

SERMON IN PROVIDENCE BAY UNITED CHURCH

BY JANE MCKAY-WRIGHT

IN JANUARY I WILL BE GOING TO IRAQ FOR THREE MONTHS TO VOLUNTEER AS A WITNESS FOR PEACE, AND TO WORK TO REDUCE VIOLENCE.

I am a member of an ecumenical group called Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) who at present have permanent violence-reduction projects in Iraq, in Hebron (West Bank), in Colombia, and in Grassy Narrows, Ontario. I will be one of a six-member team located primarily in Baghdad.

We do this work because we are committed to active grass-roots peacemaking, and you would be surprised how effective it can be. Calming tempers, listening to grievances, and openly photographing a violent confrontation can give pause to those engaged in conflict. Christian Peacemaker Teams are interested in transforming conflict, working at its roots to foster dialogue among parties in dispute. We want to reduce fear and strengthen relationships among people. It is important also for us to witness what ordinary people are experiencing in places like Iraq, and to report what we know to ordinary people in Canada and the United States.

Christian Peacemaker Teams has had a presence in Iraq for over a year. I made a two-week visit there in October 2002. What I saw then was a country impoverished by

United Nations economic sanctions, a country still suffering from the destruction of the 1991 war, with bombing by the U.S. and the U.K. still continuing, even then, on a sporadic basis. It was a country also under the tight control of Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship. I could not imagine how life could get worse for the Iraqi people, but it did.

Christian Peacemaker Teams is a faith-based organization, founded in 1993 by Mennonites, Quakers, and Church of the Brethren USA. Participants from the United States and Canada now come from many churches, both Roman Catholic and Protestant... We believe that Jesus' call to be peacemakers and to love our enemies has been too often ignored, and that there is a role for active Christian peacemaking. Many people take for granted the role of soldiers in areas of conflict around the world. We in Christian Peacemaker Teams are willing to devote the same discipline and self-sacrifice to non-violent interventions.

LET ME SPEAK A LITTLE ABOUT WHAT WAR HAS BROUGHT TO IRAQ AND WHAT MY WORK MAY

ENTAIL. In the past months, team members in Baghdad have been recording the experiences of families in Iraq. The following was told to CPTers David Milne and LeAnne Clausen in October of this

year by a boy in his teens. His family was able to get information about their relatives only through lists provided by Christian Peacemaker Teams who are working with the mosque in their district.

"At 2:30 a.m., U.S. troops came to our house, and ordered our entire family outside. They broke the locks to our cabinet and threw the contents onto the floor, even though our father gave them the cabinet key so they wouldn't have to do this. They took our money and a gold wedding necklace belonging to my mother. My father, cousin, older brother and I were tied and taken away....We were tied at our wrists with plastic ties behind our backs the entire night. In the morning we were put out into the sunlight, as a type of punishment. We asked for shade, but the soldiers refused. (Temperatures at the time were 110-120F)... The first day, our hands were still tied behind our back. Because of this we were unable to drink any water. [The soldier] refused to re-tie us so we could drink. We asked if just one of us could be re-tied with his hands in front of him so that he could help the rest of us to drink. The soldiers refused. The soldiers re-tied us with the plastic ties in front of us on the next day... Another day, I asked a soldier for water, because I hadn't had anything to drink for the entire day in the sun. He beat me on my back and chest, while another soldier kicked me in the back."

After saying this, the boy then

asked his mother to leave the room so he could tell the team members something privately, something he couldn't even tell his mother. I will spare you the details. He was released wearing only his underwear and was forced to walk back home in broad daylight. "The officers told me upon my release, 'Don't tell anyone about what happened here, or we'll come pick you up again.'" His father, brother, and cousin still remain incarcerated at various prison camps throughout Iraq.

There are other stories, one of a low-level employee at the Ministry of Agriculture in Baghdad who was reported to the Coalition Forces by someone who held a grudge against him, and whose home was raided three times, once with a helicopter hovering overhead.

"The soldiers searched the whole house—even the toilet—and interrogated my neighbours. They found nothing in the house and all of my neighbours said I was innocent. The commanding officer apologized to me...but then he said he didn't have the authority to let me go, so he arrested me...The soldiers took me to their base in the Al-Shaab district of Baghdad. They kept me alone in a room with my hands zip-tied behind my back for two days, feeding me only one spoonful of Army rationed food per day and giving me a total of two glasses of water during that time. During these two days, some interrogators beat me frequently, shoved me around, stood on my back, and pried off one of my toenails..."

This man told the team also that he was threatened he would be transferred by the U.S. military to the prison in Guantanamo Bay. His is a very long testimony, and includes reports of torture by electric

shock, and demonstrations against U.S. forces by Iraqis being held prisoner.

