

Peace army: Christian Peacemaker Teams face hostility

by [Rich Preheim](#) in the [January 24, 2006](#) issue

In a scene that has been repeatedly played since Operation Enduring Freedom commenced in Afghanistan four years ago, Michelle Naar-Obed left her home in December for a tour of duty. She knew, as did her husband, her 11-year-old daughter and her friends in Duluth, Minnesota, that she might never return.

But Naar-Obed is not a soldier. Neither is she a contractor or part of a civilian security force. She carries no weapon and will proclaim no political agenda during her tour in Iraq. She is a member of Christian Peacemaker Teams, a small pacifist organization that was thrust into the spotlight following the November 26 abduction of four CPT workers in Baghdad who were accused by their captors of being spies and threatened with execution.

The four CPT hostages are Tom Fox of Clearbrook, Virginia; Jim Loney and Harmeet Soodon of Canada; and Norman Kember of Great Britain. They are being held by a previously unknown group called the Swords of Righteousness Brigade. Fox is the first American humanitarian worker to be kidnapped in Iraq.

For the CPT, the Baghdad kidnapping is the first such incident in its 15-year history of sending teams to be a peace-promoting presence in areas of conflict. Only one worker has died in the field—killed in a 2003 car accident in Iraq.

“We’ve always known this was a possibility,” said Naar-Obed about the kidnapping. She is on her fourth CPT assignment in Iraq. “I’m not scared enough not to go back,” she said.

Fox has spent most of the past year and a half in Iraq. The other three are members of a short-term delegation, which spent several weeks observing and assisting the team in Baghdad. Loney is CPT’s Canadian coordinator, Soodon is a university student and Kember is a retired medical professor.

In placing their lives in jeopardy for the sake of peace, CPT members look to Jesus as their example. "Jesus said if you're going to be my followers, you must take up my cross," said Cliff Kindy, an experienced CPT member. "That's more than wearing it on your neck or as a tie pin." Said CPT spokesman Chris Schweitzer, "It's a gospel of doing something radical. Loving your enemies has a serious price."

In training sessions, CPT does not shy away from the possibility that teams will encounter life-threatening situations. Members are given strategies for sustaining themselves physically, emotionally and spiritually in times of stress. They are encouraged to discuss living wills with their families. The organization also does not advocate the use of violent force to rescue its workers. "We train for crisis in CPT, and the training, the spiritual undergirding that is part of CPT, is done with the expectation of being part of a transforming process," Kindy said. That transformation includes seeing the people generally categorized as "the enemy" as human beings and children of God.

In Iraq, where CPT has worked for more than three years and is one of the few remaining Western humanitarian organizations, CPT teams have acted as human shields to deter attacks, supported United Nations weapons inspectors and documented human-rights abuses. CPT workers also investigated the maltreatment of detainees at Abu Ghraib and other prisons, resulting in a report that was released four months before the publication of scandalous photos of Iraqis being abused by U.S. troops. The CPT report accurately predicted that such incidents threaten the long-term security of Westerners in the country.

The CPT crew, numbering between four and seven people who are rotated in for three months at a time, has chosen to remain in Iraq while many other organizations have pulled out. It lives outside the security of Baghdad's military-controlled Green Zone, alongside the many Iraqis who face killings and kidnappings. "Our protection is not in armaments but in our faith and our work," Naar-Obed said.

Though Naar-Obed misses her family, she feels called to this work. "In the end, this is the world [my daughter is] going to inherit," she said. "I have a responsibility to try to create for her a better world as well as for the rest of the human family."

In a reflection written a year before he was abducted, Fox said, "Does [CPT work] mean that I walk into a raging battle to confront the soldiers? Does that mean I walk the streets of Baghdad with a sign saying 'American for the Taking'? No to both

counts. But if Jesus and Gandhi are right, then I am asked to risk my life, and if I lose it, to be as forgiving as they were when murdered by the forces of Satan.”

John Paul Lederach, professor at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, who has mediated conflicts in Nicaragua, Spain, Tajikistan and elsewhere, sees the relevance of the CPT work. “It’s important that we have people present and accompany people through a difficult situation,” he said. “People that have . . . broken a cycle of violence did so by stepping into a mystery, where you didn’t know the outcomes.”

