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## PEOPLE OF GOD'S PEACE

*Blessed are the peacemakers*

### Prophets in the Pews

BY RACHELLE SCHLABACH

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God* (Matthew 5:9).

Late on the evening of July 4, a group of people attending the Mennonite Church USA assembly in Nashville gathered to hear the stories of congregations involved in advocacy. On this holiday, a different sort of dedication was celebrated by a people who have historically affirmed our allegiance to God over any political entity.

This issue contains some of the stories shared that evening. Tonya Ramer Wenger, pastor of Madison (Wis.) Mennonite Church, tells of her congregation's advocacy related to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. André Gingrich Stoner relates the story of Kern Road Mennonite Church's ongoing public witness against the death penalty. Kern Road, located in South Bend, Ind., recently received the first annual MCC U.S. Washington Office Congregational Advocacy Award for its efforts.

Also in this issue, we hear stories from several generations of peacemakers in the church. Seniors For Peace, started in Goshen, Ind., works on issues ranging from gun violence to global economics. And we highlight essay excerpts from three up-and-coming peacemakers—winners in our annual high school essay contest.

These stories are only a few of the examples of witness to government by Anabaptists. At the core of the MCC U.S. Washington Office's work are the people of faith who respond to our requests by writing legislators, planning vigils and speaking in churches about public policy concerns. These dedicated peacemakers in the pews are compelled by their faith commitment to speak boldly against injustice.

Such work is humbling, full of reminders that deeply ingrained and powerful systems resist change. It is work that requires patience and faithfulness, with the belief that our united prayers and efforts will one day bear fruit, even when there are no visible results yet.

James reminds us that "peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (3:18). And in the Beatitudes, Jesus promises that peacemakers will be called children of God. May these assurances, and the examples of the stories told within, inspire us all to work for peace. ■

**Peacemaking is humbling, full of reminders that deeply ingrained and powerful systems resist change.**

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

**In the midst of a culture of dominance, peacemakers dare to offer a fresh and alternative vision.**

## Peacemaking: The Distinguishing Mark of God's Children

In the pew in front of me at a recent worship service, a sleeping newborn nestled his head against his father's neck and shoulder. It was a powerful image of peace—security rooted in the love, care and sacrifice of parent for child. The infant's face revealed not a hint of fear, anxiety or need.

Sadly, this picture of peace is a far cry from the fiction that undergirds official Washington's view of the world—peace through dominance. It is a view that says U.S. peace and security are dependent on having overwhelming power to threaten and destroy those who frighten us—not on our ability to care for and seek one another's well-being. Peace through dominance is an old, tired and failed vision.

Rev. Naim Ateek, director of the Sabeel Center in Jerusalem, tells this story about the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The leaders of the victorious states—including U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, Prime Minister Lloyd George of Great Britain and Premier Georges Clemenceau of France—were gathered together. Clemenceau confronted the other leaders saying, "Gentlemen, I hear you talking about your wish to have a permanent peace in the world. Do you want a peace that will end all wars?"

All of them nodded their heads that, of course, they did. Clemenceau began to list the cost of peace. "If we want peace, we must give up our empires," he said. "You,

Mr. Lloyd George, you have to give up India. We French will have to come out of North Africa. You Americans, Mr. President, will have to relinquish your dollar rights in the Philippines, Mexico and Cuba. We the dominant powers will have to give up our empires, tear down our tariff walls, free our colonies and open up the world."

The heads of state looked at each other and quickly informed him that this was not exactly what they had in mind. Then Clemenceau sat up straight, banged his fist on the table, and said, "Then you don't mean peace, you want war."

Jesus offered a new paradigm for peacemaking. It is a vision rooted in servanthood, not superiority; mutual concern, not dominance. Like Jesus, true peacemakers create the space for peace by breaking down walls of division and mistrust (Ephesians 2:14). They consider the needs of others, not simply their own (Philippians 2:1–11). They are willing to absorb hostility, but not return it (Luke 6:27–31; I Peter 2:19–25).

It is a costly, risk-taking vision of peacemaking. Not surprisingly, this vision is a hard sell in a society that has largely entrusted its peace and security to cruise missiles, stealth bombers and nuclear warheads.

Peacemakers—like those highlighted on the pages of this *Washington Memo*—are extraordinary folks. In the midst of a culture of dominance, they dare to offer a fresh and alternative vision of that which makes for peace. They exhibit faith, courage and persistence in the face of false securities, opposition and seemingly impossible odds.

