

peace toolkit



**Public Witness
for Peace:**
A Toolkit for Christians



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**



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What is a Public Peace Witness?



"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house." (Matthew 5:14-15)

Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with a series of blessings that we have come to call the Beatitudes. He concludes this initial part of the sermon with the assertion, "you are the light of the world."

This toolkit is intended to assist Canadian Mennonite and Brethren in Christ congregations, groups and individuals let their light shine through a ministry of public peace witness.

What is a public peace witness? It is an intentional way of offering a peace perspective to the wider community. A public peace witness is any means whereby a Christian peace perspective is deliberately made beyond the church. Some examples include: wearing a peace button, writing a letter to the government or to one's local newspaper, participating in a public prayer vigil or peace walk.

Traditionally, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ have preferred to witness to their faith in Jesus' way of peace and reconciliation in a quiet and private way. Indeed, for many years, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ were known as "the quiet in the land." We believed that it was important to practise peace and reconciliation in our own churches and communities. Simply by living out the way of peace, we were witnessing to it. This continues to be the primary way that Christians witness to the way of peace. Indeed, a public peace witness quickly loses its integrity if it is not lived out by those who profess it.

Nonetheless, there is today a growing sense among Mennonites and Brethren in Christ that we are called to share our peace testimony more boldly with the broader Christian community and also government and non-Christian society. These materials are intended to give us some of the tools to do so.

an eagle soars above
the eagle symbolizes courage and vision

cure thy children's warring madness
shame our wanton selfish gladness
rich in things and poor in soul

you are salt for the earth
o people
our security lies not in weapons
the security of others is ours

sing friends sing
let the seed of freedom
awake and flourish
let the deep roots nourish
let the tall stalks rise

the east wind steals warmth
from fingers and toes
our songs hang in the air with our breaths
and the eagle soars above
the eagle carries our prayers higher
and closer to the creator than any other creature

standing in the public square
prayers on our lips in our hands
deep in our hearts
dona nobis pacem

courage friends courage
the eagle soars above

Eileen Klassen Hamm
27 November 2001
Sing for Peace, Saskatoon

In the post-war period Mennonites in greater numbers moved from separated rural communities into cities, pursued higher education, and entered new professions. We became more integrated with the broader society. Mennonites came to see the "world" not so much as an evil and threatening place from which they should withdraw, as a wounded and suffering place inviting Christian service. Mission and service, both at home and abroad, became increasingly important forms of witness.

As sociology shifted, so did theology. There was a movement away from a traditional "two-kingdom" theology toward one which saw **one** moral imperative—not two—for all of God's creation, the church and the world. In other words, the "lordship of Christ" was seen to encompass believers and non-believers alike. This shift to a new paradigm was not always made consciously. Indeed, many individuals and groups within the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ family continue to hold to "two-kingdom" understandings. Nevertheless, a growing segment would understand that the church's role is to proclaim the lordship of Christ in all contexts and to point the social order in the direction of the values of Jesus' reign. A more intentional public peace witness is part of this new understanding.

An example of this new understanding was the creation of MCC Canada in 1964 and, in particular, its Peace and Social Concerns (PSC) program. This program was given a wide mandate to promote the cause of peace within and beyond MCC's Mennonite and Brethren in Christ constituency. One of its first endeavors was to organize and staff "peace booths" at Toronto and Vancouver national exhibitions. Beyond attending to traditional concerns like alternatives to military service, PSC addressed issues like labour relations, capital punishment, alcoholism and nuclear weapons.

The opening of MCC Canada's Ottawa Office in 1975 was another example of a more intentional and public peace ministry. Initially, the office was to serve as a "listening post" —a way for Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in Canada to become more familiar with government policies. With time, it began to speak to government on a whole range of policies and issues. Significantly, this advocacy work was not primarily to benefit Mennonites, but to benefit others.

Apart from these developments, there was much evidence of an approach to peacemaking that was more active and "evangelistic." In the 1970s and 1980s, Mennonites began to write letters to their Members of Parliament and to their local papers on peace-related issues. Many began to join in peace rallies and walks. Withholding taxes intended for military purposes

"I did not write the article intending to be an evangelist," Scott says in retrospect. "I was not expecting to convert someone. I just thought that the peace position needed to be stated as the country remembered its war. I was just being who I was as a Mennonite Christian, and feeling free to state that publicly. I think this is a model for evangelism: do what Christ calls you to do, and speak the words the Spirit gives you, and God will work in people's hearts in unexpected ways."

