

- A publication of Mennonite Central Committee
- May–June 2003
- Volume XXXV
- No. 3



FOOT WASHING

Leading by Example

True Power

BY RACHELLE SCHLABACH

When we relate to one another as servants and not masters, the other is lifted up instead of being brought down.

This issue is the third in our series looking at church practices and their meaning for public policy. The focus this time is on foot washing—a sign of humility and servanthood.

John tells the story of how Jesus “got up from the table, took off his outer robe and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet” (John 13:4–5).

The commentary section of *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* points out that usually people washed their own feet. “No one would have expected Jesus, the master, to wash his disciples’ feet.”

Jesus thereby sets the example for how someone in power, as Master and Teacher, should act. No one expects a person in power to lower himself and act with humility.

And yet, that is precisely what we as followers of Christ are called to do. When believers do so, they “acknowledge their frequent need of cleansing, renew their willingness to let go of pride and worldly power, and offer their lives in humble service and sacrificial love” (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*).

When we relate to one another as servants and not masters, the other is lifted up instead of being brought down. We recognize our own failures, instead of seeing the failures of others. And we give up false power given to us by the world, in favor of the true power that comes through the Holy Spirit.

Congregations tap into this true power when members wash one another’s feet—both literally and through acts of service. Jubilee Mennonite Church provides an inspiring example of this (see page 7).

In this issue we begin to imagine what might happen if the U.S. government tapped into that true power—leading humbly and creatively. Sufferers of HIV/AIDS around the world and those in our own country who lack health care would get the care that they need. The federal government would follow through on decades-old promises to Native Americans. And the voices of the people of Sudan longing for peace would be heeded by those in positions of power.

On the day the United States began bombing Iraq, Senator Byrd (D-W. Va.) asked, “Why can this President not seem to see that America’s true power lies not in its will to intimidate, but in its ability to inspire?” Let us call on our government officials to lead as servants, not masters. ■

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

The way of service and sacrifice is an especially “hard sell” for Christians living in a nation that entrusts its security to a \$400 billion military budget.

Secure Enough to Serve

The United States would not be going to war with Iraq if it weren't for Sept. 11,” the White House official told me the week before Gulf War II began. Indeed, the U.S.-led war with Iraq is driven by a sweeping range of political, security and economic fears.

The Bush administration feels blamed for not preventing the Sept. 11 attacks and fears the political costs of failing to act preemptively to prevent future attacks. The president also fears that the Iraqi government poses a significant threat to U.S. security and economic interests.

Fear is a powerful motivator. “At the root of all war is fear,” Thomas Merton once wrote, “not so much the fear people have of one another as the fear they have of everything.”

Sadly, this pervasive sense of fear has prompted the United States to declare war against Iraq even in the face of overwhelming opposition from other countries. As the world's dominant power—U.S. military spending now accounts for half of the global total—the United States has the capacity to ignore the counsel of others and act almost alone in the world.

But isn't this preeminent power what makes the United States secure? Isn't it the U.S. ability to instill fear and respect—“shock and awe”—that keeps others in their place?

Jesus taught precisely the opposite with his powerful example of humbly washing his disciples' feet. Security is rooted in serving one another and considering their well-being. But this requires vulnerability and risk. If we serve others won't they take advantage of our kindness?

What made Jesus secure enough to serve? John offers this insight: “Jesus, *knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God*, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself” (John 13:3–4). Jesus was not riddled by fears. Instead, his sense of mission and identity were firmly rooted in a trusting relationship with God and with God's purposes for the world.

Bread, wine and washing of feet. These are the signs and symbols Jesus introduced to point to the way of the cross. This way of service and sacrifice is utter foolishness to the world. It is an especially “hard sell” for Christians living in a nation that entrusts its security to a \$400 billion military budget. But the way of the cross is the “power of God” to all who would find the true meaning of security and salvation (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Thankfully, the regular practice of foot washing reminds us to live daily lives of service. And it offers a hopeful alternative to a fear-filled superpower nation. Ironically, long-term U.S. security and survival may depend far more on learning how to cooperate with and serve others rather than to ignore and dominate them.

