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MORAL VALUES

Safe Space for Common Ground

Loving Neighbors in the Next Pew

BY BETHANY SPICHER

How can we witness to the government when we can't even get along with the people in the next pew?

How can we witness to the government when we can't even get along with the people in the next pew?" It's a question on the minds of many Christians, especially since the election that seemed to extend the national divide between red and blue down the aisles of churches across the country.

As a city on a hill, the church is called to first live its convictions, then advocate for policies to match. But when Christians disagree about what makes for justice and peace, then witness to government is garbled.

In times of disagreement, silence is a tempting response. But avoidance eliminates the possibility for new growth and common ground. Conflict isn't always negative, after all: it was conflict that sparked the Reformation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the list could go on.

And it was conflict that inspired Washington Community Fellowship (WCF) members to set up safe space dialogues to discuss their political differences. WCF, a Mennonite-affiliated congregation on Capitol Hill, includes members who work for progressive think tanks and members employed by conservative legislators—many led by their faith in Christ to conflicting perspectives.

The first dialogue, on welfare reform, began with a panel of members expressing their views honestly, discussing their backgrounds with welfare issues, and addressing how faith influenced their positions. Afterwards, the group worked together to identify shared values. The dialogue was so

positive that the congregation later decided to take on the controversial conflict in Israel/Palestine.

This year in the *Washington Memo*, we hope to host a series of safe spaces in our pages. The dialogue begins in this *Memo* with "moral values" (pgs. 4–6), an amorphous category of issues identified by the media as decisive in this year's election. We also offer the guidelines used by WCF to create their safe space (pg. 3).

In future *Memos*, we plan to address issues that commonly divide us, perhaps including immigration, civil liberties, free trade and environmental policy. Each newsletter will feature perspectives from at least two guest writers who share Christian understandings, but disagree when it comes to translating faith into action or policy.

Meanwhile, the Washington Office is joining the Information Age! No need to fear—the *Memo* will still be printed, but our Web site, www.mcc.org/us/washington/safespace, will offer resources for building safe space dialogues, stories of congregations who have bridged their divides, articles by guest writers and Washington Office staff, and—we hope—a discussion board to extend the safe space to visitors.

The witness of the Biblical prophets and apostles, the example of the Anabaptist martyrs and the suffering of our sisters and brothers around the world all call us to speak truth to power. Imagine the truth we could speak together! ■

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BY J. DARYL BYLER

It is our hope that safe space dialogue will help us all do less preaching at and more listening to one another.

Preaching Values While Practicing Violence?

Let's not forget the kind of people we have "down there," Gen. Richard B. Myers responded to a recent Red Cross report alleging U.S. abuse of detainees at Guantanamo Bay. "These are the people who don't know any moral values," continued the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a statement reported by the *New York Times*.

Like Gen. Myers, we all are tempted to selectively define moral values in ways that allow us to castigate others, while smugly ignoring our own violent behaviors. In so doing, we miss golden opportunities to more consistently promote the moral high ground.

Moral values got big billing in the recent presidential election. But voters mirrored a variety of views when asked which moral issue matters most. Some 42% said the war in Iraq, 13% said abortion and 9% said same-sex marriage, according to a post-election poll by Zogby International.

Moral values reflect judgments about what is good and bad, right and wrong, just and unjust. But who decides? Is it simply a matter of personal preferences?

As Christians, our confession of Jesus as Lord means that his life and teachings are the standard by which we judge morality. In his Sermon on the Mount, as in his life, Jesus emphasized those behaviors and attitudes which help build shalom: justice (Matthew 5:20), reconciliation (5:21–26), fidelity (5:27–32), truthfulness (5:33–37), generosity (5:38–42), love for enemies (5:43–48),

humility (6:1–6, 16–18), forgiveness (6:12–14) and trust in God alone (6:19–34).

We should define moral values, then, by this broad standard: Do our actions and attitudes *undergird* or *undermine* God's plan for shalom? This roomy definition could save us from several pitfalls and prod us to greater faithfulness.