Matthew Bailey-Dick, ed., *Peacemaking and Evangelism: Following in the Footsteps of Christ (MCC Ontario Peace Sunday Packet, 2002)*, p. 7.

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Biblical Motivations for a Public Peace Witness



What are some of the biblical underpinnings or motivations for Christians as they engage in public peace witness?

Jesus' own Example

Most of the time Jesus carried out his ministry in private, personal encounters. Although he was often surrounded by crowds, it seems that he often preferred not to be in the limelight. He often told people not to tell others about who had healed them (Mark 1:43; 7:36), and he rebuked those who called him Son of God (Mark 1:24, 34). Frequently, he went off by himself to pray and to be alone.

Yet on specific occasions, Jesus deliberately chose to be in the public view. Palm Sunday is perhaps the most notable example. Here, Jesus was intent about stating publicly that he was in fact the Messiah for whom the people had been waiting (Luke 19). Not only that—he was intent about demonstrating that the kingdom he had come to inaugurate was a kingdom of peace. By riding on a donkey rather than a warhorse, and without an accompanying army of soldiers, he overturned the image of a mighty king victorious in battle. Jesus' Palm Sunday parade was a public peace witness.

Witness to Jesus' Lordship

In the New Testament, the word "witness" refers to observing or being an observer of a specific event such as the death of Jesus (Luke 24:48). It also refers to telling or attesting to the truth as it has been revealed by God (John 8:19). We read in Hebrews 12 of the "cloud of witnesses" who have gone before in testifying to the faith.

The Great Commission challenges followers of Jesus to give witness to Christ's lordship, over all competing claims to their allegiance. This witness to the way of Christ is to be made to all peoples and nations (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). Even governments and authorities are considered to be under Christ's headship (Colossians 1:16). Witnessing to Jesus' lordship includes witnessing to Jesus' way of peace.

Holy Spirit

God appeared on Pentecost as an invisible but unmistakable presence which we understand as the Holy Spirit. The Spirit brought the church into being and dwells within each believer. The Spirit is at work within the church, but

f) Doing Interviews on Radio or Television

Doing interviews for radio or television can be an unsettling experience if you have never done it before because you have less control over what and how you communicate. Nevertheless, providing such interviews are significant opportunities for offering a message of peace to a wide audience.

- * Know who you are – a Christian. Focus on making a faith statement rather than a statement that is politically partisan. Don't be drawn into making partisan comments.
- * Be prepared. Make sure that you have checked your facts and know your information. If you are asked for an interview at an inopportune time, indicate when you are available. It should be within a short time.
- * Know what you want to say. Prepare a short "soundbite" statement which is brief, memorable and to the point: e.g. "Jesus taught us to love your enemies." Be creative and don't use clichés.
- * Say what you want to say. Don't get caught in answering questions at length. Answer briefly and then quickly shift the focus to what you want to say. Stay focused.
- * Watch your tone of voice and choice of words. As a member of the faith community, ensure that you convey a spirit of love and hope.
- * Practise in advance. Use a tape recorder or video camera or simply practise in front of a large mirror. Be yourself.



Adapted from Peace and Justice Support Network, Mennonite Church USA

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Risks and Blessings of Public Peace Witness

The ministry of public peace witness carries with it both risks and blessings. For those who find themselves pre-occupied with the potential risks, it is important to note that there are also risks of **not** engaging in a public witness. Silence or noninvolvement may be perceived as support for a violent or unjust status quo. Oftentimes, the blessings outweigh the risks of involvement, nevertheless it is important to consider what the risks are.

What are some of the risks of engaging in public peace witness?