Richard Gillard captures the capacity of mutual service to address our deepest fears in this beautiful hymn: “Will you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you? Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too. I will hold the Christ-light for you in the nighttime of your fear. I will hold my hand out to you, speak the peace you long to hear.” ■

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 and visit our web site at www.mcc.org/us/washington.

Washington Memo (USPS 130-310) is published bi-monthly by Mennonite Central Committee, Akron, PA. Periodical postage paid at Akron, PA. This issue went to press April 15, 2003.

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE: Washington Memo subscription rates are \$10 for one year; \$18 for two years. Send request and check to MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501-0500. For address changes, send your old address with your new address to MCC. Allow 2–4 weeks for address change. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MCC, PO Box 500, Akron, PA 17501.

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Today's Lepers, Tomorrow's Hope

BY MARTIN SHUPACK

During a siege of Samaria described in 2 Kings, four lepers banished outside the gate became the hope of their community and the bearers of the good news that the attackers have fled. AIDS sufferers are sometimes described as the lepers of today. People who are HIV-positive are figuratively cast “outside the gate,” being stigmatized and shunned in communities throughout the world.

AIDS sufferers may be treated like lepers, but they are also people of faith, women (one-half of those infected), mothers, children, breadwinners, farmers, school teachers, health care workers and government officials. Like the lepers in 2 Kings, they represent the hope of their countries' future. Addressing their needs—while preventing the further spread of AIDS—must be a priority for the global community.

During his State of the Union address in February, President Bush committed the United States to help do something about this tragedy. He pledged \$15 billion over the next five years for AIDS prevention, care and treatment. This represents a three-fold increase over current U.S. spending on global AIDS.

Unfortunately, President Bush is not following through with his pledge. His 2004 budget request to Congress includes only \$1.6 billion for global AIDS prevention, care and treatment (plus \$400 million for research and funds to address tuberculosis and malaria). The White House says that it will make up the AIDS funding in subsequent years. But given the nature of the AIDS epidemic, less money spent now will

mean many more deaths and even more funding needed later.

The MCC U.S. Washington Office, together with other advocacy partners, is calling on Congress to provide \$3.5 billion for global AIDS in 2004. This is consistent with the president's commitment and it responds to the size of the need. This is a crucial time to contact members of Congress and let them know that it is more cost effective, and will save more lives, to provide more of the president's pledged \$15 billion sooner rather than later.

Funding for AIDS prevention and treatment is not only an act of compassionate servanthood. It is an investment in the people who will help shape the future of entire societies. ■

CAPITAL QUOTES

“We must avoid the traps of hubris and imperial temptation that comes with great power. . . . In this new era of possibilities and responsibilities, America will require a wider lens view of how the world sees us, so that we can better understand the world, and our role in it.”

—Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) at Kansas State University, Feb. 20, 2003.

“I have watched the events of recent months with a heavy, heavy heart. . . . What is happening to this country? When did we become a nation which ignores and berates our friends? When did we decide to risk undermining international order by adopting a radical and doctrinaire approach to using our awesome military might? . . . Why can this President not seem to see that America's true power lies not in its will to intimidate, but in its ability to inspire?”

—Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W. Va.), speech on the Senate floor, March 19, 2003.

Pontius' Puddle



Clean (And Healthy) Feet for All

BY BETHANY SPICHER

Me touch your dirty feet? You look at mine? The vulnerability and mutuality that foot washing requires is scandalous in a society that says “my body, my business.” Most of us would prefer that health insurance—which covers how we treat our bodies *and* how we spend our money—be an individual issue. But when more and more individuals in the United States lack health insurance (41 million at last count), how can we keep our feet to ourselves?

Health care in the United States works like this. If you’re low-risk (young and healthy), you get private insurance. If you’re high-risk (elderly, sick, disabled), you might not get any at all. If you’re wealthy, your private insurance will get you the best of the industry’s research and technology—whether it’s a triple bypass or plastic surgery. If you’re poor, the government decides what services you’re eligible for (or not).

