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## LIFTING OUR VOICES

From their protest against slavery in 1688 to their presence at a rally for international debt relief this spring, Mennonites have raised their voices against injustices in this country.

This issue highlights the creative advocacy of several Mennonite congregations on issues ranging from the death penalty to the sanctions against Iraq. We hope their stories serve as a creative spark for your own congregation and community, and look forward to hearing about your efforts.

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## Cooking Rice

BY CHRISTINA LEAÑO

In the basement of Oak Park Mennonite Church in Chicago, pictures of people from around the former U.S. military bases in the Philippines flashed up on the wall. Twenty members had gathered at the weekly church fellowship meeting to hear stories of how the U.S. military presence in Clark and Subic had changed the lives of hundreds of Filipinos forever.

Through slides and taped messages, the fellowship listened to the stories of Elvira Taruc who is convinced her son's sickness is related to the oily water they used to drink. And Nerissa Agustin, who revealed her fear about getting pregnant again, knowing her backyard was poisoned with fuels, solvents, and other contaminants.

The slide presentation at Oak Park was part of a country-wide tour which Amelia Toledo and I embarked on after volunteering with a Philippine organization dedicated to cleaning up the former bases. After living with people whose lives were harmed by U.S. policy, we knew we were called to go back to the United States to share these struggles, and see how we could help take responsibility.

After the presentation, we invited the audience to participate in a nationwide call-in to the U.S. State Department on April Fool's Day. The objective was to say to the U.S. government: "Toxic waste is no joke. What are you doing about the environmental contamination that the U.S. military left in the Philippines?"

On April 1, the fellowship at Oak Park joined others across the country in barraging the State Department with faxes and phone calls asking why nothing had been done about this tragedy. Unfortunately, the U.S. government did not decide to provide the approximate \$2 billion it would cost to clean up the bases. Nonetheless, serious public concern was demonstrated, laying the foundation for an ongoing campaign. Only persistent efforts from voting constituents will convince legislators that they want tax dollars spent on a problem thousands of miles away.

"It is like cooking rice," a priest from around Subic said. "You have to keep the heat on. Not too hot or too quickly or it will burn. But slow and constant. Eventually, your time will come, and the rice will be cooked."

These small efforts are the sparks to light the fire to change U.S. policy. In time, we hope we can eat the rice and enjoy our meal. And the Filipino people will be freed from the environmental disaster that affects them now. ■

*The Filipino/American Coalition for Environmental Solutions (FACES) has launched a card campaign to further encourage the U.S. government to address this issue. For more information on this campaign and other efforts to clean up the bases in the Philippines, please contact FACES, c/o the MCC Washington Office, or see [www.bknet.org/faces](http://www.bknet.org/faces).*

BY J. DARYL BYLER

**Germantown Mennonites were the first group to publicly protest the practice of slavery in the United States.**

## The Not-So-Quiet in the Land

Mennonites have often been called “the Quiet in the Land”—*die Stillen im Lande*. But that is not the complete picture. From their earliest days in the United States, some Mennonites have raised their voices when critical peace and justice issues were at stake.

In *The Tree of Liberty*, Nicholas N. Kittrie and Eldon D. Wedlock, Jr. write that in 1688, Germantown Mennonites were the first group to publicly protest slavery in the United States, arguing that it is “inhuman and contrary to Christian principles.”

William Penn’s colony was founded as a haven for oppressed Quakers. Indeed, Pennsylvania was broadly perceived as a place tolerant of ethnic and religious diversity. And yet the Pennsylvania law required that slaves submit to their masters.

Germantown Mennonites made the moral case for breaking this law in defense of one’s freedom. In a letter drafted to Quaker leaders, they stated six reasons why they opposed slavery—or traffic of men-body, as they called it then. Their reasons were as sophisticated as they were simple:

**The Golden Rule.** “Would any of us want to be treated this way,” they asked, “to be sold or made a slave for all the time of his life?” They argued that the biblical admonition to do unto others as we would want them to do to us should apply to all, regardless of age, descent or color.

**Moral equivalence.** Early Mennonites asserted that there is no difference between those who steal or rob people, and those who buy or purchase people. Morally, both behaviors are equally repugnant.