- 1) There is a risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. When we speak publicly, particularly involving the media, there is always a risk of being mis-represented or misunderstood. One can minimize the risk by preparing in advance and by speaking as clearly and coherently as possible.
- 2) There is a risk of finding oneself in the company of persons or groups who hold to some views or practises that one cannot support. A peace walk, for example, may involve a whole range of groups, some of whom may advance causes that trouble us. A spirit of prayer and discernment is important in situations like this. Some situations may demand our participation in spite of our discomfort; other situations may demand our withdrawal.
- 3) There is the risk that we may feel pressured to minimize our Christian convictions in the interest of finding common ground with others. Sometimes Christians may use "middle axioms" as a way of finding a language that all can understand and support. An example of using middle axiom is for Christians to argue against war—not because it violates the way of Jesus (which would be their primary reason), but because of the terrible destruction and suffering that it causes. There is nothing wrong with using middle axioms; indeed, it can be very helpful. At the same time there may be many opportunities to speak from our faith convictions, and we do well to seize those opportunities.
- 4) There is the risk of seeing public witness as the only legitimate form of peace witness. As indicated in the introduction, the lived-out expression

attention than one that is still. If you decide to include a walk and you anticipate many people, contact local police to discuss whether a parade permit is necessary.

- * Publicize your event. Create a simple poster that can be distributed. Write a brief announcement that can go into church bulletins. Contact youth pastors to extend special invitations to youth.
- * Notify the media. Create a brief news release that can be sent to local TV and radio stations, as well as newspaper(s). The release should be faxed several days in advance and again on the morning of the event.
- * Create brief and concise leaflets that can be distributed to passers-by. The leaflet should include 1) the order of worship and names of the participants, 2) information about the issue being prayed about, and 3) information about who is organizing the prayer service.
- * If you plan to use candles, plan also for the potential of rain, snow or wind. A styrofoam cup will keep a flame lit, but will also create a mess. Make sure to have garbage bags ready to pick up the pieces of styrofoam off the ground.

Delegate the following responsibilities for the day of the prayer service.

- * someone to act as worship leader for the event.
- * someone to lead singing. A small group that can lead some lively singing is great. Drums and/or guitars add energy.
- * one or more people to act as speakers. Speakers should speak for no more than 5 minutes each; they need to be concise, knowledgeable, and personal.
- * someone to act as spokesperson for the media. This person or persons should have their "soundbite" prepared in advance.
- * several people to distribute leaflets. Leafleters need to be friendly and assertive and should make eye-contact with passers-by.
- * someone to take photographs.
- * someone to work with sound equipment. This person should be experienced.
- * several people to deal with disruptions. These persons should have experience or training in conflict management.
- * several people to do any cleanup necessary.

How to's

a) Communicating with Your Member of Parliament



Writing a letter to your Member of Parliament, the Prime Minister or some other elected representative is a very important way to convey a faith-based perspective on a particular issue. One letter to a Member of Parliament is considered to represent the views of one hundred people.

You do not need to be an expert on an issue to express your concerns. Often your personal convictions or related experience is as persuasive as in-depth knowledge of an issue.

Here are some guidelines to follow:

- * Typewritten or neatly written letters convey sincere constituent interest and are taken most seriously. Faxes are next best, and can be particularly useful if time is of the essence. E-mail messages may be disregarded. If you do use e-mail, make sure to include your postal mailing address. This will verify that you are a resident of a particular constituency, and will enable the office to mail a reply letter to you.
- * Keep your letter brief and to the point. The letter should be no longer than 2 pages, and preferably less. Focus on one issue per letter.
- * State the purpose of your letter clearly. If you are asking your Member of Parliament to take a particular action, say so. If you are asking for a response to a particular concern, indicate this as well.
- * Give your reasons for concern about the issue. Do not hesitate to express how your Christian convictions may inform your position. Make sure to include personal experience if it applies. If it seems appropriate, mention MCC connections.
- * Use a helpful tone. A tone that conveys outrage, sarcasm or self-righteousness is not helpful. Be critical, but polite in your criticism. Offer constructive suggestions.

- * Plan to participate as a group. Designate a time and meeting place in advance so that members of the group can find one another. Involve children if at all possible. They will learn much, and their presence will help the adults remember that life is a precious gift. Make special plans that take into account children's physical stamina and interest.
- * Plan to bring a camera or designate one person who will take pictures. You will likely want to record the participation of your group in an event like this.

At the Event

Enter in a spirit of prayer. Pray for those around you, those who are heckling you or others, those you march for and those you march against. Invite God to be present with you, your group, and all the participants.

If you have come from a distance and see media representatives from your community, introduce yourself. They will be happy to have a local person to interview.

