

December 26, 2015

Dear Friends,

We live in a violent culture. All around us in movies, video games, and TV shows people are shooting at other people. As United Methodist Christians we believe we have a responsibility to offer a different way, a way of cooperation and of valuing and caring for each other. We believe that our UM camps can play a role in that effort. However, we have recently been dismayed to learn that Wesley Woods Camp is planning to use Laser Tag as one of the activities it offers. Laser Tag is a game, the roots of which are in military maneuvers created by the Army to train troops for combat. No amount of renaming, no amount of avoiding words such as “guns,” “dead,” “shoot,” or “kill,” no amount of claiming that it is not a battle, and no amount of claiming that the equipment is not shaped like guns mitigates the truth of that reality. The bottom line is that campers are targeting other campers and shooting at them in order to score points. No matter how it’s framed, this “Christian” Laser Tag cannot hide its roots as training for combat troops on the battlefield, and serves to cauterize us to the reality of gun violence. It contributes to the idea that the way of battles and gun violence is the norm for our society and that the best way to solve problems is to use violence. We believe that is not a message our camps should be sending, and especially not a message to teach to our young people.

December 28th is the date we observe the Feast of the Holy Innocents, remembering Herod’s slaughter of innocent children so long ago. Thus it’s also a time to mourn the loss of innocent children’s lives today through gun violence, whether in war or in the homes and streets of our own country. This recognition only adds to our belief that a game that requires campers to target and shoot at other campers is inappropriate for UM camps.

For all these reasons, the Iowa Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) is proposing the following petition and asking you, if you are in agreement, to add your names to the petition by responding to this message (or signing the online form) by January 15th. Please send your name as you’d like it to appear, if you’d like it to be added to the list. Once the names have been collected, the petition will be sent to Deke Rider, Camp Wesley Woods Site Director; David Hobbs, Leadership Development Minister; Richard Bough, Chair of the Board of Camps and Retreat Ministries; Bishop Julius Trimble; Bill Poland, Administrative Assistant to the Bishop; and Dave Weesner, Dean of the Cabinet. MFSA’s Position Paper on this issue is attached.

Petition:

The Iowa Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action (MFSA) and those persons listed below are opposed to the use of Laser Tag at Wesley Woods or at any of our UM Camps, and urge the camps to use activities and games that model and teach the Biblical understanding of care for others, and games that promote an alternative to the violence in our society by teaching and modeling love, peace, and justice.

Iowa Chapter of the Methodist Federation for Social Action In Opposition to Laser Tag at Wesley Woods

Laser Tag is a “game” the roots of which are in military maneuvers created by the Army to train troops for combat.

No amount of renaming, *i.e.* avoiding using words such as “guns”, “dead”, “shoot” or “kill”; no amount of claiming that it is not a battle; and no amount of claiming that the equipment is not shaped like guns (even if not shaped like a gun, they do in fact shoot a beam of light that must be aimed at a target) does not mitigate the truth of that reality.

That the target is on a headband worn by the participants (aka, enemy, opponent) at which the beam of light is aimed, on its own, should disqualify Laser Tag as an appropriate activity for Christian Camping at Wesley Woods.

The misuse and abuse of language only cauterizes us to the reality of gun and military violence in our day. When nuclear missiles are named “Peace Keepers”; when civilian deaths from U.S. bombings, including innocent children, are labeled “Collateral Damage”; when torture by our own military is labeled “enhanced interrogation”; when bombing is labeled “servicing the target”; when training to kill the enemy is labeled “war games”; “doublespeak” is being used, the warning George Orwell gave us in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where words are used to hide the truth. In his essay, *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell claims that political language serves to distort and obfuscate reality. The church has no excuse for using the same kind of doublespeak.

In order to justify the value of Laser Tag by changing the labels and language used, the church does a profound disservice to the message of the proclamation of Jesus Christ. It is most interesting, indeed telling, that in the *Specs Sheet on Wesley Woods proposed laser tag*, in spite of the effort to change the language to make the game more palatable, battlefield language is still being used (“armor”, “hitting the target”, “traitor”, “desertion”, “friendly fire”, “armor points”, “alpha vs. bravo”, “hit points”, “Armor of God”, *etc.*) throughout it. This, unwittingly it would seem, pays homage to the origins of Laser Tag as training for combat troops on the battlefield. That the “Pre-Teach” includes “This is a game, not a battle, . . .” only serves to underscore the origins of Laser Tag and its methodology.

