

**THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA****The Methodist Connexional Office**

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MCSA ECUMENICAL AFFAIRS UNIT NEWSLETTER 2020 # 2**Toward implementing:****Church Unity****Ecumenical Diakonia****African Church Co-operation****GREETINGS.****REFLECTIONS ON LETHAL AUTONOMOUS WEAPONS (LAWS)**

Lethal autonomous weapons (LAWs) are a type of **autonomous military system** that can independently search for and engage targets based on programmed constraints and descriptions. LAWs are also known as lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), autonomous weapon systems (AWS), robotic weapons, killer robots or slaughter-bots.

After attending the African Regional Conference on Nuclear Disarmament and Lethal Autonomous Weapon Systems held with members of 20 African embassies; Scientists; Ethic specialists and Religious Leaders present, from 16 to 17 August 2018, Pretoria, a resolution was passed by Conference which notes with concern, that the advent of the fourth industrial technological revolution has given rise to technology that can harm us as humans. Conference directed the Ecumenical Affairs Director to form a Task Team with representatives from DEWCOM, Justice Desk and Artificial Intelligence Specialists, for reporting to Conference. A Webinar was held in October 2020 on the Church and 4IR (A resource book is being produced)

This made one aware of how little we know of the exponential technological advancements of AI in weaponry and especially in the uncharted area of autonomous weapons.

Jennifer Philpott Nielson of the World Council of Churches says: *Surrendering the decision over life and death to a machine does not represent human advancement. Humans have been created by God with the necessary capabilities to make decisions based on moral and ethical considerations, and to be accountable for the consequences of our actions when boundaries are crossed. The same can never be said of weapons operated by artificial intelligence.*

Many in SA are not paying attention to this development – and this is understandable because people are dying daily with hand controlled small arms and automatic weapons – either in femicide; gangsterism; politically sponsored killings etc. So being made aware of the next generation of lethal autonomous weapons is welcomed and necessary.

This weaponry must also be linked to the bias coding of AI – which is engineered predominantly by white-males who sit around the tables of AI design.

Jennifer Philpott Nielson of the World Council of Churches goes on to say: “research has demonstrated how biases can even unintentionally be programmed into Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, and concerns are now being expressed that technology may be developed which would build racial profiling and bias into such weapons, leading to situations, for example, where people with certain features common to those of particular ethnicities, such as skin colour, would be more at risk of being targeted by so-called ‘killer robots’”

If this form of bias AI coding is baked into AI and is at the heart of autonomous weapons, then we are faced with some serious scenarios playing out:

Just imagine if the following groups of people had access to ‘killer robots’ which has the capability of facial recognition and targeting certain groups of people what would happen? Groups like:

- White supremacists got hold of these weapons – like the Proud Boys of the USA or locally groups we saw at Senekal etc.
- Gangsters both local and international syndicates
- Anti-gay militant groups
- Anti- feminist groups

If the Trump era has taught us anything it is that there are a lot of crazies out there capable of anything

So, the safest way to overcome any of these scenarios is to ensure that they are not allowed to be produced in the first place,

Hence the MCSA¹ supports its banning through a resolution passed

At the Methodist Church of Southern Africa’s hybrid zoom/physical Connexional Executive (CE) held from 1-3 Oct 2020, a resolution was passed calling for the ban of the production of autonomous weapons.

Noting the lead that the Namibian government has taken calling for the ban for autonomous weapons (“killer robots), Conference urges all countries in the MCSA Connexion to join this call.

Conference therefore asks the Presiding Bishop to:

- a. Write directly to the Governments of Botswana; Lesotho; Mozambique; South Africa and eSwatini and to our ecumenical councils of Churches within our Connexion urging them to advocate that their respective governments join this call for the ban on autonomous weapons. “

The CE was asked if we should not ask for all guns to be banned. And we were reminded that the MCSA has for decades had a resolution advocating for a gun free society and ban on all weapons.