Afterwards

- * Discuss the experience with your friends, your Sunday school class, or your small group. Share your reflections during congregational sharing time. Reflect on what else you might do to offer a message of peace.
- * Write an article for your church newsletter, your denominational paper, or the local news media.

Adapted from Peace and Justice Support Network, Mennonite Church USA.

b) Meeting with your Member of Parliament



Meeting with your Member of Parliament is the best way to share your point of view with him or her.

Beforehand

- * Call the MP's constituency office and ask for a meeting. You may have to wait several weeks for an appointment.
- * Plan ahead. Do your research on the issue that you wish to present. Find out your MP's stance on this issue. Plan your questions and follow-up. Gather materials that you wish to share.
- * Take a small group of like-minded people with you. Three or four is usually the optimum size of group. Identify one individual as the group spokesperson and another as note-taker.

At the meeting

- * Smile, relax, get comfortable. Mention mutual friends or acquaintances.
- * Identify the issue that you wish to raise.
- * The spokesperson should take the lead, but all members of the group should speak.
- * Be persistent but polite.
- * Ask what action the MP is prepared to take on your issue. Ask for follow-up.

Afterwards

- * Send a letter of thanks to the MP. Include a summary of the understandings or commitments made.
- * If the meeting was unsatisfactory in its outcome, arrange another meeting in six months.
- * Share information with other groups or the media, as appropriate.

Adapted from "Meeting with Your Member of Parliament," KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives. www.kairoscanada.org

c) Writing a Letter to the Editor

Letters to the editor of your local newspaper provide a way for you to share concerns with many people in your community. Letters are among the most widely read features in the newspaper. Many Members of Parliament will read the newspaper from the constituency they represent as a way of finding out what constituents are concerned about.

Here are some guidelines.

- * Type the letter, double-spaced, on only one side of the paper.
- * Keep your letter less than two pages. It will likely be shortened if it is longer.
- * Deal with one specific topic. Refer to a recent news item, editorial or letter.
- * Include information or an opinion that broadens the discussion from other articles on the issue.
- * Express your thoughts clearly and concisely.
- * Avoid a sarcastic or hostile tone. Also avoid sounding preachy.
- * Refer to any personal experience that informs your view. It will add credibility to your position.
- * Have a friend or co-worker read your letter before you send it off.
- * Sign your name, providing your full address and phone number. You will likely be contacted to ensure that you wrote the letter.



Adapted from Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office Advocacy Handbook

d) Participating in walks, marches or rallies



Beforehand

Think and pray about your reasons for participating in a public march or rally. Are you wishing to offer an alternative to the status quo? Involve your children in a significant event? Witness to God's desire for peace and justice for all?

- * Design a placard or banner to carry. You may wish to identify your group. Use cardboard or firm backing and waterproof lettering. Lettering should be large enough to be seen easily about three metres away. Think about how you will carry a large banner. Keep your messages short and respectful. A few good placards are more effective than many messy ones.
- * Think about what you will wear. Plan to wear comfortable shoes and clothes appropriate to the weather. If it's hot, wear a hat and take along sunscreen and water to drink. If it's cold, remember that you will get colder while you are standing still than while you are walking; dress accordingly. If it's raining, find alternatives to umbrellas, as they can be dangerous and obstruct other people's view.
- * Prepare a leaflet which explains your position and which you can distribute to people around you and to any media representatives that are present. Make sure to include contact information. If you are representing a congregation, include an invitation to join your congregation in worship.
- * Be prepared for radio and television interviews. Determine the main points you wish to make and how to do so simply and in a few quotable phrases. If you are part of a larger group, ensure that one person is designated as a spokesperson.

- * Share copies of your communications. If you write to the Prime Minister, make sure to send a copy to your Member of Parliament and to leaders of the opposition parties. Depending on the nature of the issue, also consider sending a copy to your local newspaper.
- * Say thank-you. If your Member of Parliament takes a position that you believe contributes to peace and justice, make sure to send a letter of appreciation.
- * Consider a group letter-writing initiative. Organizing an initiative so that a particular Member of Parliament receives a number of thoughtful letters on a particular issue can be an effective way of using the letter-writing tool. Having people sign their names and addresses onto a prepared letter is a second choice option.