First, it will keep us from narrowly defining moral values in ways that have currency in only one political party. Jesus, not the Democratic or Republican party, is our standard bearer.

Second, it might keep us from making preachy and self-righteous demands that others must change, while we take license to continue our own hurtful practices. The call of Jesus is broad enough to unsettle even the most seasoned Christians. Cultivating consistency is a lifetime endeavor.

Finally, it requires us to dialogue with those who accent different aspects of morality than we do. It's the only way we grow. In that spirit, we asked three Mennonite writers to reflect on what they see as the most important moral issues for U.S. policymakers to address today.

Elaine Bryant calls us to take a wholistic approach that punctuates both public and private morality. She identifies justice and mercy—with a particular focus on "the needs of the 'poor', oppressed, defenseless, or 'least' among us"—as the most weighty moral matters for public attention.

Vicki Sairs ponders how to be both pro-life and pro-peace. She lists abortion, stem cell research and the invasion of Iraq as moral issues which are worthy of our attention.

Karl Shelly lists three moral issues: U.S. militarism, materialism and bigotry. He notes that Martin Luther King, Jr. named these same three nearly 40 years ago. Sadly, they are still relevant today.

It is our hope that safe space dialogue will help us all do less preaching at and more listening to one another. And that it will rouse us to a fuller grasp and practice of all that is good, right and just. ■

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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Creating Safe Space for Dialogue on Political Issues

1. Welcome, introductions and prayer (10 minutes)
2. Guidelines and goals (10 minutes)
 - commitments made by all participants
 - a. to express my views honestly
 - b. to seek to understand the views of others
 - c. to avoid judging or interrupting others
 - d. additional guidelines that will help make this a “safe space” for conversation?
 - goals for the process
 - a. to better hear and understand one another’s perspectives
 - b. to encourage honest dialogue and understanding
 - c. to discover common ground and a more complete view of truth
 - d. to search for ways to work together to promote the church’s witness
3. Spectrum exercise—optional (5 minutes)

Outline the two poles of the issue to be discussed and ask participants to place themselves along that spectrum. For example, if discussing welfare reform, the two pole positions might be: “I see a substantial governmental role in providing a ‘safety net’” and “I see a very limited governmental role.”

Questions 4–7 (45 minutes):

At this point, if there are more than 8–10 participants, divide into two groups with each group having persons from across the spectrum. If all participants are at one end of the spectrum, some may need to “role play” a different perspective. Allow time for questions of clarification and understanding.

4. Give a brief personal history with the issue being discussed. How did you become interested in this issue? What has been your involvement with the issue?

5. What are your beliefs about this issue? What do you want to see happen and why? How does your faith and biblical understanding undergird your views?
6. Identify any uncertainties, dilemmas, ambiguities and value conflicts that you struggle with in your general approach/viewpoint on this issue.
7. What do you want the “other side” (those with a different perspective) to know and believe about you?

Questions 8–12 (45 minutes)

Bring the whole group back together. After a brief time of reporting, continue with the next steps.

8. What are the values/interests that lie behind each participant’s position?
9. What values/interests do we share in common?
10. Given the common values/interests, are there policy principles that we can work on and promote together? Brainstorm.
11. Next steps.
12. Debriefing: How did you experience this exercise? What was most helpful? What could be improved? ■

The Washington Office offers these guidelines, adapted from Mennonite Conciliation Service, for safe space dialogue in congregations or small groups. In their discussions about welfare reform and Israel/Palestine, Washington Community Fellowship learned that a good process and skillful facilitator are key to creating safe space (pg. 1).

CAPITAL QUOTES

“First we blow up your house, then we pay you to rebuild it. . . . You give [the Iraqis] \$1,000 and they’re happy.”

—U.S. Col. Michael Oliver describing U.S. operations in Najaf and Falluja, *New York Times*, November 17, 2004.

“If I lose my house, my life is gone.”

—Kamal Mohammed Saleh, a Falluja resident quoted in the same article.