Therefore, calling for the ban on lethal autonomous weapons, like killer robots, must be seen in as part of the wider call for the ban of all lethal weapons. All weapons in the hands of humans can kill other humans.

¹ – Because MCSA works in six Southern Africans countries we are asked specifically for all countries to follow the lead of the Namibian Government ---

Let us spend a moment and look at the MCSA resolution which calls for all weapons to be banned – and we can now also include autonomous weapons – because when this particular resolution was written the idea of automatic weapons was seen as the greater threat; now it has evolved to autonomous weapons (which can almost think for themselves)

These resolutions need to be placed within the longstanding MCSA resolution in the Methodist Book of Order:

35. WEAPONRY AND GUN-FREE CAMPAIGN

Trust in lethal weapons is a sign of our failure to fashion a society free of violence and fear. The only long-term answer to this problem lies in obeying God's teaching about caring human relationships and respect for life.

The Methodist Church therefore:

- (a) Calls on all in civil society, especially Methodists, to turn away from firearms.*
- (b) Requests the Government to ban private ownership of firearms;*
- (c) Affirms the Gun Free South Africa Campaign designed to achieve the voluntary surrender of firearms and calls on all Methodists to participate in the campaign;*
- (d) Directs our Ministers not to assist people to gain firearm licences;*
- (e) Directs that no firearms be brought to worship services and other meetings of our church;*
- (f) Calls on toy manufactures to stop manufacturing gun replicas of any kind;*
- (g) Methodists should work for the conversion of the arms industry in South Africa to the production of humane civilian products, with due consideration to existing employment levels and/or adaption of present skills;*

The Gun Free Campaign should address the increase in the advertising of handguns with a view to having such advertising banned in our violence-ridden society;

This resolution about weapons from the MCSA, even though at the time was SA-Centric, however, is relevant to Southern Africa; Africa and the Globe at large.

I have been schooled in the maxim coming from Christian Aid and CAFOD in the 80's when they encouraged seekers of peace and justice to think Globally and act Locally. In recent years I have changed this to Think Globally; act Continentally; act Locally. Like it or not everything is connected; for better or worse.

REIMAGINING A WEAPONS FREE WORLD:

Based on Ezekiel 47 passage, among the many rich images presented to us by Presiding Bishop Purity Malinga, in her address to Connexional Executive is that of “*diluting the salty water until it becomes fresh water where fish multiply and provide food for fishermen!*” – As I listened, I thought to myself this is possible through the technology of de-salination (already used to good effect in Namibia). The de-salination process using sophisticated technology can dilute salty sea water into water for everyday use.

With technology could this not also mean that it is possible to turn weapons to plough shares?

Methodists together with our ecumenical partners the church universal should work, as the resolution says, *for the conversion of the arms industry in South Africa to the production of humane civilian products, with due consideration to existing employment levels and/or adaption of present skills;*

Let us reimagine a world without weapons. Technology has taken arms production into a very dangerous space – let us call for the ban of all weapons (look how successful the ban on landmines has been; and chemical warfare).

Just imagine if the peace-prophets were able to ban all weapons from being produced in the first place. The time is now that to ensure that generations to follow are not threatened by autonomous weapons who have the capacity to racially profile and kill; are banned before production. Imagine if these miniature killer drones fall into the hands of white supremacists?

Let us reimagine arms industries with their highly qualified scientist turn these energies and intellect toward healthcare; building affordable smart houses for everyone; enabling urban environment friendly farms (already happening in high rise buildings); provide timeous qualitative healthcare for all.