The healthy and wealthy in the United States aren’t likely to do with less health care or pay for more so that everyone has equal access. At least not anytime soon. But lately it seems that even the government’s safety-net programs are threatened by the same me-first mentality.

Medicaid: Medicaid provides basic health care for some low-income people. States offer a variety of services, and the federal government covers a certain percentage of costs. Currently, however, states are facing frightening deficits, and many are cutting services or raising taxes.

The president has proposed a block grant that would offer states ten years worth of Medicaid dollars up front. Presumably, the extra money would help states weather the hard times. But what happens when the grant runs out in the sixth or seventh year and states are no longer eligible for federal Medicaid funds? Short-term solutions might get a president or governor safely through several terms, but people in poverty will pay the price.

Medicare: Medicare provides basic health care for anyone over 65 (regardless of income) and people with disabilities. But Medicare doesn’t cover prescription medicines, and drug costs are soaring.

The president has proposed a voucher to encourage Medicare recipients to switch to insurance plans with drug benefits. Sounds good, right? But short-term benefits could mean long-term reductions in services, depending on the arbitrary decisions of private insurance companies. While the voucher plan might cut costs for the government, it’s the elderly who will eventually pick up the tab.

Health care in the United States should work like this: No matter what your “risk,” your income or age or condition, the community agrees to pay for enough health care for everyone. Understanding that “enough” might not mean “whatever I want, whenever I want.” But knowing that a community’s health depends on the health of each individual member.

To get closer to equal health care access for all, we can encourage the government to maintain systems that don’t leave the poor or the elderly out in the cold. And in our own communities and churches, perhaps we can start by taking off our socks. ■

Health care in the United States should recognize that a community’s health depends on the health of each individual member.

IN THE FACE OF WAR WITH IRAQ

In March, MCC U.S. released “In the Face of War with Iraq,” a statement encouraging churches to pray and fast for peace and calling on the U.S. government to cease hostilities immediately. Read the statement and find updates on MCC’s response to the situation in Iraq at www.mcc.org.

Broken Trust: A Failure of Servanthood

BY DAVID M. WHETTSTONE

If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard (Proverbs 21:13).

Somewhere in this country, one man died homeless under a bridge. He was a millionaire. He did not know of his assets and, in all likelihood, they were mismanaged. Some families get government checks legally due to them—some for pennies, others for thousands. Many of the checks come infrequently. Many never come at all.

Their problems represent a struggle for generations of American Indians: the lack of U.S. government payments for lands held in trust. According to a report in *The New York Times*, more than 300,000 American Indians claim the government may owe them as much as \$137.2 billion in proceeds generated from their land.

This tragedy started 115 years ago. Then-Massachusetts Senator Henry Dawes suggested dividing the land held by Indian reservations into plots for individual Indians in an attempt to persuade them to become farmers on their own. His bill, the General Allotment Act of 1887, became law and opened up more than 90 million acres, two-thirds of the established reservation land, to white settlers. Some historians suggest the Act enabled unscrupulous exploitation. At the time, individual Indians owned about 138 million acres. Today, individual Indians own about 10 million acres and tribes own about 45 million acres.

In the decades following passage of the Act, the government was in charge of land management and Congress authorized the use of trust funds for individuals and tribes. Revenues from the leasing of oil, gas, mineral, timber or grazing rights on Indian lands were to be deposited in a trust fund and later disbursed to their respective owners. Almost immediately, newspaper accounts and later the Government Accounting Office indicated that beneficiaries were not receiving payments. Up to our present day, government has sporadically made insufficient payments or none at all.

In 1994, Congress required the U.S. Department of the Interior—through the American Indian Trust Reform Management Act—to account for all trust monies. Records under its care that were needful for proper payment have met with mysterious ends—suspicious fires, misplacement in warehouses, contamination with the rodent-associated Hanta virus, or even shredded though requested by court orders.

Throughout history, many in Indian Country have exercised a great forbearance by attempting to negotiate. Yet, in 1996 after a 25-year struggle with the Interior Department, Elouise Cobell (member of the Blackfeet tribe in Montana, a founder and chair of the Blackfeet National Bank) along with the Native American Rights Fund felt compelled to file a class action lawsuit (*Cobell v. Norton*) to seek justice. The case is still pending.