**All oppression is wrong.** The Germantown Mennonites observed that Pennsylvania is rightly a place for liberty of conscience, but said it should also be a place for liberty of the body. They noted that in Europe many are oppressed for conscience-sake, but in Pennsylvania many are oppressed because they are black.

**Marital fidelity.** The Mennonites asserted that our faith calls us not to commit adultery. But with slavery, they contended, “some commit adultery in others, separating wives from their husbands, and giving them to others.”

**A poor public witness.** They argued that it would harm the reputation of Quakers and keep others from coming to the new colony. It will be a poor witness in Europe when folks hear that “the Quakers do here handle men as they handle there the cattle.”

**An appeal to nonviolence.** With this argument, the Mennonites appealed to a core Quaker belief. The use of force will be necessary to maintain slavery, challenged the Mennonite leaders. If the slaves revolt, will you “take the sword at hand and war against the slaves?”

This early public witness stands as a reminder that clear, persistent and biblically-rooted advocacy does make a difference. Quakers became leaders in the movement to abolish slavery, perhaps in large part due to the persuasive voice of their Mennonite friends.

This issue of the *Washington Memo* highlights the inspiring range of issues that Mennonites are addressing today. Like their Pennsylvania forebears, churches continue to root their witness in the biblical themes of justice and nonviolent peacemaking.

Paul admonished the early church to “aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands . . .” (I Thessalonians 4:11). But living quietly does not mean silently ignoring injustice.

Perhaps Mennonites will never be the loud in the land. But we will do well to continue to find a clear and bold voice at the right times. ■

WASHINGTON MEMO is written by Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office staff. It interprets national legislation and policy, seeking to reflect biblical concerns for justice and peace as represented in the work and statements of MCC U.S. and Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

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To contact the MCC U.S. Washington Office, please see our address on the back page. See our weekly commentary at [www.thirdway.com](http://www.thirdway.com)

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# Responding To The Death Penalty: Witness and Action

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For years, Homer Nissley, a retired teacher, announced state executions to his congregation, Kern Road Mennonite Church in South Bend, Indiana. Church members finally received a call to action through last year's capital trial of a teenager accused of murdering a police officer. During the trial, Nissley sat on the defense side of the courtroom and was joined by Darrin Belousek and six or seven others from his church. This prayerful presence led to a front page story in the local newspaper.

During the penalty phase, some congregants gave leadership to a series of prayer vigils outside the courthouse. More than 100 people—half black, half white—gathered five times. The jury and judge decided against the death penalty.

"This was an important witness," says Andre Gingerich Stoner, a pastor at Kern Road. "In past years, when there was a capital case locally, there was no public opposition. The silence has been broken. Linking hands across the racial divide was an important part of the witness."

As an outgrowth of activism on the capital trial, Belousek and others organized the St. Joseph-Elkhart County Religious Coalition Against the Death Penalty last year. The coalition is composed primarily of Mennonites and Catholics and is seeking to expand the participation of African Americans.

The strong convictions of members of his congregation as well as the clear position of the larger Mennonite community encouraged Stoner and others to give leadership on this issue.

Another public witness was praying at the site of a murder. Some 35 to 45 people have met at such vigils, including some public officials. These prayer gatherings create a significant opportunity to grieve with and support family members of murder victims. Family members often participate in the vigils.

"Praying at the site of evil is different from praying within the safety of church walls. There is often a great deal of fear at a murder site," says Stoner. "When we gather to pray we confront the fear in ourselves and in the community. We ask God to cleanse that place and to empower us to be peace-makers. This kind of prayer involves engaging powers of violence in our society." ■

*Pending federal death penalty legislation includes the National Death Penalty Moratorium Act of 2000 (S. 2463) which calls for a national commission to thoroughly examine the use of capital punishment while temporarily halting executions.*

*For more information, see: Death Penalty Information Center ([www.essential.org/dpic](http://www.essential.org/dpic)) and National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty ([www.ncadp.org](http://www.ncadp.org)).*

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

**"Praying at the site of evil is different from praying within the safety of church walls."**

## CAPITAL QUOTES

*"Just because we dropped the stuff doesn't mean we're going to go in there and clean it up. The cleanup of ordnance is the responsibility of the people who caused the conflict."*

—a Pentagon official discussing the problem of deadly unexploded ordnance covering Laos that is left over from the Vietnam War. In fact, the United States has provided millions of dollars of funding for ordnance cleanup in Laos.