“Economic policy and abortion are not separate issues; they form one moral imperative. Rhetoric is hollow, mere tinkling brass, without health care, health insurance, jobs, child care, and a living wage.”

—Glenn Stassen, Professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, on a study showing that number of U.S. abortions increased in the past four years because of increasing poverty.

Justice and Mercy

Weightier Matters

BY ELAINE BRYANT

Elaine Bryant is pastor of Englewood Mennonite Church (Chicago, Ill.) and a member of the Mennonite Church USA Executive Board.

Neither faith in, nor love for, God can be enforced by public policy. That leaves justice and mercy issues as priority categories.

When dealing with public or private morality, there is no dichotomy. From a Christ-centered biblical viewpoint, personal righteousness and social justice must be taken together if holistic well-being for individuals and society is to be sustained.

The above statement is the premise for this discussion. It has been derived from and is informed by the content of biblical scriptures such as Ezekiel 18:3–31; Micah 6:8; Matthew 7:12, 23:23, 25:31–46; Mark 7:20–23; Luke 11:42; along with references associated with Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18:16 to 19:28; and prophetic writings, such as Isaiah 1:2–28.

According to one dictionary, the word moral “implies conformity with the generally accepted standards of goodness or rightness in conduct or character, sometimes, specifically, in sexual conduct.” The same dictionary spoke of the word ethical as implying “conformity with an elaborated, ideal code of moral principles, sometimes, specifically, with the code of a particular profession.” The definition for ethical gets to the basics for this discussion of morality, i.e. standards of goodness and rightness, from a Christ-centered biblical perspective.

While Genesis focuses on sexual conduct as the cause for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaiah points to the two cities as examples of injustice and turning from God’s way. Ezekiel and Micah speak of persons practicing righteousness and being just in relationship to their sexuality, abstinence from oppression and violent robbery of others, as well as their merciful treatment of the poor and submission to God-given standards. In Matthew 25, the Lord Jesus affirms the practice of justice and care of the poor as given in Isaiah, Ezekiel and Micah. In Mark 7, he speaks of certain sexual, as well as other so-called private practices, as defiling.

From the above, it can be concluded that individual and societal righteousness and goodness must be taken into account if holistic well-being is to be sustained. Are there, however, moral issues which should have priority focus for public policies from a Christ-centered, biblical morality perspective?

The words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 5:43–45 and 23:23, along with Luke 11:42, point to categories of priorities. In each of these, justice and/or mercy, along with faith in, or love of, God are characterized as “weightier matters of the law” or the cause of “woe” (grief) to those who neglect them. Neither faith in, nor love for, God can be enforced by law or public policy. That leaves justice and mercy issues as priority categories.

The challenge comes in determining justice and mercy for whom, when there are conflicting claims. Such cases call for intentional reliance on the Spirit of Truth for wisdom, principles and guidelines. Such cases also call for reliance on examples from biblical scriptures that conform to the revelation of the God-pleasing “way, truth and life” as revealed through Jesus Christ, with a focus on the needs of the “poor,” oppressed, defenseless or “least” among us. ■

Abortion, Stem Cell Research, Iraq

Hard Questions

The country is divided, and so is the church. What a good time to be an Anabaptist! We have a theology that makes it possible to live in a pluralistic society, contribute to the national discussion on public policy and still be peacemakers.

I'm a Mennonite because I want to be part of a New Testament church that transcends political boundaries; I want to be part of a community of believers that rejects violent solutions to social problems. At the same time, I don't want to be unrealistic about human nature—my own and everyone else's. Evil is real, and government has been ordained by God to restrain evil. I do not expect my government to lay down its weapons in the face of an aggressive enemy; I do expect my government to protect the innocent.

And there's the rub. I expect my government to operate in a way that I cannot. Anabaptist two-kingdom theology serves me well here. Governments operate outside the perfection of Christ; as a believer, I am a citizen of a different kingdom, and must act accordingly. This means rejecting the use of coercion; it also means not participating in the level of government that requires the use of force.