Two factors may contribute to resolving this situation: The Indian Trust Asset and Trust Fund Management and Reform Act of 2003, S. 175, introduced by Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.), Tim Johnson (D-S.D.) and Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), would create a new structure with a Deputy Secretary for Trust Management. Currently, there seems to be a general impulse to improve working relations with tribal governments.

The things that foot washing asks of its participants are essential in this case. Humility, a demonstration of deep respect, honesty and mutuality can lead to right relationship and correct inequities and past wrongs. Perhaps our government and nation can loosen its mantle and bend down and serve a people it has oppressed for so long. ■

More than 300,000 American Indians claim the government may owe them as much as \$137.2 billion in proceeds generated from their land.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

National Congress of American Indians:
<http://www.ncai.org/>

Indian Trust: Cobell v. Norton:
<http://www.indiantrust.com/>

Intertribal Monitoring Association:
<http://www.itmatrustfunds.org/>

Native American Rights Fund:
<http://www.narf.org/>

The Sudan

A Forgotten War and a Forgotten People, Forgotten Again

BY TIMOTHY SEIDEL

Timothy Seidel is an intern in the MCC Washington Office this spring. He is a graduate student at Wesley Theological Seminary and American University's School of International Service.

The Sudan still exists. And what is more, the people of the Sudan still exist. Indeed, they are very much alive. This fundamental statement, though seemingly obvious and uninformative, is quite important. And in light of the continued suffering of the peoples of the Sudan it calls for our self-reflective reexamination. The people of the Sudan are not storybook characters or fictional figures on television, but real people. And seeing a group of individuals as human beings carries with it some implications.

The incredibly deficient manner with which the Sudan conflict and the African continent as a whole are portrayed in the media, by the White House, and on Capitol Hill inadvertently feeds a dehumanization of the peoples there. Africa never seems to show up on our radar screen; that is, unless it somehow comes up in our discussion of the “war on terrorism.” It is too often an invisible continent with invisible people. And despite recent efforts at peace talks, people in the Sudan continue to suffer. The Committee on Conscience (<http://www.usmmm.org/conscience/>) continues to place Sudan under a “genocide warning,” which means that organized violence is under way that threatens to become genocide.

Hostilities persist in the oilfields of southern Sudan. And with a cessation of hostilities agreement signed in October of 2002, these actions endanger the already fragile peace process between the government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M). The role that the United States and the rest of the international community at this time should be one of intentionally supporting this peace process and condemning any violation of agreements that will endanger or de-legitimize the peace.

But what can the international community support or condemn, or where can we speak from, if neither this conflict nor the people of the Sudan themselves are even real to us, if they are not even in our line of vision? This requires some lens adjustment—a shift in focus.

Striving to understand the meaning of foot washing for Jesus and his disciples has relevant implications for our own attitudes and behaviors at social as well as individual levels. A recognition of servanthood as the form and source of true power acknowledges the God who through Christ was humbled and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8), and requires laying aside the privileges of our own power and serving those invisible “nonpersons” of history.

It is unfortunate that once again an update in our *Washington Memo* is being written that resembles greatly the last update on the Sudan conflict that was written four years ago. We could republish the same article now, and its relevance would still hold without any substantive changes needed. What does this say about a place like the Sudan and about the people and their needs? What does this say about ourselves?

As we experience the chaos and confusion that accompanies times of war such as these, may we continue to engage our senators and representatives, urging them to provide generous funding for rebuilding Iraq, but also to invest heavily—financially but also in terms of time, effort and concern—in peacebuilding initiatives such as the Sudan. Remembering that the people of the Sudan are still there and still suffering, even when we change the channel. ■

Note: As this goes to press, MCC workers in Africa send word that there have been positive developments in the peace process in the Sudan. Look for an update in the next issue of the *Washington Memo*.

Washing Feet and Bathtubs

Twenty years ago, our little family moved to Meridian, Mississippi. We numbered two young adults and a baby, with another baby on the way. Though we had met most of Meridian's Mennonites, they did not know us well.

