



# NONVIOLENT INTERVENTIONS

## A RESPONSE TO TERRORISM

*Anne L. Barstow*

***Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence... Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now.***

D. Bonhoeffer, "Sermon on II Corinthians 12:9"

***There is no way to peace along the way to safety. For peace must be dared. It is the great venture.***

D. Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Peoples of the World"

Terrorism, like lightning, strikes. I live in Manhattan, where my son is a member of the New York City Fire Department. Our lives were significantly affected by the events of September 11, 2001, yet neither my



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family nor anyone I know in New York desired a war of revenge. We are sickened by the way New York's tragedy was used to stir people up for war. Most of the nation's war fever developed outside the city; New Yorkers for the most part did not want any other city to suffer the horror we had experienced.

### **The Need for New Definitions**

The noun nonviolence is problematical. It puts our main value, namely working actively for peace, into the negative. Although the word was key to the work of social and political transformation in India, the U.S., South Africa, Guatemala (1944), the Philippines (1986), Eastern Europe (1990), and elsewhere, it limits us to what peacemakers *won't* do and is silent about the courage that peacemaking requires and the work for justice that it demands. While useful as an adjective, it is misleading as a noun.

Pacifism is another term that has attracted a connotation of nullity – doing nothing, refusing to kill, turning away from duty. No doubt it is a commentary on the violence of our society that the word pacifism is useless in discussing our current crisis.

Thus I suggest the need to redefine both words in positive terms such as “nonviolent direct action,” “finding alternatives to war,” and “witnessing to peace” - terms that indicate action, process, doing the hard work of peacemaking.

Finally, we need to focus on militarism. Following Johan Galtung, I define militarism as “relying on military power to settle disputes, depending on violent means to achieve our goals.” This definition, while leaving room for us to affirm the role of the military in defense and in police actions, condemns the military when it usurps the roles of diplomacy and other nonviolent means of settling disputes.

### **The Role of the Church**

What is the role of the church when the nation has been wounded by terrorism and is going to war? I start by assuming that the church's calling, in peace or war, is to do the work of peace. It is our mandate from Christ, who by example and teaching modeled nonresistance, forgiveness, reconciliation, even love of one's enemies. These values are far from those of mainstream American society. If the church does not teach and practice them, who will?

My second observation is that the United States is now the strongest nation in the world. No one can restrain us. Terrorists can wound us but they cannot control us. If we, the people, do not put limits on our military power and redirect our foreign policy, no one else can. Is this not a call to the churches of America to be prophetic and demand a change in the way we relate to other nations?

Gifted as we are with the biblical message of peace and reconciliation, however, the Presbyterian Church has never been one of the so-called "peace" churches. From time to time we have united around strong calls for peace, especially since the world entered the atomic age. *Peacemaking: The Believer's Calling*, *Presbyterians and Peacemaking: Are We Now Called to Resistance?* and *Christian Obedience in a Nuclear Age* are documents we must be proud of, but we always turn away from a radical affirmation of the biblical call to be peacemakers in order to follow our government into war. We fall back on theories that justify war.

After September 11, when the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship posted its call for a nonviolent resolution to the conflict, we received mixed reactions, ranging from criticisms of our "pathetic tripe" to thanks "for speaking the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The church is indeed divided, as demonstrated by the difference between statements such as the one issued by Louisville Seminary opposing an attack on Iraq and the votes of Presbyterian members of Congress, 76% of whom supported the war. The church, like the country, was divided, with thousands taking part in antiwar protests, yet the overwhelming opinion in the country was to follow President Bush in his call for war and revenge (and expansion of our hegemony).

Not being one of the traditional peace churches, we must ask, what kind of church are we? In a *kairos* time such as this, we are forced to define ourselves on this issue, yet torn between the call to be prophetic and the desire to support the president we, like other churches, were basically ineffective.

I propose that our advice to the Presbyterian Church should be to be the church. In doing so we should take into account the following obstacles to Presbyterian peacemaking and some possibilities for action.

### **Resistance for Individuals**

We must remember that most people believe that wars are inevitable. This is no small wonder, for we are given no education by

either church or state in thinking about alternatives to war. For the church to speak against the government's very problematical response to the terrorism of September 11 (a repaying of violence by a much greater violence), it must clearly spell out the options that are available.

It must begin to acquaint us with the importance of nonviolent First Amendment actions done in the name of the church. Presbyterians have a healthy regard for law and orderly governance. However, when this respect prevents us from carrying out our other responsibility, that of judging the nation by the teachings of Christ, of speaking prophetically, we have chained ourselves to the law. We need to urge statements that advocate challenging administration policies, signing petitions, and supporting such actions as consumer boycotts, lobbying, vigils, marches, public prayer, Internet appeals and debates, and symbolic actions such as nonviolent civil disobedience, prison witness, conscientious objection, fasting and tax refusal. The church must not only recommend and model these actions to us as Christians but also support us when we undertake them. The letter of support I received from the Stated Clerk after I was arrested at a School of the Americas protest means more to me than anything I have received from the PCUSA in my long life. I would feel even more supported if national staff would join us in this General Assembly supported protest.