Adapted from MCC U.S. Washington Office Advocacy Handbook

e) Holding a Public Prayer Service



A public prayer service is a worship service focused on a particular concern (either local, national or global) and held in a public place. A public place usually means outdoors, but it could also be inside a city hall building or a provincial legislature building. The aim of praying and worshiping publicly is to bring a faith perspective to an issue that concerns the community, and to invite members of the public to encounter God.

Beforehand

- * Gather a group to plan the prayer service. Be as inclusive as you can be, considering gender, age, race and ethnicity, denomination or faith group. Clarify your goals and objectives together.
- * Pray together as you plan your prayer service.
- * Do your research. Know the issue that you are concerned about. Make sure that you can back up your assertions with sound sources.
- * Choose a site. Consider aspects such as accessibility to public transportation and parking, visibility to passers-by, and the symbolic significance of a particular venue. When you have decided on a particular location, obtain permission to hold your event. Be transparent about your purpose.
- * Choose a date and a time. Consider the day and time that is most likely to appeal to members of your congregation or group, as well as your intended audience.
- * Plan the outline for your service. Think of including prayers, litanies, scripture readings, songs, brief reflections, moments of silence, candle-lighting, etc. If the weather is very cold, keep the service brief (a half hour or so). It is better to keep people's attention for a shorter time, than to have people leave early. Also, if you are hoping for adults to bring children, think of ways to make this experience meaningful for children.
- * Decide whether you want the group to walk from one location to another as part of the action. Walking often adds to the enjoyment of the experience. Also, a group that is moving is likely to attract more

of a commitment to peace must remain primary. When we forgive one another, when we resolve group conflicts in healthy ways, when we befriend those different from us, we are witnessing for peace in important, if not public, ways. Public witness is no replacement for the lived-out expression of peace.

What are some of the blessings?

- 1) It is a blessing to share God's gift of peace with others. Many people long to hear that the gospel of Jesus is a gospel of peace. Many others long to hear that the peace of Jesus is shalom and that it encompasses not only personal spiritual peace, but also justice, material wellbeing, right relations. Witnessing publicly to the gospel of peace is a way of engaging in mission and evangelism. It is a way of sharing the good news with those who are searching for it.
- 2) It is a blessing to join with others in a common cause. It can be tremendously exhilarating to join with other people in the pursuit of peace. Where we work together with strangers and, especially, those who are different from us, the exercise of working and witnessing together is in itself peacemaking.
- 3) It is a blessing to experience God at work in new ways. When we participate in public peace witness, we open ourselves to new ways that God can speak to us and through us. We may be surprised by the moving of the God's spirit in our midst.

See the section "Stories of Public Peace Witness" for some stories of blessing.



At the event

Gather all team members in advance. Remind participants of the purpose of the gathering and their particular responsibilities. Encourage them to demonstrate a friendly and cheerful attitude to any members of the public who may pass by or join in. Pray together before the service begins. Be open to the leading of the spirit.

Afterwards

- * Gather to evaluate the experience and your learnings.
- * Write an article for your congregational or community newsletter.
- * Keep a record of important contacts, learnings, etc.

Adapted from Peace and Justice Network, Mennonite Church USA

also beyond it, moving ahead of it, drawing creation back into God's plan (Romans 8:21-23).

The structures of creation and society (government, civil society) are often reluctant, even rebellious agents of God's will. Instead of liberating, they oppress; instead of promoting peace, they make war. But God has set these structures up as stewards and as keepers of creation (Romans 13:1). Governing structures cannot lead the world to the fulness of God's intentions – life in Christ – but they are mandated by God to provide a just, peaceful, sustainable order for all members of society.

The Holy Spirit is at work, beyond the church, within institutions and structures not identified as Christian. Christians participate in the work of the Spirit by sharing and shaping a common moral vision, and by calling on governments and authorities to standards of behaviour that point in the direction of God's justice and shalom. This is another motivation for public peace witness.

Love for neighbour

Jesus told his disciples that the most important of commandments were these: to love God and to love the neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:37-38). Loving one's neighbour is demonstrated in practical actions of caring and compassion (1 John 3:17-18). Clothing the naked, offering food to the hungry or drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick or imprisoned – these are concrete ways of offering love to the neighbour (Matthew 25:31-46).

