

Nonviolent voices: Peace churches make a witness

by [William Vance Trollinger Jr.](#) in the [December 12, 2001](#) issue

It is not a propitious time to be a pacifist in the United States. Polls indicate that over 90 percent of Americans continue to support the military campaign in Afghanistan. Indications of such support are everywhere, as are the warnings—like the ubiquitous and vaguely threatening “Americans Unite” bumper stickers—that this time of national crisis is not the time for dissent. Not only are there very few voices in the mainstream media expressing doubts about the wisdom of the current military operation, but a number of commentators have waxed apoplectic over any possibility that there may be those in the land who oppose the war effort.

In a pair of particularly venomous columns *National Journal* editor and *Washington Post* columnist Michael Kelly not only derided antiwar protesters as those “unhappy people who like to yell about the awfulness of ‘Amerika’ or international corporations or rich people or people who drive large cars,” but he also attacked pacifists as “liars,” “frauds” and “hypocrites,” whose views are “objectively pro-terrorist” and “evil.”

The leaders of some mainline denominations have been rather restrained in their support of a military response to the terrorist attacks. In early November the United Methodist Council of Bishops issued a statement observing that “violence in all its forms and expressions is contrary to God’s purpose for the world.” Still, it appears that American churchgoers have been as supportive of the U.S. military campaign as the rest of the citizenry. From the beginning some Christians have been particularly enthused about countering violence with violence.

In the midst of all this stand the historic peace churches—Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren. From their beginnings in the Reformation these groups have refused to countenance warfare, committed as they are to the proposition that nonviolence is at the heart of the Gospels and at the heart of what it means to be a Christian—that is, to follow Jesus is to reject the sword.

Despite the strong public sentiment against such convictions after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon, a perusal of public statements

made by the leadership of the historic peace churches clearly indicates that, while they have repeatedly called for the perpetrators to be held accountable, they have not backed away from their commitment to nonviolence.

On September 13 Judy Mills Reimer, general secretary of the General Board of the Church of the Brethren, called on members of her denomination to “remember who we are and whose we are.” She went on: “This is a time to stand by our belief as Christians that all war is wrong . . . Let us, out of our Church of the Brethren convictions, continue to witness to Jesus’ gospel of peace.”

The next day James Schrag, executive director of the Mennonite Church USA, sent a public letter to President Bush, calling on him to forsake the sort of eye-for-an-eye retaliation that “escalates violence for everyone and does not work,” and urging him instead “to seek Jesus’ new way of security rooted in our trust in God and our concern for all.” In response to growing cries “for retribution, retaliation and revenge,” a number of Quaker organizations issued a Call for Peace on September 29, “challenging those whose hearts and minds seem closed to the possibility of peaceful resolution,” and pleading for “people of goodwill the world over [to] commit to the building of a culture of peace.”

Eight days after this statement the U.S. bombing campaign began. The Friends General Conference, the American Friends Service Committee and other Quaker organizations responded with a joint statement in which they observed that the only way to succeed in the struggle against terrorism would be to engage in “prolonged, nonviolent efforts for reconciliation, justice and long-term economic development”; in this conviction “we continue to be guided by our historic testimony concerning God’s call to renounce war . . . we commit ourselves to work and pray for the time . . . promised by God when ‘peoples shall beat their swords into plowshares.’” Echoing these sentiments, the Peace and Justice Committee of the Mennonite Church USA proclaimed that, instead of bombing and other forms of violence, “God calls us to give bread to our enemies,” to do the “unexpected [in order] to stop the cycle of revenge.” And on October 22 the Church of the Brethren’s General Board adopted a resolution that called “for the immediate cessation of military action against the nation of Afghanistan,” and that called on all Brethren “to creatively and nonviolently challenge the prevailing belief that the application of force is the path to enduring peace.”

These are powerful statements at odds with the American mainstream, including the religious mainstream. Anyone who studies religion in the United States, however, knows that denominational proclamations can be unreliable barometers of what is going on among the membership. But there is a good deal of evidence that many Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren remain ardently committed to pacifism. One only has to follow the conversations on MennoLink, a collection of online Mennonite discussion groups, to be struck by the number of Mennonites who are resolutely and articulately nonviolent, and who are critical of America's past and present foreign policy.

In regard to local Mennonite congregations, there is the example of Assembly Mennonite Church (Goshen, Indiana), which has proposed a "season of solidarity" with Muslims during Ramadan, in which church members fast, pray for peace and collect blankets to be sent to those suffering in Afghanistan. And there is a group of Delaware Quakers who, at Newark's Community Day celebration (held on September 16), organized a booth which, as reported by a member of the Newark Meeting, "featured a circle of chairs surrounding a huge floral arrangement and under a canopy bearing a big sign, 'Pray for Peace Here.'"