This kind of peacemaking is so central to God's character that Jesus calls it the distinguishing mark of God's children. Indeed, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9). ■

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# The Death Penalty: A Church's Growing Response

For years, before nearly every execution in Indiana, Homer Nissley has stood up during sharing time at Kern Road Mennonite Church and reminded us that once more the state was planning to take a life in our name. This helped raise our awareness and prepared us for public witness.

In 1999, for the first time in years, a capital case was brought before a St. Joseph County jury. An all-white jury was deciding the fate of a black 16-year-old charged with murdering a policeman. Five church members were a prayerful presence in the courtroom throughout the trial. One of them, Darrin Belousek, had the opportunity to share his faith and opposition to the death penalty in a front-page interview in the *South Bend Tribune*.

When the jury came to a guilty verdict and moved into the penalty phase, we held prayer vigils outside the courthouse. Friends and fellow pastors spread the word. We were overwhelmed when more than one hundred people, black and white, participated in four gatherings of public prayer. It was a powerful witness. The jury and the judge decided against the death penalty.

This experience inspired us to organize the St. Joseph-Elkhart County Religious Coalition Against the Death Penalty. The coalition has circulated petitions, organized letter-writing campaigns, held a press conference with religious leaders and continues to conduct local prayer vigils whenever an execution is scheduled in Indiana. There have been numerous opportunities in the secular and religious media to speak on this issue.

Sometimes our efforts seem insignificant and our energy lags. Yet we know that the relationship between what we do and what we hope for is not one of cause and effect, but one of cross and resurrection. When we are discouraged or feel we fail, we remember that a creative, untamed and unpredictable God who makes a way out of no way is still at work. It is in this God we trust.

We are gratified to be reminded that the witness of speaking truth to power is in a long tradition—from Moses and Esther to Jesus and the apostles. We are thankful for all the friends and partners God sends on this journey, and are confident that through God's power at work within us, God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. ■

BY ANDRÉ GINGERICH STONER

André Gingerich Stoner is a pastor at Kern Road Mennonite Church in South Bend, Ind. Kern Road received the first annual MCC U.S. Washington Office Congregational Advocacy Award in February.

*We are seeking nominations for next year's Advocacy Award. If you would like to nominate a congregation, contact your regional MCC office.*

## CAPITAL QUOTES

*"The state must not claim the right to take human life away, which belongs only to the Almighty."*

—Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking against capital punishment earlier this year.

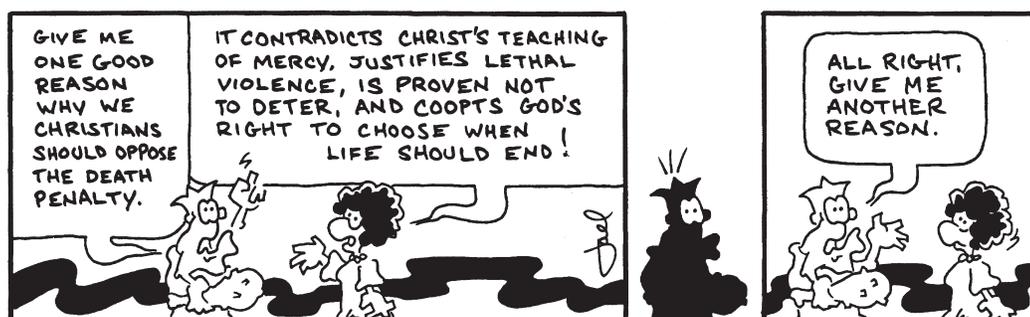
*"If statistics are any indication, the system may well be allowing some innocent defendants to be executed."*

—U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, July 2001.

*"You say the scientific evidence isn't strong enough to go forward with [the] Kyoto [climate change treaty]. So how then do you justify your missile defense plan when there is even less scientific evidence that that will work?"*

—Reporter questioning President Bush at a news conference in June 2001.

## Pontius' Puddle



BY ZACHARY KURTZ

This article is excerpted and condensed from Zachary Kurtz's first-place entry in our annual high school essay contest. Zachary is from Keyser, West Virginia.

*If you would like the full text of the three prize-winning essays, please send us a self-addressed stamped envelope with \$1.03 postage.*

**It is when resisters suffer the greatest hardship that the peace witness carries the most integrity.**

## Our Inconsistent Stand for Peace

Menonites and other peace church members have refused to participate in war because of Jesus' command to love our enemies. Possibly because of the suffering and sincerity of this pacifist minority, legislation was passed in 1940 that made it much easier for conscientious objectors during World War II.