*"A cannon is not the best weapon to shoot at flies."*

—Dmitri Rogozin, chair of the International Relations Committee in the Russian Duma, claiming that plans for a U.S. missile defense system exaggerate the threat of an attack.

*"The Senate advances the love of country that is patriotism when it struggles to deliver justice. The Senate serves the people not when it avoids difficult issues, but when it acts with courage to address them fully."*

—Senator Russell Feingold (D-Wisc.) from the floor of the Senate, May 18,

# Solidarity Fast Calls for End to Sanctions

BY LORA JOST

Lora Jost is a member of the Peace and Justice Committee at Peace Mennonite Church in Lawrence, Kansas.

**We invited individuals to choose a day to fast as an act of solidarity with the people of Iraq.**

The Peace and Justice Committee of Peace Mennonite Church (Lawrence, Kan.) this spring invited our congregation, area churches and the broader Lawrence community to participate in a month-long project calling for an end to the U.S.-led economic sanctions against Iraq.

This project, dubbed the "Solidarity Fast," sought to combine both spiritual reflection and social action in a project that would ultimately raise community awareness about the economic sanctions that are devastating the people of Iraq.

We invited individuals to choose a day between April 9 and May 6 to fast as an act of solidarity with the people of Iraq who are chronically short of food due to the sanctions. We also encouraged participants to write congressional representatives, calling for an end to the sanctions.

A special worship service at Peace Mennonite helped explain the project to the congregation. The service included a related sermon, children's story and Lenten reading. Peace and Justice Committee members promised to call participants on their designated fasting day to offer support.

We mailed 30 information packets to area churches to invite participation in the project and sent a press release to local media. We were very pleased when our local paper included an extensive article about the project in the religion section.

In the end, 38 individuals agreed to fast, 22 of them from our local congregation.

Our committee sent a one-page information flier to each participant, explaining project

details. For example, the flier included this note on fasting: "The Bible teaches that fasting is a way to add emphasis to private prayers. Fasting brings urgency, priority, resolution, tenacity, gravity, importance and seriousness to our praying; it requires us to focus on God and/or the purpose of our fast. Pray for mercy for those who suffer under the sanctions. Pray for the leaders of our nations that they may peacefully resolve conflicts."

By the end of the project it had become clear that many participants integrated these ideas about fasting into their experience.

The flier also included information about the sanctions and specific suggestions for sending an anti-sanctions message to congressional representatives, along with names and addresses of elected officials.

The project concluded with a simple fellowship meal at the end of the period of fasting. The Peace and Justice Committee cooked rice, beans, and cornbread for 50 as a way of thanking individuals for participating in the project, as well as to symbolically break the fast. One committee member prepared a food basket which exhibited the limited food rations that Iraqi people are provided through the United Nations' Oil for Food program.

The project was a meaningful experience for many participants. We hope it also provoked thought in our local community about the sanctions. ■

*For more information about the work of the Peace and Justice Committee at Peace Mennonite Church, write: 1204 Oread Ave., Lawrence, KS 66044; or call: 785-841-8614.*

## 500,000 FEWER DEATHS

"According to UNICEF (August 1999), if pre-1990 trends in child mortality had continued through the 1990s, there would have been 500,000 fewer deaths of children under age five in Iraq during the period from 1991 and 1998; and, further, that sanctions have been an important contributor to this crisis. Adding the 50,000 excess adult deaths each year, this amounts to a death toll of over 200 Iraqis every day."  
—from the Solidarity Fast flier

# Advocating for Gun Control

I didn't wake up to the tragedy of gun violence in this country until my brother called me from Illinois April 20, 1999, and frantically asked, "What school does Gabe go to?" My son attends school in Boulder, Colorado, and thankfully was safe from the massacre at Columbine High School.

The following week, in response to the National Rifle Association's decision to proceed with their national convention in Colorado, I joined many others from Boulder Mennonite Church and other Denver-area Mennonite churches in the Silent March at the state capitol. Along with deep sadness, I was outraged at all I learned there and vowed to get involved.