This lack of participation in government does not, however, let me off the hook. I may not force my beliefs on others (my husband calls it "bullying secular society"), but I still have a duty to speak up for those who have no voice, to protect the vulnerable and to reach out to and love my enemies.

For me, this means doing all I can in the public arena to win hearts and minds to Jesus, without entering into politics. It means being kind to those who disagree with me. Persuasion, not coercion, is my goal. By staying out of politics, I'm free to present my position on difficult issues—abortion, stem cell research, the invasion of Iraq—unencumbered by the weight of a party line. If my opponents know that I'm appealing to reason and not resorting to political muscle to back up my position, they might be more open to what I have to say.

The difficulties of this position are obvious. I'm open to the charge of not wanting to get my hands dirty in the actual business of making laws that might save lives. Still, I choose to serve in a different arena. Pro-life peace activist Juli Loesch Wiley once said it's not enough to make abortion illegal—we need to make it unthinkable. I want to work on the "unthinkable" part of that equation.

Abortion, stem cell research, and the invasion of Iraq all involve hard questions: What does it mean to be human? Which human lives are worth protecting? How do we protect ourselves against our enemies without dehumanizing them or dehumanizing ourselves? Anabaptist theology can provide a "safe space" for discussion of these issues not only in the church, but also in the culture. I would love to see Anabaptists embrace this. ■

SAFE SPACE
DIALOGUE

BY VICKI SAIRS

Vicki Sairs attends London Christian Fellowship (London, Ohio), and is center director of Madison Pregnancy Care.

By staying out of politics, I'm free to present my position on difficult issues—abortion, stem cell research, the invasion of Iraq—unencumbered by the weight of a party line.

ECUMENICAL ADVOCACY DAYS

This year, the MCC Washington Office Spring Seminar is joining the Ecumenical Advocacy Days for Global Peace with Justice, March 11–14, 2005. Sponsored by a broad range of denominations, the days will include speakers, workshops, worship services, advocacy trainings and visits to Capitol Hill. This year's theme, "Make All Things New," encompasses several critical regions and issues: Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, the United States, Eco-Justice and Environmental Justice. The MCC Washington Office will host a special gathering Saturday evening for Anabaptist participants. Visit www.advocacydays.org for more information.

Militarism, Materialism and Bigotry

Enduring Issues

BY KARL S. SHELLY

Karl Shelly is co-pastor at Assembly Mennonite Church (Goshen, Ind.) and an adjunct professor in the Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies department at Goshen College.

I understand the Bible to be more broadly focused.

The moral concern of God's Word stretches from the vast created world to the isolated and lonely widow.

Before nominating two or three “moral issues” as the most important for U.S. public policy makers to address, one must determine which policy issues are rooted in our sense of morality and which—if any—are not. “Moral values” has become code for a narrow set of concerns, largely focused around how individuals use their bodies (i.e. abortion, same-sex marriage, stem-cell research, euthanasia). Without question, these are important “moral issues,” but I understand the Bible to be more broadly focused. The moral concern of God’s Word stretches from the vast created world to the isolated and lonely widow.

So, if pressed to select a few “moral” priorities for U.S. lawmakers, I would nominate the three identified more than 30 years ago by Martin Luther King, Jr.—militarism, materialism, and bigotry. These biblically rooted concerns continue to be America’s particular burden.