At the same time, Americans saw a dramatic increase in federal income tax and military spending. Since then, more and more pacifists have been searching for ways to redirect their tax money from the military toward humanitarian efforts.

Many pacifists send letters to government officials, pleading that military spending be decreased. Others contribute to the National Campaign for a Peace Tax Fund, hoping that laws will be enacted enabling them to place the military portion of their taxes in an alternative fund. Finally, an estimated ten to twenty thousand people refuse to pay the military percentage of their federal income taxes.

For war tax resisters, paying military taxes is inconsistent with refusing to participate in the military as soldiers. According to conscientious objector and war tax resister Peter Dyck, "Today the government does not want us, it wants our money, but it's all for the same purpose."

While resisters today usually do not lose their jobs or face prison, most receive fines and a few have had liens placed on their homes. It is when resisters suffer the greatest hardship that the peace witness carries the most integrity.

Resisters try to communicate their reasons to as many workers in the system as possible. Often they enclose letters with tax returns and send letters to lawmakers. As resisters' civil disobedience becomes known locally, they have an opportunity to witness for peace and for their faith in Jesus.

Withholding war taxes is not only an expression of one's values, but a necessary ingredient for change. What reason has the government to pass legislation for a Peace Tax Fund as long as the vast majority of this bill's supporters continue to voluntarily comply with the tax code?

Much of the scorn for war tax resistance stems from popular interpretations of some ambiguous Bible passages, especially Jesus' command to "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's . . ." It is unreasonable to immediately take this passage as a command to pay taxes because it was a crafty answer to a question designed to trap Jesus. Moreover, in the next breath, Jesus says, ". . . and to God the things that are God's." An MCC poster displays the words of John Stoner, noting "We are tax resisters because we have discovered some doubt as to what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, and have decided to give the benefit of the doubt to God."

We know that the will of God is to love our neighbors, regardless of their nationality. Peace churches have typically distinguished themselves for resources they put into helping the poor. Nevertheless, Menonites reportedly spend \$9 on military taxes for every \$5 they donate to charitable causes. Our fear of the consequences must stop keeping us from taking an honest look at what we say to the world every time we voluntarily contribute to the most destructive military force on earth. ■

### HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY CONTEST

Attention high school students: Win a cash prize and get your essay reprinted in the *Washington Memo* next year! Choose from the following topics: national missile defense, prisons, global warming and domestic poverty. The deadline for entries is November 2001. Contact the Washington Office (address on back page) for more information.

# The Death Penalty: A Justified Solution to Crime?

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**WINNING  
HIGH SCHOOL ESSAYS**

**BY DAVID STUCKY**

David's essay, excerpted here, won second prize in our high school essay contest. He is from Moundridge, Kansas.

**We preach to criminals that it is wrong to kill, but we kill them if they violate this principle.**

Capital punishment is an inhumane procedure that should be abolished.

Scientific studies have consistently failed to find convincing evidence that the death penalty deters crime more effectively than other punishments. . . . For instance, Texas ranked first in the nation in executions [in 2000]. However the crime rate in Texas has not significantly decreased.

The death penalty is far more costly than life incarceration. [Furthermore] if we change our current focus on the death penalty to spending money on crime prevention programs, our nation would be much better off.

Many people are wrongly convicted. A 1993 U.S. Congressional Report listed 48 condemned men freed from death row since 1972. Three hundred and fifty people

convicted of capital crimes in the United States between 1900 and 1985 were innocent [and] 23 were actually executed.

We preach to criminals that it is wrong to kill, but we kill them if they violate this principle. As a bumper sticker asks, "Why do we kill people who kill people—just to prove that killing people is wrong?"

Man cannot replace God as jury, judge and executioner. . . . Jesus shows [in the story of the woman caught in adultery] that we all sin, and it is not humanity's job to decide which sins are punishable by death.

Many countries have abolished the death penalty. . . . The United States, along with China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, account for 84 percent of executions worldwide. . . . It is time as a nation that we send a message to our politicians that we want to stop this appalling practice. ■

# The Ultimate Injustice

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**BY JESSE NATHAN**

These remarks are excerpted from Jesse's third-place essay. He lives in McPherson, Kansas.

Jimmy Wingo [was] an African-American arrested . . . for allegedly murdering a white man. He was prosecuted by a small-town attorney hoping to advance his political career, defended by a court-appointed lawyer who was the prosecutor's close friend, and convicted solely on circumstantial evidence. Wingo was eventually killed by the State of Louisiana without any direct evidence that he had even *met* his alleged victim, let alone been to the scene of the crime. Mr. Wingo's case represents everything that is unjust about the use of capital punishment.

