red Hand Campaign" has worked to address the use of child soldiers. The campaign calls nations to ratify the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*. In addition, it calls on the nations that have ratified the treaty, the United Nations, and the international community to implement the provisions of the treaty.
- UNICEF and other organizations have developed programs to disarm, demobilize, and reintegrate children who have been used as soldiers. This work has taken place in Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda.
- Individuals are being prosecuted before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for recruiting and using child soldiers. The International Criminal Court's first verdict was the conviction of a warlord from the Democratic Republic of Congo for using children as soldiers.
- Nations are signing action plans with the UN to make sure that children do not serve in their armed forces. South Sudan, Myanmar/Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia signed plans in 2012.

How are Presbyterians addressing this issue?

- Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission partners in South Sudan and other places have ministries that work to reintegrate children who have been used as soldiers.
- The Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations and the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program have encouraged and facilitated Presbyterian participation in the Red Hand Campaign since 2009.
- Presbyterians Red Hands and related letters are sent to officials at the United Nations from nations that have not yet ratified the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*.
- The 208th General Assembly (1996) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) voted to support the efforts of UNICEF to "find means of protecting children in situations of conflict-to prevent their use as soldiers."

"UN Treaties alone obviously won't demobilize all the world's child soldiers, but their main role is to put down a legal placeholder."

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Making Red Hands Presbyterian Red Hand Campaign

What Is the Issue:

On February 12, 2002, a new treaty came into being that prohibits the use of children under the age of eighteen as soldiers in war. But today, UNICEF estimates that as many as 300,000 children are still being used as soldiers in various armed conflicts.

Presbyterians have joined the effort to end the use of children as soldiers. The Red Hand Campaign is an international movement to encourage nations of the world to ratify the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict*. This protocol establishes 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment and requires nations to do everything they can to prevent individuals under the age of 18 from taking a direct part in hostilities.

At different times, Red Hands made of paper or cloth are delivered to different international leaders.

Always the message is the same: Children are children, not soldiers!

The Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations and the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program are coordinating efforts within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

How to Participate:

For a simple version of Red Hands, use red construction paper and black crayons or white construction paper and red crayons. Invite participants to trace their hands on the paper and write a message about why using children as soldiers is a bad idea. Individuals may write their name, town, state, and country on the paper.

Make Red Hands with paint:

What You Need:

- 8 1/2" x 11" sheets of white or red paper or pieces of muslin cloth cut to 8 1/2" x 11".
- Fine-lined marking pens or fabric pens.
- Red tempera paint.
- Dishwashing liquid.
- Aluminum pie plate.
- Water and towels for clean-up.

What You Do:

1. In advance, mix up some thick red tempera paint. Add a little liquid dishwashing soap for easier cleanup.
2. Tell the participants about the Red Hand Campaign.
3. Invite the participants to think about what they would say about child soldiers. Then encourage them to print their message at the top of the sheet of paper. Tell them to be sure to leave enough space in the center of the page for their handprint.
4. Using the red paint, participants can make a red handprint on their sheet of paper.
5. Set the handprints aside to dry.

When the Red Hands Are Made:

Send your completed Red Hands to **Presbyterian Ministry at the United Nations, 777 UN Plaza, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10017**. They will be combined with Red Hands from across the country and delivered to appropriate world leaders.



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Find worship resources and further information on child soldiers at:

www.pcusa.org/resource/resources-child-soldiers/