I joined several gun control groups and attended legislative hearings on proposed gun laws. However, the NRA and other pro-gun groups contributed over \$16,000 to Colorado lawmakers in just one month during this current session. As a result, only bills supported by the gun lobby were made into law. We are currently working to get an issue on the November ballot that didn't even make it out of committee this session—the requirement of background checks at gun shows.

In May, I attended the Million Mom March in Washington, D.C. It was a fantastic experience. The day began with an inter-faith service. The message from all of the celebrants was the same: God does not condone this violence, but is the source of our

healing. Hearing of the painful losses experienced by many of the mothers there was moving for all of us. I heard more evidence that tragedies continue largely because of the millions of dollars that pro-gun groups contribute to election campaigns.

Many speakers made the point that "guns are not more important than our children." A rabbi made the case that an excessive love for guns amounts to idolatry. There was also joy in seeing the numbers of people who feel so strongly about the issue of gun violence that they were willing to spend Mother's Day at rallies in Washington and other cities around the country.

Over the past year members of the Boulder Mennonite Church have written letters, called their legislators and attended a protest where NRA president Charlton Heston was speaking. They also donated a mountain of shoes which were displayed at the state capitol to symbolize the number of children killed by gun violence in this country—more than 4,000 each year.

Recently, some members of the congregation with Christian Peacemaker Team experience helped train Million Mom March participants in nonviolent responses to confrontation. We are working to educate ourselves about where our state legislators stand concerning gun legislation, and in November we will vote for those whose beliefs are in alignment with our peace mission. And, of course, gun control groups need contributions of money and time to counter the NRA's vast resources. ■

BY KATHY SMALL

Kathy Small is a member of Boulder Mennonite Church. She was one of 44 "moms" who attended a post-march multi-denominational breakfast briefing and visited members of Congress.

The message from all of the celebrants at the Million Mom March was the same: God does not condone this violence, but is the source of our healing.

## Pontius' Puddle



# Pilgrims' Spirit-Filled Social Action

BY FRED YOCUM

Fred Yocum, who serves with MCC in Akron, Pa. as a graphic designer, is a regular attendee of Pilgrims Mennonite Church.

The three-hour journey to Washington became a time of worship and preparation.

The seeds of Pilgrims Mennonite Church's participation in the National Mobilization for Debt Cancellation were sown in a Jubilee worship service held on the first Sunday of 2000. It was a time of prayer for nations whose debts should be forgiven. Many also signed a petition regarding the debt addressed to the U.S. government. When the congregation discovered that Jubilee 2000 was organizing an event for April, members decided it was important to go to Washington, D.C. to join in a more public witness.

Rather than go in separate cars, we decided instead to hire a bus. If this was to be a group activity, traveling together was an important part. We sold tickets for the bus rather than rely on verbal commitments. Pilgrims is a relatively small church and hiring a bus was a big financial risk. Still, by April 1, we had filled all 84 seats on two buses.

A core of three people undertook most of the organizing, promotion and ticket sales, but other members were also involved. Worship planners facilitated the worship. Sunday School teachers prepared lessons for the children of the church. The debt rally in Washington appeared as a regular item in the church's prayer life. When the actual day arrived and the East Coast was enjoying snow and cold winds, most people still opted to go to Washington instead of staying cozily at home.

The three-hour journey to Washington became a time of worship and preparation. It was punctuated by prayer for the specific debt-ridden countries, singing and making paper chains which grew to extraordinary lengths in the confines of the bus. Once in Washington, the group dispersed somewhat, but came together for the human chain around the Capitol. The weather was uncommonly cold and windy, but this did not seem to put people off. When we arrived back in the evening, staggering off the buses with remnants of lunches, banners and chains, no one voiced regrets—only satisfaction.

Though it is important for churches to be circumspect in deciding which grassroots actions to be involved in, I was struck by the wholeness this kind of witness can bring. Often within Christian circles there is a suspicion that if you add "social action" you have to give something up, most likely something more "spiritual." What I have seen is that often when churches include corporate social action in their life, it becomes an opportunity for more of everything else. The events become times of Christian sharing, building relationships, worshiping and witness—both social and evangelical. It is also one of the few opportunities for true inter-generational activity, with youth and adults, parents and siblings participating together in ways that normally do not happen. ■

## CURRENT STATUS OF DEBT RELIEF

In order to meet U.S. obligations under the existing international debt relief plan, Congress must appropriate \$810 million, at least \$435 million of it this year. So far, the Senate Appropriations Committee has only agreed to provide \$75 million. In addition, Banking Committee Chairman Phil Gramm (R-TX), is attempting to delay funding for debt relief until the International Monetary Fund is "reformed" to require more stringent "free market/free trade" conditions on borrowing countries. Although inadequate and flawed, if fully funded, the current debt relief plan can provide significant debt cancellation for up to thirty-three countries. The MCC Washington Office asks that constituents write letters to their members of Congress supporting \$810 million for debt cancellation without delay.