As it is, we have to learn how to do this witness from Quakers, Mennonites, Brethren and Pax Christi. We have leaned on them too long; besides, their forms of spirituality are different from ours. What would resistance actions based on Presbyterian spiritual resources be like? We don't know. I think we might be surprised at the strength of such a movement because of the discipline, depth of commitment and seriousness that Presbyterians bring to such matters.

We must remember that for most people the word peace has no real content. It is merely the absence of war. The church faces a huge educational challenge, which we should address at every level.

We should encourage the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program to continue its teaching against family violence, offering conflict resolution training, in the name of Christ, from the pre-school level on up. Following up on the recommendations of the 1998 "Just Peacemaking" resolution, we should encourage all educational agencies to train local peacemakers in negotiation and conflict resolution and mandate that all Presbyterian colleges and seminaries include peacemaking and issues of war and peace in their curricula. (I realize that I did not learn one sin-

gle lesson about peace from my years at Union Seminary; I have had to educate myself on peacemaking through the Quakers, Witness for Peace, and PPF, the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship.)

We must support Presbyterians in their own countries as they work for peace, often at risk to their lives, and accompany them when possible. The delegation to Colombia<sup>1</sup> was a response to the urgent call from the Colombian Church to stand with them and learn what violence is doing to their lives, their church, their country. We must reach out more often to areas of conflict affecting our own church (e.g., Northern Ireland, Iraq, Cuba, Guatemala), even when we disagree with the local politics. In a recent list of Presbyterian Travel/Study seminars, only two (Sudan and Gary Payton's trip with Russian and U.S. veterans of the Cold War) are described as focused on peacemaking and reconciliation. We need a Presbyterian peace presence in many more conflicted areas.

We must continue on the path, set for us on September 11 by then-Moderator Jack Rogers and Stated Clerk, Clifton Kirkpatrick, of trying to love our enemies. To love is to listen to and try to understand. This means to comprehend how we threaten and offend those who attack us. (If we had listened to Timothy McVeigh, what might we have learned about the terrorism of our own government? If I, a firmly pro-choice woman, had listened to the Rev. Paul Hill, how might I have been challenged with new thoughts on reproductive rights?) The church must help us understand what it means to be the richest and most powerful nation: That we are feared and envied; that when we threaten others, they will strike back however they can, in ways we find sneaky and abhorrent. We must continue our work started after September 11 to make up for centuries of ignorance and prejudice about Muslims.

## **Resistance as Church**

We should remember that peacemaking requires knowing what is going on. Like democracy, it functions only when there is honesty and transparency. The church therefore must insist that the government, whenever possible, give the media access to its anti-terrorism and military actions. Most important, if our defense is to have any claim to humaneness, we must know what civilian casualties we are inflicting. Otherwise, we are no better than terrorists ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Planned for March 17-29, 2003 by the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship and the Witherspoon Society. A similar delegation to Israel and the West Bank, under the auspices of the Peace Fellowship, was planned for October 2003.

Our government has not always leveled with us. We remember, for example,

- The Gulf of Tonkin “incident” that was inflated and misrepresented;
- The politics of fear that dominated the November 2002 elections, complete with still-unsubstantiated warnings of nuclear attacks and biological warfare;
- The promises that there would be few civilian casualties when we invaded Afghanistan; and
- The current U.S. military build-up in Colombia, ostensibly in order to destroy the drug trade but in fact to protect U.S. oil interests and build up the U.S. military presence there.

This dishonesty makes it impossible for us to assume that U.S. military intervention – no matter how badly “needed” – will serve the victims we seek to help or alleviate the conditions we seek to overcome. Our Christian desire to help, therefore, must be carried out through third party, non-military means. Too often military intervention, accompanied by bombing, kills the very people whom it seeks to liberate.

### **A Call to Confession**

We must confess and do penance for years of comfortably equating faith in America with faith in God. This most important piece of advice is also the hardest. This simplistic doctrine robs us of the ability to be prophetic, to speak out against the fundamentalism that distorts both Christianity and democracy, preventing us, in short, from being the church. At our best, we have done this when saying no to nuclearism, racism, poverty and sexism.

But we have not said a clear “no” to uncritical patriotism. Nor have we condemned war. In the 1998 Resolution on Just Peacemaking, we let the horse out of the barn right at the start by advocating the use of military means for peacemaking. While urging working through the U.N. and warning about national greed, the resolution does not rule out unilateral U.S. intervention. This position can only be maintained if one believes that the U.S. is, in some way, special and that it alone among sovereign nations will not use superior military power to fight an “unjust” war. I see no evidence that we are special in this regard; in fact, being the strongest, we are probably more likely than others to turn military action into a war of aggression. This stand compromises the many excellent recommendations made later in the resolution.

In the 1940s-50s, Presbyterians were among the key leaders in forming the United Nations. Today the churches have very little power in Washington and are growing more conservative in many aspects. We need a very different approach to this different world. In a way, we are freer to speak as the church, with a radical message of peace, than we were when we were part of the political establishment.