Another experience was that of a man imprisoned by Saddam Hussein's government for refusing to serve in the armed forces. He is unable to get identification papers; he is still unemployed; and help for his mental trauma is not available. In a further case, CPT team members learned of an incident where U.S. soldiers entered a house from two different sides, opened fire and killed four of their own. Then, distraught, the U.S. soldiers came out of the house; shot dead three Iraqi men who were sitting handcuffed in the yard; and ordered the house destroyed by helicopter and tank fire. These are not the only instances where homes were ransacked by U.S. soldiers, where money and valuables were removed, and family members taken away. One woman concluded that during Saddam's reign, no one came searching in their house like this.

Last July, Holy Mary Orthodox Egyptian Coptic Church in Baghdad, built in 1668, was sacked by U.S. forces. The assistant to the priest described what happened:

"Some of the soldiers desecrated the altar by walking all over it with their boots, while others hammered on the brick walls of the church, damaging the bricks...Yet another group of soldiers broke down the doors to several church offices. In one of the offices, they pried open a small locked cabinet. They confiscated the passports belonging to the five [church officials] as well as 4.15 million Iraqi Dinars (\$2,075 U.S.) and \$5,100 U.S. of church money that was stored there. The money was being saved to buy books for

the church library and for the future construction of a new church...The soldiers then detained us for one night at a U.S. base in central Baghdad, then another night at a U.S. base near al-Shaad stadium, where they questioned us one by one. After holding us at the Baghdad International Airport for two nights, U.S. soldiers took one of us to Abu Ghraid and the other four of us to Al-Rasafah prison....I have spent three months now trying to get our property back from the U.S. forces, but neither the money nor the passports have yet been returned. In this process, U.S. Military representatives sent me to eight different military bases..."

AS FOR MYSELF, I REMAIN UNCONVINCED THAT MILITARY ACTION IS THE WAY

TO PEACE. It is my view that we need to discard violence even in difficult international conflicts. As Christians, the example of Jesus is our strength, and our challenge. He taught us, "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God." I think it is appropriate now, in the Christmas season, for me to feel called to action, as we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. Of course, not everyone is called to do this kind of active intervention. But the life of Jesus has lessons for all of us....

But I want to give the last word this morning to Sheik Al-Adhaim, Imam of Abu Hanifa Mosque in Baghdad. When Christian Peacemaker Teams visited him, he told them that if people motivated by religion work with one another then solutions can be found that serve all.

“We must guide others to peace and security and treat them kindly” said the Imam. ✱

Jane McKay-Wright, a member of Toronto Monthly Meeting, is again in Baghdad for three months of volunteer work with the Christian Peacemakers Team.

Note: All testimonies quoted are from team e-mails from Iraq during November 2003, and are published on CPTnet at: «<http://www.cpt.org/subscribe.php>»

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Taking to the Streets

By Bert Horwood

It's lunch hour on Friday. I'm standing with a peace sign in front of Kingston's City Hall. There's cold rain blowing in my face and I wonder, not for the first time, what I'm doing here. The voice of a Friend echoes in my mind's ear, "You aren't accomplishing anything with that vigil." I feel the futility. What good can it possibly do, week after week, to stand here with a dozen or so other vigil keepers in weather of every description while an uncaring world goes on with its crazy course?

I don't always feel this way. Sometimes drivers honk as they pass. There was one wonderful day when a happy six-year old walked down our line carefully reading each sign aloud to her parents. Even a hostile reaction has meaning, such as the occasion when an angry woman yelled at us, "What don't you people get jobs?" And one of the vigil keepers, a nun, replied gently, "This is our job." And then had a conversation with the woman.

But still, I feel an abiding sense of uselessness. The vigil is not making any observable difference in those issues of peace and social justice which we bring to public notice. I know that many others in similar demonstrations must feel the same, and I hope it will be helpful to describe our vigil and further explore the complex realm of motives and satisfaction in taking a message of silence, peace and non-violence out of the meeting room and onto the streets.

Our vigil is organized primarily by the Sisters of Providence. Sister Pauline Lally is "in charge" but she practices a Quaker-like equality which makes the vigil our common enterprise. The vigil is silent, except for special occasions, and most of our signs and special

events are organized by the vigil keepers themselves with Pauline presiding in a remarkably clerk-like way.

The vigil began in 1995 to mourn the cuts the Harris government was making to social programs and to express solidarity with those most hurt by them. Our concerns have changed over the years, but the general message is always one of peaceful awareness of hurt to people and the land. Our signs reflect care for peace, environment, health care, and similar issues. The vigil keepers come from various faiths and centres of concern.

Each week we open with a prayer which we wrote collectively. It reads:

*We long for a world
that respects all of humanity and all the earth.
And so we stand in silent, non-violent solidarity
with all those affected
by governments and corporations
that put profits before human kind
and indeed before all creation.*

*Together
in this vigil we bring before us injustices
affecting our world.*

*In gentle awareness
we present these concerns
to the Divine Light
which permeates the universe.*

Thus, we stand in hope.