Imposition of the death penalty is, as one death row inmate described it, "like lethal lottery, a game of Russian roulette." Certain factors make a person more or less likely to receive the ultimate punishment. Race is a prominent factor. If a black man is convicted of killing a white man, he is four times more likely to receive capital punishment than with reversed circumstances.

The poor are also much more likely to be targets of capital punishment. Indeed, 90 percent of those on death row cannot afford to pay for their own lawyers.

The state is a teacher and example. When it takes up vengeance through the death penalty, it sanctions vengeance by any citizen.

When Americans are given the option of choosing between the death penalty and life imprisonment without parole, only 29 percent continue to prefer the death penalty. . . . We are presented with a historical opportunity to stamp out a terrible injustice, and replace cruelty with compassion and murder with morality. ■

# Seniors For Peace

BY ETHEL UMBLE

Ethel Umble, a founding member of Seniors For Peace, lives in Goshen, Indiana.

**Seniors have more discretionary time, wisdom gleaned from many years of living and hope for a better world for their grandchildren.**

The idea for Seniors For Peace (SFP) originated in 1987 in the mind of Atlee Beechy, a Goshen professor and peace activist. Seeking to increase the body of peacemakers in the world, he thought of senior citizens. They have more discretionary time, wisdom gleaned from many years of living and hope for a better world for their grandchildren. Six members of Atlee's small group from church were interested, and SFP was launched.

Under Atlee's leadership our ad hoc committee took seriously the call to be ambassadors for Christ in the ministry of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18–20). Our work was to stimulate, deepen and increase peace witness through participation in worship, prayer, workshops, discernment and action. We were and still are constantly challenged by domestic and social violence, abortion, gun violence, military force and capital punishment.

Hoping to encourage SFP groups to start in various places, we traveled to Civilian Public Service (CPS) reunions, developed a list of "friends" to receive a newsletter, provided information at regional and national conferences, and contacted retirement homes. To those interested, we suggested simply inviting like-minded friends to discuss, perhaps over tea or coffee, the important issues in their area.

SFP groups have formed in Ontario, British Columbia and North Manchester, Indiana, in addition to our Goshen group of 40–50. In Goshen we meet monthly to hear speakers who have visited places of conflict or are

knowledgeable about local issues. We encourage each other to spend time daily in prayer and study in order to become more faithful disciples of Christ. Atlee reminded us to look inward to discover the wars in our own hearts before confronting those outside.

Letter-writing to policy makers and legislators is another important activity. For example, SFP members wrote repeatedly to the Elkhart County 4-H Fair Board requesting that there be no more gun shows on the grounds. After some time the board decided to prohibit further shows, and to this day their decision stands.

Other actions include:

- sponsoring congregational and community forums on various concerns;
- helping to sponsor community and regional peace events, such as the Indiana Journey of Hope (Murder Victims for Reconciliation) and Christian Peacemaker Teams' Tents for Lent;
- helping to plan a national conference on "Moving Toward Healing" and two regional conferences, "Global Economics and the Church" and "20-20 Vision: Anabaptist Peacemaking;"
- speaking to high school and middle school students;
- inviting CPS men and women (62 in College Mennonite Church) to write memory statements about the significance of their experiences, published in a booklet, "Detour—or Main Highway" available from College Mennonite Church;
- gathering 80+ local volunteers to assist during a Goshen College national conference on violence prevention;
- joining in vigils to oppose the death penalty at the state prison; and
- creating a web page: [www.seniorspace.mennonite.net/](http://www.seniorspace.mennonite.net/).

It is still our hope that in this time of desperate need for reconciliation and transformation persons who have a passion for peace—God's peace—will find each other and begin a "movement" in their area. Love—God's love—can overcome many of the violence-promoting practices all too common in our society. ■

## CREATIVE PEACEMAKING

### *Hymn Sing for Peace*

This April, 120 persons from six states and the District of Columbia participated in the third annual Hymn Sing for Peace. The event, organized by the First Mennonite Church of Richmond, Virginia is held each year across the street from the White House. The goal is to proclaim the message of peace among the people of God and with all people.

### *Advocacy Award Painting*

Pam Seretny, art teacher at Philadelphia Mennonite High School, created the art prize for the winner of this year's Congregational Advocacy Award. The piece, which was presented to Kern Road Mennonite Church for their anti-death penalty advocacy, "is about Christ's power through the resurrection to bring about change and transformation."