# One Voice Among 1200

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Some unusual wallpaper graced the walls of a Congressional reception this spring. The names of more than 1200 local, state and national organizations that have endorsed the Hunger Relief Act were printed on giant sheets of paper, so that each member of Congress could see firsthand the support of groups from their district and state. One of those names was Proyecto Hispano, a project begun by an Hispanic Mennonite congregation in Goshen, Indiana.

Three years ago, the members of Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor were searching for ways to build connections with the growing Hispanic population around them, as well as increase ties with non-Hispanic Mennonite churches in the area. They designated three coordinators for Proyecto Hispano, including Ron Collins, who also co-pastors the congregation.

As part of his work, Collins monitors a variety of public policy issues through e-mail list-serves. Many of the bills relate to immigration issues. About once a month he sends out information to interested congregations describing different pieces of legislation and calling for action on them. Currently around ten Mennonite congregations in the Goshen area receive information regularly from Collins.

One of the bills Collins chose to highlight was the Hunger Relief Act (H.R. 3192, S. 1805). The bill has four parts. It would:

- restore food stamp benefits to all legal immigrants. These benefits were cut off in 1996 and have only been partially restored.
- allow states to set a more reasonable allowance for a low-income family's car. Currently, if a family owns a car worth more than \$4,650, they are ineligible for food stamps. This causes particular difficulties for families in rural areas, where public transportation is poor or non-existent.

- raise the amount that households can pay for rent and still receive food stamps. Because of the current low limit, families in urban areas where housing costs are high often do not qualify for an adequate level of food stamp benefits.
- increase funding for a program that provides food to emergency providers. Food banks are consistently reporting increased demand for emergency food across the country, despite the economic boom.

Many of these provisions, if passed, would benefit families living in the Goshen area, which has a high immigrant population and minimal public transportation.

Members of Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor have also been involved in local advocacy. Collins sometimes accompanies immigrants to court hearings. In addition, congregation members attended demonstrations in front of the courthouse after several Immigration and Naturalization Service raids on local factories. Local TV stations and newspapers covered the demonstrations and the raids, and many people wrote letters to the editor. Eventually the raids stopped.

Advocacy, of course, does not always result in such immediate changes. The Hunger Relief Act, for example, was introduced last year and is in the long, slow process of gaining co-sponsors in both the House and Senate. But by joining their voice with 1199 other groups, Proyecto Hispano is part of a grassroots movement that an increasing number of Congressional representatives are finding hard to ignore. ■

BY RACHELLE SCHLABACH

**Proyecto Hispano is part of a grassroots movement that an increasing number of Congressional representatives are finding hard to ignore.**

# SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
MOUNTAINTOP REMOVAL STRIP MINING	A form of strip mining, which literally takes the tops off of mountains, is opposed by many Appalachian residents because of its social and environmental consequences. Last year, a court ruled that the practice was in violation of several environmental laws. Soon afterward, Senator Byrd (D-WV) led an unsuccessful effort to overturn the court ruling. Senator Byrd has promised to try again this year.	Let your senators know that you oppose efforts by Senator Byrd to overturn the West Virginia court ruling on mountaintop removal strip mining, and that you wish to see current laws upheld which protect mountains and streams.
SHARED JERUSALEM	The status of Jerusalem is one of the most contentious issues in the Middle East peace talks. Both Israelis and Palestinians want Jerusalem to be their capital. Some are making exclusive claims to this ancient city which is sacred for Jews, Christians and Muslims.	Urge your representatives to support a shared Jerusalem as a sign of peace and symbol of reconciliation for two peoples (Israelis and Palestinians) and three faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). For a free "Shared Jerusalem" poster and education packet, contact the MCC Washington Office.

## USEFUL ADDRESSES



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