“They shall beat their swords into plowshares…”

Events in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014 won’t soon be forgotten—nor should they be. The powerful images of the city’s protest at the death of an unarmed 18-year-old African American boy, and the shocking images of police carrying military grade weapons and armored vehicles rolling down Ferguson streets, captured the nation’s attention as it braced for the worst.

The escalating tension brought to the fore of the American consciousness the urgent need to address the racism that pervades our society, and specifically the racial bias that exists in our prison system and law enforcement policy.

The Department of Justice Report released seven months later revealed a shockingly disproportionate number of arrests targeting African Americans, as well as punitive systems of escalating fines and punishments intended to generate revenue. Importantly, these events and resulting analysis also revealed a worrisome trend in policing: Militarization of our local law enforcement forces through the Pentagon’s “Law Enforcement Support Office,” known as the 1033 program.

Micah 4:3

“And God shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

Understanding the growing militarization of community police departments

As recent reports have revealed, Congress authorized the 1033 program in 1989 to equip local, state, and federal law enforcement to support the “war” on drugs. In 1996 this was broadened to include counterterrorism activity. Yet, despite its stated mission, there is little evidence to suggest that these goals have shaped or restrained the implementation of the program. Instead we have seen the distribution of weapons and vehicles across a wide variety of states and localities. Reports reveal that since 2006 the program has resulted in the free transfer of large numbers of military equipment to local law enforcement, including armored vehicles, 50 airplanes, 422 helicopters, almost 80,000 assault rifles, 200 grenade launchers, and more than $3.6 million worth of camouflage gear and other ‘deception equipment.’

The proliferation of this military equipment in our communities, combined with a lack of training, is extremely worrisome. How, when our neighborhoods resemble war zones, can we expect the cycle of violence to do anything but escalate? As Emanuel Cleaver, a U.S. Representative from Missouri, notably observed, “Ferguson resembles Fallujah more than it does Ferguson.”

Although President Obama called for a review of the 1033 program in September 2014, more must be done to limit this transfer and to de-militarize our law enforcement. Part of the long-term solution must be increased restraint in defense spending, and greater transparency of the defense department, as we address the surplus of weapons and technology generated by the world’s largest military.

As a Just Peace Church, which has expressed opposition to the “institution of war,” addressing this systemic challenge is part of our call.

More can and must be done immediately by Congress to address the specific concern of militarization of law enforcement. The “Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act” (H.R. 1232) has been re-introduced in 2015 by Rep. Hank Johnson and has received bipartisan support. This legislation would rein in the 1033 program’s giveaway of military-grade weapons and impose increased accountability and transparency for this program.

The blurring lines between the military and police, which only serves to elevate cycles of distrust and violence in our communities, must end. Serious review of this program by the Obama administration and congressional passage of H.R. 1232 would both be keys steps toward reversing these trends.

It is up to us to raise concern on this issue in our own communities and hold to our public officials accountable to see that our neighborhoods remain safe but do not resemble battlefields.

Why is the UCC a “Just Peace” Church?

The Just Peace Church vision is a hallmark of United Church of Christ theological identity. For more than two decades, the Just Peace Church pronouncement has inspired a grassroots movement of UCC congregations committed to corporately naming and boldly proclaiming a public identity as a justice-doing, peace-seeking church.

The “Just Peace Pronouncement” (1985) articulated the UCC position on war and peace distinct from other approaches such as crusade, pacifism, or “just war.” Grounded in UCC polity and covenantal theology, the position focuses attention on alleviating systemic injustice of all types through the use of non-violence and calls us to offer a vision, grounded in the hope of reconciliation in Jesus, that “peace is possible.”