CPT’s first step into that mystery came following a 1984 address by Ron Sider, founder of Evangelicals for Social Action, to an international Mennonite assembly in Strasbourg, France. Sider, a Mennonite minister, called for the mobilization of peace armies made of people willing to risk death by placing themselves between warring parties around the globe. “Unless we are ready to die developing new nonviolent attempts to reduce international conflict, we should confess that we never really meant the cross was an alternative to the sword,” Sider told the gathering.

That challenge stirred North American Mennonites, who joined members of the Church of the Brethren and the Quakers to create CPT in 1986. These historic peace churches were obvious candidates to run with Sider’s idea.

Two decades later, CPT’s faith-based approach to nonviolent action has drawn support from beyond the traditional pacifist constituency. With offices in Chicago and Toronto, the organization has Baptists and Presbyterians on its steering committee, and about a third of its workers are from denominations other than the historic peace churches. CPT has a full-time corps of about 40 people, plus some 140 reservists who serve shorter stints each year.

In addition to its work in Iraq, CPT currently maintains a long-term presence in four other locations, including northern Colombia, a region ripped by conflict between right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas; western Ontario, where a Native tribe is fighting efforts to clear-cut its forested land; and the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona, where tensions are high over illegal immigration. The oldest CPT project, and the place its workers have faced the most danger, is in the West Bank, where CPT has been since 1995. Team members have been assaulted by Israeli settlers while accompanying Palestinian children to school, faced machine guns in confrontations between Israelis and Palestinians, ridden on Jerusalem buses targeted

by Palestinian suicide bombers, and been imprisoned for opposing the demolition of Palestinians' homes.

Kindy, who was in Baghdad during the U.S. "shock and awe" bombing, was in a Palestinian refugee camp in Gaza when it was attacked by Israelis. "I was sure some of us would not live through that," said Kindy, a CPT member since 1989 who has also served in Latin America, the Caribbean and North America.

CPT has also worked in Chiapas, Bosnia, Chechnya, Haiti and other international hot spots. In the United States, CPT groups have demonstrated against war taxes, militaristic toys and urban violence.

Kindy recalls being told by Palestinians that the most important thing CPT has accomplished has been to present an image of American Christianity different from the God-and-country version. "Maybe those are signs that . . . we are doing something right," Kindy said.

That sentiment is reflected in the outpouring of support for CPT following the abductions. Many Western churches, organizations and individuals have called for the four abductees' release, and so too has a flood of Muslim and Arab groups, including members of Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood. Three Arab Muslims now held without charge in Toronto under Canadian security measures issued a statement urging that the kidnappers "not let these kind, caring, compassionate and innocent people suffer." Al-Jazeera, the Arab news network, reported that it was "inundated" with pleas for the CPT workers' release.

"Parts of these groups are the ones accused of being suicide bombers, being part of the resistance in Iraq," Kindy said. "Would that Christian groups in this country stood up for nonviolent peacemaking as much as those radical Muslim groups have done in the past weeks."

CPT was one of the sources for Seymour Hersh's 2004 article in the *New Yorker* that helped expose the abuses at Abu Ghraib. In a recent interview with the radio program *Democracy Now!* Hersh called CPT a "cutting edge" organization. "These are people toiling, really for the good of Iraq, the Iraqi people, and often in . . . obscurity in terms of the mainstream media."

Not all attention has been glowing. On his radio broadcast three days after the abductions, Rush Limbaugh said, "I don't care if they're Christian or not. . . . Anytime

a bunch of people that walk around with the head in the sand practicing a bunch of irresponsible, idiotic theory confront reality, I'm kind of happy about that," he said. Syndicated columnist Cal Thomas echoed that sentiment: "I hope it exposes the naïveté of people who think evil can be accommodated. In fact, it must be eradicated."

Such indictments are embraced by CPT. "I would ask . . . if the disciples were naive do-gooders," Obed-Naar said. "Was Jesus a naive do-gooder? I'd be happy to fall into that category."