A perusal of the Church of the Brethren Web pages provides clear evidence that a commitment to pacifism is not limited to denominational headquarters: the 48 churches of the Northern Indiana District Conference have joined to urge "the use of nonviolent approaches and interventions" in response to the terror; the Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania, Church of the Brethren has adopted a statement in which they "remain committed to walk in the Jesus way of nonviolent love, in which evil can only be overcome with redemptive acts of love"; a group of Brethren Volunteer Service Workers have issued a statement in which they "advocate the use of nonviolent means to settle disputes" and "stand opposed to the increased drive toward militarization"; on October 7 members of local Brethren churches (along with Mennonites and others) organized a peace rally at the state capitol in Harrisburg, "Sowing Seeds of Peace: Prayers and Petitions for Nonviolent Action," which attracted over 300 people.

Of course, such sentiments are not unanimously held by members of the historic peace churches. For example, in the October 12 issue of *Newsline*, a Church of the Brethren weekly newsletter, there were reports of "tension and dissension" in "Brethren congregations at various points across the country . . . in regards to issues of pacifism and patriotism." *Newsline* reported that in some churches members were

“questioning the Brethren peace position in light of current events, sometimes putting pastors in difficult positions”; a “few churches postponed love feast services . . . amid congregational quarreling.” Congregational disagreements in response to the denominational stance on the military campaign have also been reported in some Mennonite churches (although there have also been reports of newcomers who have begun attending precisely because of the peace position).

One can also find dissenters on MennoLink and in the letters section of Mennonite periodicals, including the individual who, in the October 16 issue of the *Mennonite*, criticized a recent editorial and asserted that governments “have served and will continue to serve as a means by which God secures his brand of . . . often violent justice.”

The most publicized statement of disagreement with the pacifist position from within the historic peace churches has been that of National Public Radio’s Scott Simon, who is a Quaker. In remarks at a September 25 United Church of Christ gathering Simon acknowledged that, while his support of military force in the Balkans and elsewhere meant that he was “a Quaker of not particularly good standing,” he was “still willing to give first consideration to peaceful alternatives.” However, he forcefully asserted, in confronting the forces that attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the U.S. has no sane alternative but to wage war, and wage it with unflinching resolution.

Fellow Quaker David Johns may be more ambivalent about this prospect than Simon, but he has arrived at a similar conclusion. An assistant professor of theology at the Earlham School of Religion (in Richmond, Indiana) and a recorded minister in the Religious Society of Friends, Johns was embarrassed at how fast some in his own denomination and college responded to the September 11 attacks with official statements asserting that the U.S. should not go to war. As Johns sees it, such statements were not only unseemly in their haste—memos and family pictures from the World Trade Center towers were still drifting over Manhattan and we were ready to announce to the world what we would and would not do—but they grew out of an unattractive combination of national self-loathing and utopian pacifism. While he “was once an absolute pacifist,” Johns now believes that “the state may have to use force in this broken world.”

In saying this, Johns admits that he is torn: he is “trying to follow the Way of the Cross” in his life, and he seeks “to live a life of peaceableness” in all his

relationships, but he cannot understand “what unilateral nonviolence would look like as American foreign policy.” So he supports “the current military campaign,” which he grants “may not be perfect,” but which is something “we need to do” as one component of response to the threat of future terrorist attacks.

But most peace church academics and leaders speaking out on the current crisis would demur. As Judith McDaniel, director of peacebuilding for the American Friends Service Committee, has observed in a brief article on her organization’s Web page, “Is It Punishment or Prevention,” there is little evidence that “bombs/war/violence are going to put an end to bombs/war/violence”; in fact, McDaniel pointedly asserts, “the bombing of Afghanistan . . . harms more innocent people without achieving its alleged goal of stopping further attacks.”

To respond to terrorism with violence will actually have the perverse effect of creating more violence in the future, according to John Paul Lederach, professor of international peacebuilding at Notre Dame and distinguished scholar at the Conflict Transformation Program at Eastern Mennonite University. As Lederach argues in “The Challenge of Terror,” an essay that has gotten a good deal of attention within the peace community (and that was published in the October 2 issue of the *Mennonite*), massive bombing and other acts of violence simply “sustain . . . the myth of why we [in the West] are evil,” thus giving terrorists “gratuitous fuel for self-regeneration, fulfilling their prophecies by providing them with martyrs and justifications.”

Of course, religious pacifists recognize that it is not enough to point out that the massive military campaign currently under way will not work, and in fact will do more harm than good. That is to say, they know that those supporting the war effort will demand an answer to the question: In light of the possibility of further terrorist acts, what would you have us do? But for pacifists such as James Juhnke, professor of history at Bethel College (a Mennonite college in Kansas), there is something “breathtaking” about folks who have “applied principles of violence and force that have not worked” now demanding solutions from the pacifists: “Asking us to provide a short-term solution to a problem that long-term militarism has created is a little like asking a medical doctor for a short-term solution for a cancer-ridden patient who has been smoking tobacco all his life.”

J. Denny Weaver, professor of religion at Bluffton College (a Mennonite college in Ohio), puts it this way in his article “Pacifist Response to 9-11”: “It is unfair to

assume that pacifists, who did not create the situation in the first place . . . can now be parachuted into the middle of [the crisis] with a ready-made solution.”