An argument might be made that this is nitpicking. Not so. Consider that the game of chess is won, not with the endgame but with the beginning; the movement of the pawn that makes all the difference. Jesus rather strongly suggests that the sin begins not with the “big” sin, but with the very small first steps; how we treat one another (Matthew 5:21-22; 27-30). The long range consequences of these seemingly innocuous beginnings are what this opposition to Laser Tag is proclaiming.

Laser Tag only serves to create a milieu that emulates war and gun violence becoming the norm. “(The Lord) shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3).” This serves as a much better scenario for a United Methodist Church Camp that directly counters the prevailing attitude/atmosphere of society and the world. The United Methodist Church has official positions regarding weapon free zone (Book of Resolutions #5011), gun violence (Book of Resolutions #3426).

The teamwork and team building that is so highly touted as important is designed to take advantage of the other team and their players; no different than being used by the military. Indeed, the recent Paris Massacre, was highly coordinated, taking a great deal of teamwork. That the church is teaching this kind of teamwork

only serves as a training ground for when the participants become members of the military. The Biblical understanding of teamwork and team building has to do with caring for each other, even before oneself; servanthood; and caring for others (Acts 2:42-47; Acts 4:32-37; Mark 9:35; Mark 10:35-44; John 13:34; Matthew 25).

That other churches, camps, even United Methodist ones are providing this programming, is a poor reason for the Iowa Conference Camping Program to endorse the use of Laser Tag. It sounds like when children complain to their parents, "But everyone else is doing it."

That kind of excuse is exactly what the Israelites used, lobbying for God to grant them a king, just like the other nations around them. God was resistant, warning the Israelites what the consequences would be should God grant them a king (I Samuel 8). Nevertheless they persisted and God changed God's mind and allowed them to have a king. Within the span of 100 years (the end of Solomon's reign and the beginning of the divided kingdom), all the consequences of which God had warned the Israelites had come true. Consider the long term consequences of this program based not on what others are doing.

The use of scripture to support, debrief, and learn from this program is most troubling. It appears to be used as a way to justify this is an appropriate activity for a Christian Camp not as a way to understand the grace and power of God through Jesus Christ. At best, the scripture is trivialized rather than allowed to empower.

In the debriefing sessions will the discussion include topics such as shooting others, gun violence in families, organizations (schools, churches, and medical clinics), theatres, concert venues, and workplace and bombings of hospitals? Will there be a discussion about the United Methodist position on Gun Violence <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/gun-violence> and the church (camp) as a Weapon Free Zone <http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/church-is-a-weapon-free-zone>? Will there be a discussion about the Spirituality associated with tagging, aka, shooting another, even in a game, including, especially the aiming of a wand (aka shooting) at another's head?

Others have eloquently written and spoken of the personal toll gun violence has taken on their lives and the impact of playing a war like game has on them, their family and their friends. There are many others who have the same kind of stories.

Much has been made of "recruiting" new campers to Wesley Woods through the introduction of Laser Tag and the 70% recruited who are male (that is a remarkably telling statistic). Many of these persons are coming from already unsafe situations (this is not limited to "inner city" campers, but may well include campers from hidden violent situations). Placing them in a setting designed to teach military type maneuvers as team building does not provide them a safe sanctuary; that being one of the hallmarks of the church of Jesus Christ.

Violence, including, sadly, redemptive violence and redemptive revenge are pervasive in the culture, society, and the world. The church of Jesus Christ is to proclaim an alternative; an alternative which proclaims the peace and love of God through Jesus Christ; which provides an opportunity for campers at a Christian Camp an alternative to what society provides as the norm.

Give this proposal for Laser Tag the careful, prayerful, theological, biblical consideration it deserves, considering all of the long range consequences. Rescind the decision to use it as a part of the programming ministry of Wesley Woods.