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CHRISTIAN PACIFISM ON THE MARCH

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More than 400 Christian pacifists gathered in Indianapolis, Indiana, on September 8–11, 2005, to address issues of violence, war, and human rights around the globe. The theme for the conference, “Seeking Peace: The Courage to Be Nonviolent,” expressed the sentiment of attendees, many of whom take an active role in thwarting violence through peaceful means.

Motivated by “the ethic of Jesus,” pacifists travel to areas of the world where violence and war are imminent. They protest, hold public prayer vigils, advocate for peaceful resolutions, stand in front of army tanks, appeal to their own governments for better treatment of enemy detainees, address the needs of those facing the horrors of conflict (including soldiers), and basically “get in the way” of war. One sponsoring organization, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), reports current activity in Iraq, Israel, Columbia, the Arizona/Mexico border, and Canada. Canadian issues include violence related to aboriginal inhabitants and fishing rights. In the past, the organization’s teams have traveled to a number of other countries including Afghanistan, Mexico, Haiti, and Puerto Rico. CPT relates dramatic accounts of their activities in *Getting in the Way* (Herald Press, 2005).

Conference Highlights. At the peace conference in Indianapolis, the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL asked Peggy Gish, leader of CPT to Iraq, if she thinks of herself as a peacekeeper, similar to the Belgian peacekeeping soldiers killed in Rwanda, or if she makes a distinction between *peacekeeper* and *peacemaker*. “A peacekeeper fills the role of policing an area, with authority to prevent violence,” she responded quickly. “Jesus calls for another way, the way of nonviolent, suffering love. It’s putting your life on the line. Peace is important enough that I will say it with my body, and risk arrest. It also means seeking the transformation of those involved in violence.” Is she hoping to convert Iraqis to Christianity? “That’s not the primary goal for our activities,” she explained. Like many pacifists, she hopes for world peace, and for nonviolent coexistence among people of different races and religions, though she added that conversions would be an additional gift from God.

Gish, a member of the Church of the Brethren, first went to Iraq in October of 2002, five months prior to the U.S. invasion. She has since spent a total of 18 months in the country. Her book, *Iraq: A Journey of Hope and Peace* (Herald Press, 2004), chronicles her story. Her husband, Art Gish, has spent time with CPT in Hebron where tensions are also strong.

In addition to the three historic peace churches—Quakers (Society of Friends), Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren, along with their varied denominational offshoots—conference speakers reported pacifist activity among other Christian denominations such as the Assemblies of God, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, as well as among Pentecostal groups. Proponents even cited the Southern Baptist declaration made in 1940 that “war is contrary to the mind and Spirit of Christ.” Roman Catholic pacifism is also active through church outreaches such as Pax Christi. One organization represented at the conference bore a name that clarified their main goal: “Every Church a Peace Church.”

Subjects discussed at the conference included a military draft, objection to military taxation, and the economics of justice and peace. Session topics also covered how the Bible is a training model for nonviolent action, how “You shall not kill” instead of “You shall not murder” might be the better translation of Exodus 20:13, building peaceful relationships with Muslims, raising peace-conscious children, promoting peace education in schools, and more. A gay Episcopalian led a session about

making peace in the battle for same-sex marriage. He connected the homosexual issue with the peace issue by arguing that the passages that condemn homosexuality in the Bible describe violent acts. The issues of abortion and euthanasia were noticeably missing as session topics, while the civil rights emphasis took precedence.

As an expression to reach out to American Muslims, Gish and other attendees visited the Islamic Society of North America near Plainfield, Indiana. On Friday afternoon a group of conference participants protested the death penalty in front of the state capitol building in downtown Indianapolis. Proclaiming, "Let those without sin cast the first stone," they placed a pile of stones in front of the building and sent a personal message to Governor Mitch Daniels to stop the death penalty, which "makes killers of us all."

Differing Views within the Movement. Many of those who oppose violence and war and focus instead on acts of peace and service base their pacifism on Jesus' words in Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers." The historic peace churches all adhere to pacifism in a broad sense, though some within them hold to a doctrine of nonresistance that strictly applies Jesus' words in Matthew 5:39: "Resist not him that is evil." Anabaptists traditionally expressed their peace position as nonresistant, even through the early part of the twentieth century. Guy F. Hershberger, author of the 1969 book *War, Peace, and Nonresistance*, made four distinctions between *pacifism* and *nonresistance* that became critical differentials from that time on, dividing sentiment throughout the Mennonite church:

1. Pacifism focuses on international peace, while nonresistance focuses on peace with God through Christ.
2. Pacifism is optimistic about achieving a world without war, while nonresistance expects wars to continue to be a global problem.
3. Pacifism does not see governmental display of power as a legitimate means for bringing about political peace between countries, while nonresistance sees government as having a legitimate, God-given role in punishing wrongdoing and controlling evil, even by the use of force.
4. Pacifism does not always mean being willing to suffer without any resistance, while nonresistance means refusing to resist assailants, though being willing to lay down one's life to protect others.

Although Hershberger distinguishes between the two views of resistance, adherents in both camps often hold the same view, practically speaking, of personal nonresistance. Pacifists see even Jesus' death on the cross as a type of subversive act of resistance to overcome evil. Gish expressed her position as "active but not harmful. I would make appeals...[or] use other means. I would not take on the methods of evil."