More than this, peace church representatives can legitimately claim that the U.S. government has already disregarded what would have been the best short-term response to the crisis. Juhnke and some (but certainly not all) others in the peace church tradition have argued that the best immediate response would have been to establish a genuinely international police force which would have sought—with the least force necessary—to arrest those accused of terrorist acts, and which would have brought them to an international court for trial. But with the massive and U.S.-dominated military response, and with the talk of American military tribunals, this option is no longer a possibility.

Still, for peace church academics and leaders, the real solutions to terror and war are to be found in responses that go beyond Osama bin Laden and the current crisis. In keeping with many of his Mennonite, Brethren and Quaker colleagues, Lederach has argued that instead of “seeking accountability through revenge,” the powers-that-be should “pursue a sustainable peace process” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, invest “financially in development, education and a broad social agenda” in countries where terrorism is nurtured, and give “diplomatic but dynamic support” to the Arab League. Weaver and others add to this by proposing that the U.S. end sanctions on Iraq, pull its troops out of Saudi Arabia, and move toward a more equitable distribution of foreign aid in the Middle East (in particular, less to Israel and more to the Palestinians).

Dale Brown, Church of the Brethren peace theologian, goes beyond specific policy proposals in his essay “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand.” For Brown, if the United States could commit itself to refusing to imitate the “evil deeds” of the terrorists, if the U.S. would eschew the violence that has marked its post-World War II foreign policy, if the U.S. could abandon its “faith in redemptive violence,” if the U.S. could spend as much money on a peace academy as it does on the service academies . . . well, there would be some hope for a peaceful future. Brown acknowledges that many folks, including some in the peace church tradition, are skeptical that the “Jesus’ way can realistically be applied to national policies.” Nevertheless, Brown says, in a world in which we are all vulnerable to terrorist acts, “it increasingly seems believable that the responses of Jesus, Gandhi and Martin Luther King are relevant to the present confusing crisis.”

A number of people outside of the peace church tradition seem to be quite interested in what these pacifists are saying and doing. Not only did a recent edition of the *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* devote a segment to religious pacifism, but a number of local newspapers throughout the country have run stories on this topic. One example involves the *Toledo Blade* and Richard Kauffman, pastor of the Toledo Mennonite Church. Shortly after the attacks on New York and Washington, Kauffman received a call from a *Blade* columnist who wanted to know what someone who “is a pacifist as a matter of faith thinks about the events.” Kauffman explained that he and his congregation “take Jesus very literally, and very seriously.” Kauffman pointed out that “Jesus talks about loving our enemies and praying for our enemies and doing good to those who do evil to us”; more than this, on the cross “Jesus allowed himself to die, and absorbed in his own being the violence around him, rather than countering that violence.” This is how we Christians should live our lives: even though nonviolence is not necessarily the “most efficient or effective” response to violence, the fact is that “Jesus [is] calling us . . . not to return violence” with violence. For Kauffman, nonviolence “is the core value” of his life; that is to say, living nonviolently is his “faith statement.”

While these are far from mainstream sentiments, especially after September 11, the *Blade* columnist reported in a subsequent article that she received “a flood of e-mail” in support of Kauffman’s comments. A month later Kauffman reported that he also had received a number of phone calls of appreciation for his remarks, as well as some inquiries about conscientious objection; he also received positive feedback at the next meeting of the local ecumenical organization, as well as an invitation to speak to a United Church of Christ Men’s Bible study group.

As Kauffman sees it, there are a good number of mainline and other Christians who have grave doubts about the war on terrorism, and who are open to the message of nonviolence. It is thus the responsibility of those who are members of historic peace churches to serve as witnesses to the conviction that the commitment to peace grows out of “an understanding of who God is and what God is calling us to.”

For Mennonites, in particular, such engagement with the wider church and wider culture marks a shift from the separatism of the past. According to James Juhnke, this engagement is good for both sides: Mennonites are forced to consider how nonviolence relates to issues of justice and how it can be applied in terms of public policy, while the broader church must take seriously “our claims that peace is central to the gospel.”

But Juhnke also points out that even though Mennonites are becoming increasingly engaged with the broader church, they remain connected in a very real sense with the Amish and other conservative cousins. For Juhnke, this connection with those who are separate “reminds us . . . that we are in this world but not of it.” That is to say, “we can remember how to draw lines” between the state and the church. As he puts it, Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers know how to resist the impulse, too often acceded to by mainstream Protestants and Catholics, to “sprinkle holy water on whatever the state does.” According to Juhnke, “we know who we are.”

It is hard to see how a commitment to pacifism will ever be held by more than a small minority of Christians in the U.S., especially after the September 11 attacks. In his first sermon after the onset of the American bombing campaign, a local Mennonite minister exhorted his congregation to “be not ashamed” of “your commitment to nonviolence.” Generally, members of the peace churches don’t seem to be.