

Church voice on war measured, or muffled? Sparse news attention for statements on reconciliation: Sparse news attention for statements on reconciliation

by [John Dart](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

As bombs and rockets rained from the skies in Lebanon and Israel, the American presidents of international Lutheran and Reformed fellowships joined with the World Council of Churches to plead for an immediate cease-fire, saying that “the world cannot wait for signs of ‘a new Middle East’ to stop the killing.”

The implied criticism of the Bush administration’s delay in backing a cease-fire was a jab both at Israel’s initial hopes of crushing Hezbollah militias and at Bush’s Middle East policies. Otherwise, the joint appeal was even-handed—like other mainline church statements—in criticizing the terror inflicted by the Hezbollah rockets in northern Israel and the destruction wrought by Israel’s bombing of populated areas in Lebanon.

The “intransigence by both parties” about ending the violence was deplored in a statement August 8 by three spokespersons for millions of Christians, namely, Lutheran World Federation president Mark S. Hanson, also presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; World Alliance of Reformed Churches president Clifton Kirkpatrick, also the top executive of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); and Methodist minister Samuel Kobia, general secretary of the World Council of Churches.

When the August 14 cease-fire was finally brokered by the UN, reports totaled up at least 800 Lebanese and 155 Israelis killed in the 34 days of fighting that began when Hezbollah guerrillas attacked Israeli forces, killing several soldiers and kidnapping

two.

In U.S. ecumenical circles, questions were raised about whether too many churches were silent about the violence, and whether balanced cease-fire appeals from mainstream church leaders were ignored by news media while rallies by a pro-Israel fundamentalist figure got news attention.

Mainline Protestant leaders were not silent, however.

Within days of the breakout of hostilities, individual United Methodist leaders urged the White House and other nations to take swift diplomatic steps.

“Neither the attacks of Hezbollah on Israel or the Israeli military actions in Gaza and Lebanon are justified from the perspective of international law or sound political policy,” said R. Randy Day, chief executive of the United Methodist Board of Global Ministries, in a July 14 statement. (After the cease-fire, Janice Riggle Huie, president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops, praised Bush for backing the truce.)

Leaders of 16 religious organizations—including eight mainline Protestant denominations, two Catholic groups, an Orthodox church, the National Council of Churches and the relief agency Church World Service—wrote a joint letter July 21 to President Bush urging him to work with other nations to secure an immediate cease-fire. Signers said the conflict “has created a grave humanitarian crisis and no hoped-for benefit should outweigh the cause of saving innocent lives.”

Meanwhile, one of the letter’s signers, John H. Thomas, general minister of the United Church of Christ, posted a prayer on the UCC Web site faulting “leaders in Tel Aviv and Damascus, Tehran, Washington and southern Lebanon” for pandering to ancient fears and claiming to be righteous victims.

The church leaders’ laments, and the meager news attention to such appeals, were discussed in two guest commentaries on Religion News Service last month.

Presbyterian minister Mark Lewis Taylor, professor of theology and culture at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote that the armed conflict was complex, with blame due on both sides, but said that Israel deserved more onus for “disproportionate” military responses. Taylor also noted that UN judgments “continue to weigh against Israel, as the 2004 ruling against Israel’s partition wall showed.”

Outside the United States, there are Christians who criticize Israel more pointedly, said Taylor, pointing to a July 14 Vatican statement that said Israel's right to self-defense does not exempt it from respecting international law, "especially as regards the protection of civilian populations."

U.S. churches were silent or complicit in the military actions, Taylor asserted. "Too many churches are in lockstep with growing Christian Zionist movements, exchanging faith in the God of Jesus Christ for a nationalist loyalty to an imperial Pax Americana/Israelica, thus giving a blank check to U.S. and Israeli governments' attack policies," he wrote August 9.

In an RNS column two days later, ex-TV journalist and Episcopal priest Daniel Webster, now media relations director for the National Council of Churches, said that "a majority of leaders in the mainstream religious community was vocal and outspoken." But, he added, "if you aren't a regular reader of denominational or religious news publications or Web sites, you would not have known it."

News editors across the country routinely spike statements from mainstream religious leaders because they are usually very predictable "and that's not news," said Webster, who worked as a news producer at NBC's West Coast headquarters and in Washington, D.C. "The message of the U.S. churches is not getting to most of the television, radio or newspaper audiences."

By contrast, evangelist John Hagee of San Antonio, Texas, drew news coverage in July by telling a pro-Israel rally in Washington that the Mideast violence was the start of end-times chaos signaling Jesus' return. The July 27 *Wall Street Journal* began its lengthy story about Hagee on page one.

"News media decisions are both bewildering and incredibly frustrating," said Bishop Hanson in a Century interview. The Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches alone have constituencies of 66 million and 75 million members respectively, not to mention additional millions in other WCC denominations.

"It seems the only news stories worth reporting from the religious communities are those that contribute to the fractious nature of life today," said Hanson, who added that carefully worded statements have internal benefits. "I have had local clergy say, 'Thank you for giving me a voice.'" Moreover, he said, "we've failed as religious leaders unless we give public witness to being in difficult but mandated

conversations on the Middle East problems interwoven with religious and political issues.”

One point repeatedly made in church statements on the Hezbollah-Israel fighting was that world leaders should not overlook the ongoing conflict between Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. Hanson, for one, said he is “absolutely convinced there will not be a just and lasting peace until the Israeli occupation is ended and no one is experiencing violence.”

Agreeing that news attention is sparse for predictable statements on reconciliation, Mark Silk, editor of the journal *Religion in the News*, said in an interview that journalists also give highest priority to reactions from newsmakers that are thought “to have clout and influential opinions.” Conservative evangelicals, for instance, are known to be influential in the White House, which has routinely ignored mainline advice.

Silk also suggested that the even-handed statements by churches on the recent fighting—which Princeton Seminary’s Taylor characterized as less than daring and thus doomed to be ignored—were probably honest reflections of the views of mainline Protestants. “Like most Americans, they have tended to be relatively sympathetic to Israel,” he said.