Sunday, 11.11.18, marks the 100th anniversary of the Armistice that ended hostilities in what was promoted as “the war to end all wars.” As churches that follow the Prince of Peace, we think it appropriate to reclaim the aspiration for peace of our ancestors. The day chosen for the 1918 Armistice was already known as the Feast of St. Martin. The fourth-century Martin of Tours was serving as a Roman soldier when he became a Christian and then would no longer carry a weapon into battle.

One hundred years after the 1918 Armistice, we hope we can tell the truth about whether WWI was a necessary evil, or just simply evil. Did all this suffering have to happen? First let’s tell some truth about the suffering.

It is not disrespectful to the memory of military veterans to tell the truth. Indeed, in the aftermath of WWI, the American Legion was among the groundswell of citizens around the world who pressed for the outlawing of war, accomplished with the international Kellogg-Briand pact in 1928.

In addition to the massive killing, brutalization, and permanent disabling of combatants, malnutrition and disease spread suffering far beyond the battlefield. Typhus and tuberculosis killed many, but the influenza of 1918 killed 50-100 million around the globe.

If the winner of a war is determined by who kills the most, the flu was definitely the winner. People who had never heard of the clash of empires died from the flu’s global reach. The popular narrative of the Yanks saving the Allied cause takes on a different perspective if it is true, as some experts surmise, that the flu pandemic spread from a military base in Kansas. The flu killed regardless of uniform or flag. (See more in accompanying article Flu Connection.)

Domestic civil rights also suffered from war. For instance, some Minnesotans were questioning why they should be forced to go to Europe to kill people with whom they had no quarrel. Anyone who publicly questioned the war, the draft, or investing in war bonds was subject to persecution. The state legislature legalized the Minnesota Commission on Public Safety to require anyone to come before it for examination. Their expectation was that “a man is wholeheartedly for the war and subordinates everything else to its successful prosecution.” *

The Commission helped create the atmosphere that attacked union organizing, cost teachers their jobs, terrorized (for instance, tar and feathering) citizens, and stifled free speech and other civil liberties. One particularly enthusiastic perpetrator and self-proclaimed patriot on the Commission profited from his war time zeal by being appointed a federal judge. It was in that office, in 1925, that he shot himself. His suicide note suggests that he was suffering from remorse and moral injury.

Historians generally accept that WWII came from seeds sown because of WWI. Among other factors, the German people suffered so greatly that many seized on the inaccurate explanation provided by Hitler. He blamed “Jewish bankers” for promoting the carnage in order to profit. Today, Germans are very aware that humiliation and coercion, whether by force or threat of force, does not result in peace.

May we use this anniversary of the Armistice to fulfill our ancestors’ intent to end war.