## **Suggestions for Peaceful Intervention**

So what about specific peaceful interventions against terrorists? What can we challenge the government to do? There is a rich body of possibilities, all tried and proven elsewhere.

Where the terror is internal, against one's own people, as in Colombia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Japan, East Timor, El Salvador in the 80s, Haiti in the early 90s, Oklahoma City, and so on, there are several opportunities. Other (disinterested) nations can press for the rebels to be admitted into the political process, given a voice, and provided with a fair share of the wealth, while all parties (including governments) are denied arms purchases. A powerful third party (preferably the U.N.) is needed to monitor elections, support fragile judicial systems and, possibly, police public areas.

But perhaps the level of violence is so great that none of these measures can be used. Only in this worst case scenario should troops be called in, but they must be multinational and trained in peacemaking, or they will cause more trouble than they cure.

At this point, an unarmed civilian force, trained in conflict resolution, can also be helpful. On a small scale, this is called *accompaniment*. Trained civilians interpose themselves between warring groups. Witness for Peace, Peace Brigades International, and Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) have pioneered in this work, using teams of two to six persons. A new global group, now organizing, is applying the same principle but using a larger force. Called the "Non-Violent Peaceforce," it plans to send one hundred persons to Sri Lanka in 2004. All of these groups differ from U.N. Peacekeepers in that they are unarmed; they take the risk of injury onto themselves in order to open a space for peace.

These civilian groups hold great promise. Seeing them as the wave of the future, the PPF approached the church to form a Presbyterian

Peacemaker Team. We could start by using the CPT training. Despite the fact that only 3.2% of our 340 currently serving mission workers were assigned to “Peacemaking and Social Justice” work, our project was not accepted. We were told that severe financial cutbacks made it impossible. Given the times, this infinitesimal commitment to peace work makes me question the priorities of our church.

PPF then raised money from its own pockets for one Peace Intern. Chris Caton has finished her two-year term, having trained with CPT and serving twice as an accompanier in the West Bank; she also led a delegation of Presbyterians to Israel and the Palestinian territories. Having seen the violence of terrorism first hand, she is now available to speak about peacemaking in churches.<sup>2</sup>

However significant, this process of interposing peacemakers between warring parties is only the beginning; it establishes a *space* in which peace *might* develop. For healing nations torn by political or ethnic violence, third parties must organize international courts where victims may seek justice and local hearings where face-to-face “truth and reconciliation” encounters may take place. Truth must be established, confession made, apology and recompense rendered. This has taken place in South Africa and is now underway in Rwanda, the site of the most intense genocide on record. As U.S. citizens, we must urge our government to drop its opposition to the new International Criminal Court and to support it fully.

There is still more that can be done. The “have” nations must assist poor or devastated nations to get back on their feet economically, to rebuild. Presbyterian documents have been particularly strong on this point, but we have not spoken out as forcefully against the “haves” interfering/intervening in changing regimes and political systems, exploiting local resources, or establishing military bases in weaker, poorer nations (Honduras and Colombia come to mind). Destroying the sovereignty of other nations must be strictly forbidden.

Where the terror comes as attack from outside, a consortium of nations (again, this would be most effective if done by/through the U.N.) can band together to form a league against the terrorists to deny them arms, money, a hiding place, legitimacy and contact with each other. This cannot be done unilaterally; the world is too porous. As they are tracked down, the murderers must be given a fair trial, preferably in an international court.

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Caton may be contacted at [ca\\_caton@msn.com](mailto:ca_caton@msn.com).



Rather than killing them, we need to study them, to see how they see us, to try to change whatever made them so desperate. This is only self-interest; only in this way can we stop them from multiplying. And sooner or later it will be in their interest to negotiate with us. If Mark Juergensmeyer is right in claiming that “overcoming defeat and humiliation is the point of war” (*Terror in the Mind of God*, 165), we may have some bargaining points to use with our enemies. Removing our military forces from Saudi Arabia, so odious to Al-Qaeda and many Muslims, may seem unthinkable to the Pentagon, but it might save us another September 11. Perpetrators see themselves as victims (the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, etc.), ergo, if we give some moral ground, we might find a place on which to meet them. We must urge our government to work for accommodation with terrorists rather than seeking to destroy them, for we cannot destroy terrorism itself.

Most important, in defending ourselves against terrorists, we must take great care not to betray our own best values and become like those we seek to deter. We must learn the hard lessons of not being stampeded by fear, nor driven by revenge; we must even learn to love the enemy. Those lessons require years of theological work and prayer.

To return to the initial question of what the church can, in fact, do in a time of threatened terrorism, I would highlight two things. Reflecting on the repeated references in the 1998 resolution to confer with governmental and nongovernmental agencies about our urgent concern with peacemaking, we need to ask: What has been done since 1998? Where can our own groups such as the Washington Office and the General Assembly Council speak and lobby for us to the establishment? Second, we must urge the church, through its programs, General Assembly speakers, and presence in the national peace movement, to make more visible our urgent concern for peace, using the language of peace, radical and unacceptable though it may be in times like these.





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