Nonresistance adherents see themselves as belonging to another kingdom, based on Jesus' assertion that His kingdom is not of this world. This distinction between the earthly and heavenly kingdoms leads some to support the death penalty and the government's responsibility to maintain an active military. Advocates of a strict separation of the two kingdoms, such as the conservative Mennonites and Amish, will not vote or hold public office, and refuse to participate in public protests.

History of Pacifism. Mennonite theologian J. C. Wenger and United Methodist theologian Walter Wink report that it is nearly impossible to find quotes from early church history that support Christian participation in war. Not until the time of Constantine in AD 313 did Christians participate in state-sanctioned conflict. The church then shifted to blessing Christian participation, culminating in the Crusades, where the church waged war for the ostensibly religious cause of reclaiming the Holy Land. During the Reformation, Anabaptists suffered persecution without resistance at the hands of other Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. Detailed accounts of Anabaptist martyrdom are recorded in *Martyrs Mirror*, a 1,141-page volume first published in 1660, which surveys Christian martyrdom from early church history through the seventeenth century.

From the Anabaptist movement, the Church of the Brethren sprang up in 1708 near Schwarzenau, Germany. Quaker pacifism came by a different route, through the Anglican Church, but with many of the same conclusions as the Anabaptists. The three historic peace churches (Quakers, Mennonites, Church of

the Brethren) joined in 1976 to promote a "New Call to Peacemaking." In 1978 they held their first national conference in Green Lake, Wisconsin. Jehovah's Witnesses are also conscientious objectors, but the group, as a cult and a younger movement, is not considered to be part of the historic peace churches.

The Anabaptists historically held to a separation of church and state. The movement eventually was stimulated by Martin Luther King, Jr., who himself was inspired by Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi, the leader of India's peaceful revolution. Gandhi was familiar with the peace writings of Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*, who, Peggy Gish relates, had Anabaptist influence. Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, author of *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1994), has injected Anabaptist thought into the contemporary Christian debate concerning politics, while fueling, along with the current war in Iraq, a renewed interest in pacifism throughout Christianity.

Conscientious Objectors in Jail. The United States' provision for conscientious objectors to military service was strengthened between World War I and World War II; however, even today the government prosecutes conscientious objectors if they appeal to that status after enlistment. During the past year the army jailed three men at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. In March 2005, specialist Blake LeMoine was sentenced to seven months in prison and reduced in rank to private. Private Neil Quentin Lucas refused to deploy to Iraq and was court-martialed on June 22, 2005. He is serving 13 months in prison. Dale Bartell joined the Mennonites after serving in Iraq, and when he refused to return he was sentenced to four months in prison with a dishonorable discharge. His wife, Amy, was charged with the felony of "enticing and abetting" an army deserter, but those charges have been dropped.

The U.S. government reportedly gave Bartell the option of using nonlethal weapons, but he still refused to deploy. Some conscientious objectors historically have fulfilled noncombatant roles such as medics, while others stayed in the United States for alternative service.

Christians in the Military. National Public Radio reported in July 2005 that while only 14 percent of the U.S. population is made up of evangelical Christians, they make up 40 percent of the military's active duty personnel. Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics make up approximately 25-30 percent.

Barbara Anderson is the mother of two young Christian men who joined the military after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. Her oldest son was in Korea in the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea, where he often guarded the bridge between the two countries. Her youngest son is in the 173rd Airborne in the Paktika District of Afghanistan, where Osama Bin Laden is believed to be hiding.

Anderson explained that the Afghan children love the American soldiers who provide treats and attention. She reports that her son watches as Afghan boys line up each morning to attend classes on the military base. In rural areas, girls are often still excluded from school. "It's not that we should not strive for peace," Anderson states, "but unfortunately sometimes the only thing that has brought about a better life is force or the threat of force. Sometimes the need of the people is far greater than the theory of no war."

Many Christians believe that the United States and its allies are engaged in a "just war" in Afghanistan and Iraq, and against terrorism in general. For pacifists, a just war is a slim possibility, particularly in this era when weapons of mass destruction have the capacity to do damage far beyond that of previous wars. They question the use of the just war theory to endorse and sanction war, when it was initially an effort to limit violence. Nonpacifist Christians often see pacifism as a danger, allowing evil to prevail by ignoring aggressors and leaving the innocent vulnerable. Anderson states concerning her sons, "The military wasn't my first choice for them. Yet, being over there in the midst of the conflicts, they believe even more in what we are doing." Others vacillate between the two positions. One conference attendee, a military veteran who now attends Quaker meetings, wondered about the role of police or about situations when a violent aggressor will not retreat.

Throughout the conference, shirts and signs proclaimed, "Peace Takes Courage" and "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God. [signed] Jesus of Nazareth." or "I'm a

Conscientious Objector: All War Is Sin." Besides the rhetoric, music provided a powerful, unifying force that pacifist attendees recognized, even making it the topic of one session's discussion. The emotion and ideology of pacifism proved inviting as participants marched in place to the words:

Keep on moving forward,
Never turning back.
Keep on loving boldly...
Never turning back.
Pray for peace together...
Never turning back.
Reach across the border...
Never turning back.
Stand up and be counted...
Never turning back.

— *Rachel D. Ramer*