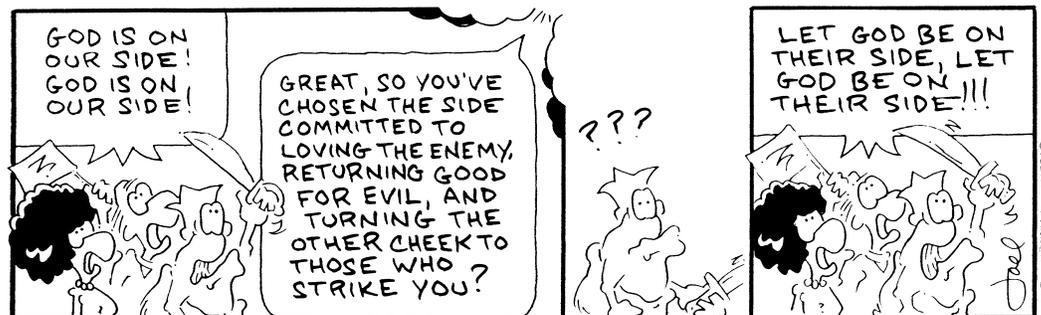
Militarism. The historic Anabaptist value of peace needs champions today as much as ever. U.S. military might has become the god in which our country puts its trust; which demands the first and largest share of our resources; and which requires blood sacrifice. To resist militarism is to resist idolatry.

Materialism. Perhaps no justice issue is raised more often in the Bible than concern for the poor and warnings for the rich. The wealth of the United States is unparalleled and has been used to alleviate much suffering around the globe. But woe to that country which celebrates greed and ignores a widening gap between rich and poor. In our nation today, over 44 million people—predominantly the working poor—do not have access to basic health care. Additionally, strong links have been demonstrated between a rise in poverty and a corresponding rise in abortions. In more senses than one, to be anti-poverty is to be pro-life.

Bigotry. Another consistent theme of the Bible is its concern for the outcast, the stranger, the Samaritan. In King’s context, “racism” was the most pressing divide between peoples. That sin has yet to be completely uprooted from our national life, and there are other groups of people—immigrants, Muslims, and sexual minorities, to name a few—for whom it is socially and sometimes legally permissible to exploit.

There are other ways to frame our most important moral issues, but King’s identification of the “giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism” endures. King also warned that “we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values” if we are going to make strides in conquering these evils. That is a challenge not only for our policy makers but for us as well. ■

Pontius' Puddle





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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

SOUND THE TRUMPET!

Over the past year, we asked readers to respond to a variety of issues. Here is a summary of where they stand.	
AIDS	Congress appropriated \$2.9 billion for global AIDS, TB and malaria for 2005, a 21 percent increase over last year, but far short of the \$5.4 billion that the MCC Washington Office and other advocates called for.
Assault Weapons	The ten-year-old federal assault weapons ban expired in September. It passed as an amendment in the Senate, but met with defeat in a larger legislative package of gun laws, and it had no vote in the House. Mennonites gathered 1,132 signatures encouraging renewal of the ban.
CAFTA	Still lacking the votes for passage, President Bush has not yet submitted to Congress for ratification the Central American Free Trade Agreement, signed last May.
Immigration	Despite bi-partisan support, congressional leadership refused to bring to vote legislation to provide legal status for undocumented farm workers and students: the Agricultural Job Opportunity, Benefits and Security (AgJOBS) Act and the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act.
Iraq	Iraqi elections are scheduled for Jan. 30, but widespread fighting might especially limit the participation of Sunni Muslims. While some estimates place Iraqi civilian deaths at below 20,000, research by Johns Hopkins estimates that some 100,000 have died as a direct or indirect result of the U.S.-led war.
Laos	In November, Congress approved legislation which extended normal trade relations to Laos, as well as an omnibus spending bill with \$2.5 million marked for removal of unexploded ordnance in Laos.
Military Draft	To quell rumors of a draft, House majority leadership called for an October vote on the Universal National Service Act which would reinstate the draft. It was defeated 402-2. Thus far, the administration has stated there is no need for a draft.
Military Spending	Congress has approved \$416 billion in military spending for FY 2005. In February, President Bush is expected to ask Congress for an additional \$75 billion for the war in Iraq. Some good news: Congress has eliminated the president's request for funds to develop new nuclear weapons.
TANF	In October, Congress voted for the eighth time in two years to postpone a much-needed revision of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, which offers child care and job training for families in poverty.
North Korea	In October, Congress passed the North Korea Human Rights Act. The bill will raise awareness about humanitarian issues and encourage dialogue between the United States and North Korea, but its impact is expected to be minimal.