But that did not stop the onslaught of kindness that they poured on us. There were hot homemade muffins to celebrate our first morning in our new home. Our new friends collected pickup loads of trash from the yard. One woman spent a morning bending over our filthy bathtub, scrubbing it back to its native pink.

I was overwhelmed. These people hardly knew us. We had not decided where we would go to church. Why were they doing all of this?

I discovered, as we became part this little church, that acts of kindness were part of the culture of Jubilee Mennonite. Through the past twenty years people helped us raise our children, encouraged our gifts and challenged us to grow. When we struggled financially, they wrote checks that helped us survive difficult years on the farm.

Though Duane and I had both grown up in churches that enjoyed the ancient practice of foot washing, this ritual took on fresh meaning at Jubilee. Our former pastor helped the congregation connect washing feet with other acts of kindness and hospitality. He suggested that perhaps a contemporary foot washing service would include washing each others' toilets.

And so, in addition to pouring water on a sister's feet, we cleaned her car. Along with rubbing a brother's feet with a towel, we shelled his purple hull peas. These acts of service also became known as foot washing.

In the 25 years since it began, Jubilee reshaped as she grew. Today most of the congregation of about 70 did not grow up in a Mennonite church. For many the idea of literally washing feet is new and most strange. On Maundy Thursday each year, Jubilee continues the practice of the basin and the towel. Everyone in the congregation is invited to the service to participate or to observe. The rest of the year, acts of family kindness continue.

Though the congregation has changed through the years, the culture of hospitality has not. When someone in the church has a critically sick child, the rest of the congregation is there, with prayers, words of encouragement and a casserole. When a member who is not a citizen struggles with documentation issues, Jubilee welcomes by providing a dozen trips to the lawyer in New Orleans, a journey to the immigration office in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and thousands of dollars to pay for the effort. When a family new to the church has a third baby, there are bags of hand-me-down clothes, pots of spaghetti and plates of cupcakes and a party to celebrate.

And so we continue to wash each other's feet, the supreme act of hospitality. And sometimes it happens on Tuesday morning while we are going about regular life. ■

IN OTHER'S WORDS

BY ELAINE MAUST

Elaine Maust is co-pastor of Jubilee Mennonite Church in Meridian, Mississippi. She and her husband Duane also operate a woodworking business.

Our former pastor suggested that perhaps a contemporary foot washing service would include washing each others' toilets.

NEW RESOURCE ON GLOBAL ECONOMIC JUSTICE

A study and advocacy packet on global economic justice is now available for \$6 from the MCC U.S. Washington Office. The packet covers such issues as U.S. trade policy, international debt, environmental concerns, development aid and economic sanctions. Also included are biblical reflections, worship resources and advocacy suggestions.

This packet is a revised and updated version of a similar resource released in 1998. It includes greater coverage of global trade and its impact on impoverished communities around the world.

To order a copy, contact MCC at (717) 859-1151 or e-mail twk@mcc.org.



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ISSUE	SUMMARY	ADVOCACY NEEDED
DEATH PENALTY	The National Death Penalty Moratorium Act (S. 132) would place a moratorium on federal executions, and urge states to do the same, while a national commission on the death penalty reviews the fairness of the imposition of the death penalty. Moratoriums have been a good first step toward abolishing state executions. Contact the MCC Washington Office for more information and to learn more about the <i>Anabaptists Against the Death Penalty Network</i> .	Urge your senators to support the National Death Penalty Moratorium Act (S. 132), which was introduced by Sen. Feingold (D-Wisc.) and co-sponsored by Sens. Levin (D-Mich.) and Durbin (D-Ill.).
IMMIGRANT CHILDREN'S HEALTH	The Immigrant Children's Health Improvement Act (ICHIA) allows states to lift the five-year ban on health care for children and pregnant women who are legal immigrants, and to use federal Medicaid dollars to provide care. ICHIA was introduced last year with a long list of co-sponsors in the Senate and House, but no action. It will be re-introduced this spring.	Urge your members of Congress to co-sponsor ICHIA when it is introduced. Contact the MCC Washington Office for an update on ICHIA's status.

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