# Reclaiming the Land

Recently members of our Peace and Justice Committee attended a town hall meeting with Senator Russ Feingold. It was yet another place and forum to urge our government to recognize the illegal and violent occupation of Palestinian land by Israel.

I was struck by the similarity of the Palestinian issue to the issues raised by farmers who came to the meeting. Both involve land—living on and working the land as farmers. Our Peace and Justice Committee also is involved with another land issue—reclaiming the land of a former army ammunition plant. We are part of a group advocating to return that land to natural uses, including returning some of it to the Ho-Chuck Nation.

Our committee became involved with the Palestine/Israel issue through the Campaign for Secure Dwellings with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). Initially, we did what was minimally expected of us—communicate regularly with our partner family and send occasional letters to our government representatives.

But when the second *intifada* (uprising) began this past fall, we felt compelled to take further action. Several members of our committee made personal connections with individuals and groups in Madison that shared our concerns—Al Awada (a Palestinian right to return organization) and Jews for Equal Justice. It was then that we attended our first rally at the university—a big step for many of us “quiet” Mennonites!

By then the momentum was rolling and we organized a number of educational sessions for our congregation and planned visits to our government representatives. We organized a postcard “shower” requesting that our Peace and Justice Committee be granted a session with each of our representatives. As a result, when we called their offices to follow up, they knew who we were! We have had conversations with Rep. Tammy Baldwin, and with aides to Sena-

tors Russ Feingold and Herb Kohl. We currently send bi-weekly letters to all three of these legislators to urge them to keep our concerns in mind.

A challenge for our advocacy work has been seeking to remain well-rounded in our approach and understanding of the issue. To this end, we have begun a relationship with a Jewish Reconstructionist Community in Madison who share some of our concerns. We are in the process of drafting a letter stating our position on this issue that will be handed to groups we work with. We hope this letter will help clearly explain our stance—especially that we are interested in peacemaking and not war-making.

In March 2001, we sponsored a visit from Rich Meyer of CPT to our congregation and the wider community. In June, we cosponsored a Women in Black rally, and in July, we sponsored a talk by a member of Jews for Equal Justice who had just returned from Gaza. We also are involved with a group working on establishing a sister-city relationship between Madison and a refugee camp in Gaza.

As I write this I am very aware that one of our church members is currently acting as our eyes and ears and mouth in the Middle East as part of a CPT delegation. Another church member will be participating in the November CPT delegation. ■

BY TONYA RAMER WENGER

Tonya Ramer Wenger is the pastor of Madison (Wis.) Mennonite Church.

**We attended our first rally at the university—a big step for many of us “quiet” Mennonites!**

## NEW STAFF MEMBER

We welcome Elisabeth (Libby) Hausrath to the MCC U.S. Washington Office.

Libby previously served with MCC in the Philippines, where she lived near a former U.S. military base, working with a local organization and advocating for clean up of the toxic wastes left behind by the U.S. military. She will continue this work in her capacity as advocacy director for the Filipino/American Coalition for Environmental Solutions (FACES), as well as monitoring other issues for the Washington Office.

Libby grew up in Boise, Idaho and graduated from Brown University in 2000 before beginning her work with MCC. She is a member of Hyde Park Mennonite Church in Boise.

# SOUND THE TRUMPET!

ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
FEDERAL MINIMUM WAGE	Congress will likely soon begin discussion on raising the federal minimum wage, which has been \$5.15 since 1997. The Fair Minimum Wage Act (S. 964, H.R. 665) would raise the wage to \$6.65 by January 2003. Minimum wage legislation has often become a vehicle for corporate tax breaks, as well as an opportunity to weaken overtime laws and other labor protections.	Ask your member of Congress to support raising the minimum wage a full \$1.50 by 2003 <i>without conditioning it on excessive tax cuts or repeal of existing labor protections.</i>
MILITARY ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY ACT	Rep. Filner (D-CA) has introduced the Military Environmental Responsibility Act (H.R. 2154), which would require the U.S. military to fully comply with federal and state environmental laws. Currently the military, one of the nation's largest polluters, is exempt from many such laws, putting public health and the environment at risk.	The bill needs many more co-sponsors in order to move within the House. Ask your representative to co-sponsor H.R. 2154. For the full text of the bill and a list of co-sponsors, go to <a href="http://thomas.loc.gov">http://thomas.loc.gov</a> and type in the bill's number.

## USEFUL ADDRESSES



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