I often quote Anglican Archbishop Thabo who says the greatest crisis facing humanity is the crisis of imagination. PB Purity says that we need to re-ignite our reimagining that another world is possible. and where two such great leaders agree so it is in heaven. *"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven."*

REFLECTION:

After presenting this to our Natal Coastal Synod ministers' seminar on 23 February 2020, **our Synod Bishop Rev Linda Mandindi asked an important question: "What can a local congregation do to engage with the issue of Artificial Intelligence?"**

Here are some suggestions:

THE ADVENT OF THE FOURTH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION:

1. Arrange local bible study discussion groups (virtually or in person) and discuss the following:
 - a. A brief introduction on what is AI and the new world of the fourth the industrial revolution. - **Please Make time to listen to this podcast**
 - i. [PROFESSOR TSHILIDZI MARWALA - ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE - Profmed - The Professional](http://theprofessional.profmed.co.za/2019/10/03/professor-tshilidzi-marwala-artificial-intelligence/)
<http://theprofessional.profmed.co.za/2019/10/03/professor-tshilidzi-marwala-artificial-intelligence/>
 - b. Will this benefit humankind?
 - i. The advancement of Technology could mean **the loss of millions of jobs** through the pace of automation OR it could mean we work is no longer necessary, we can all receive a basic income grant by money made by AI; we can choose to work if we want to (Prof Marwala)?
 - c. What are some theological questions?
 - i. Read Genesis 1- when AI is developed to carry out human tasks – can we say that AI is created in the image of God?
 - ii. Jesus said to his first wave of disciples: **"you will do greater things than I.."** (John 14:12) do you think that the advent of medical technology which can make the blind see; heal the sick; etc. is possibly what Jesus meant?
2. How can we encourage our young people to become influencers for the good and to ensure that there is a strong Judeo-Christian ethical and Africanised influence in the design of Artificial Intelligence?

- a. [Artificial Intelligence Has a Racial and Gender Bias Problem | Time](#);
3. How can technology be an instrument for the advancement of the quality of life for those who are the poor among us? (John 10:10)

REIMAGINING A WEAPONS FREE WORLD:

Calling for the banning of Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems:

1. Do you think the development of Autonomous Weapons will save lives?
 - a. [Killer robots reconsidered: Could AI weapons actually cut collateral damage? - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists \(thebulletin.org\)](#)
4. Do you think the calling for the ban on the production of LAWS is a good thing? Jennifer Philpott Nielson of the World Council of Churches says: *Surrendering the decision over life and death to a machine does not represent human advancement. Humans have been created by God with the necessary capabilities to make decisions based on moral and ethical considerations, and to be accountable for the consequences of our actions when boundaries are crossed. The same can never be said of weapons operated by artificial intelligence.*
 - a. [10 things to know about 'killer robots' | World| Breaking news and perspectives from around the globe | DW | 27.08.2018](#)
 - b. [MICRO DRONES KILLER ARMS ROBOTS - AUTONOMOUS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE - WARNING !! - Bing video](#)
 - c. [\(146\) 5 Best Smallest Mini Nano Quadcopter Drones With Camera | Popular Micro Drone today - YouTube](#)
 - d. [Death by algorithm: the age of killer robots is closer than you think - Vox](#)
 - e. Read what Namibia has done? In October, **Namibia** became the 30th state to support an international treaty to prohibit lethal **autonomous weapons** systems. There has also been a growing number of **calls**, in numerous countries, reaffirming the need to maintain meaningful human control over the **weapons** of war.
 - i. [Microsoft Word - KRC_CountryViews_25Oct2019.docx \(stopkillerrobots.org\)](#)
 - ii. [Death of efforts to regulate autonomous weapons has been greatly exaggerated - Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists \(thebulletin.org\)](#)
 - f. The Presiding Bishop has written to all the governments in our MCSA Connexion, to follow the example of Namibia. As yet we have only received a response from the South African Government (See attached)
5. How can your church call: *for the conversion of the arms industry in South Africa to the production of humane civilian products, with due consideration to existing employment levels and/or adaption of present skills?*

As it is in heaven let it be so on earth.

May weapons of death become life giving plough shares for the benefit of all humanity?

Shalom
Rev Mike Vorster
MCSA Director of Ecumenical Affairs.
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