Loving neighbour also means pursuing justice. When Jesus made his inaugural address he announced that he had come to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives and liberty to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus' words were a reference to the biblical Jubilee. The Jubilee was a celebration occurring every fifty years which intended to restore justice and equality by cancelling debts, releasing slaves and returning land to its rightful owners (Leviticus 25:8-17). Jesus also carried on the prophetic tradition of calling those in authority to demonstrate justice and fairness in their treatment of the poorer and more vulnerable members of society.

Loving neighbour and pursuing justice includes individual acts of charity. But it also means building social and economic structures in such a way that people are able to live out their God-given potential. Advocacy and public witness are important ways that Christians pursue justice and love for their neighbours.

Stories

A high-school student becomes a peace evangelist

Scott Albrecht grew up in the faith community of Hillcrest Mennonite Church (New Hamburg, Ontario) where he became rooted in the Mennonite peace tradition, especially after hearing the stories of several church members who had been conscientious objectors during both world wars. He could not have known that his acceptance of peacemaking would have a rather unexpected effect!

When he was in grade 13, Scott wrote an editorial for the local newspaper in which he shared his belief in Christ's call to love our enemies. He explained that on Remembrance Day he would remember war but would not honor the soldiers who killed, and that instead of wearing the red poppy he would wear the MCC button that said, "To Remember is to Work for Peace."

The editorial was published in the local newspaper to a readership of several hundred thousand people. Over the next few weeks, some twenty letters-to-the-editor were published in response to Scott's editorial, some of which were quite negative. While he had support from his family and several Mennonite church leaders, Scott still wondered if he had written the right words.

Then one night he had a phone call from Ellis Brown, a man who read the editorial and wanted to hear more. "I read this article and some lights went on," recalls Ellis. "It was very personal because it made me think about my own father who had fought in World War I. And it was evangelistic because it not only moved me toward a position of absolute pacifism, but it also moved me toward a greater awareness of Mennonite faith."

Eventually Scott and Ellis got together to talk about war, peace, and faith. Scott attended a mass at Ellis' Catholic church; then Ellis attended a communion and foot washing service at Scott's Mennonite church. The two became good friends. Later, Ellis was re-baptized and joined the Hillcrest Mennonite Church. Both are now part-time members of Christian Peacemaker Teams.

and other forms of civil disobedience became issues of concern in some sectors. Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) was formed in 1986, training unarmed peacemakers for intervention in situations of violence; a Canadian office was established in 1997. In the weeks and months leading up to the 2003 U.S. war against Iraq, many Mennonites and Brethren in Christ across the country participated in actions intended to resist Canadian involvement in the war.

An activist approach to peace witness, such as that represented by CPT, continues to be controversial among many Canadian Mennonites and Brethren in Christ. Nevertheless, there is a growing sense that sharing the gospel also means sharing the good news of Jesus' way of peace.

standing in the public square

standing in the public square
 anticipating unsure
 cold winter winds
 hurry along the last dry leaves
 people gather ones twos
 look – an eagle soars above
 the eagle is the guardian of the tree of peace

people gather groups busloads
 toques mittens scarves and furry hoods
 wrapped in blankets from grandma
 we will sing for peace

god of grace and glory
 grant us wisdom and courage
 for the living of these days

we will sing
 through our fears and frustrations
 shape them into courage and faith and hope
 sing side by side bodies warming each other sing

we shall walk through the valley
 of the shadow of death
 we shall walk through the valley in peace

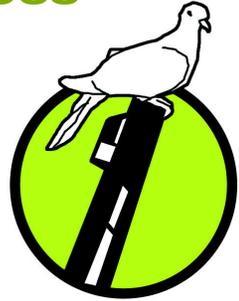
we've heard too many half truths untruths lies
 too many dead bodies too much brutality
 and fear

o healing river
 send down your waters
 and wash the blood from off the sand

siyahamb' ekukhanyen' kwenkhos'
 djembe drum keeps our hearts beating
 voices for freedom for light
 bodies swaying
 feet moving keeping warm

Historical Overview of Public Peace Witness

Mennonites and Brethren in Christ are considered "historic peace churches." We understand that a faith commitment to Jesus Christ means a commitment to Jesus' way of peace and nonviolence. Traditionally, however, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ in Canada have eschewed the notion of public peace witness. We have understood our task as living out the ethic of love and nonviolence in the context of the church, rather than in prophetic witness to the state and broader society.



At the heart of this understanding is a theology which has sometimes been called "two kingdom theology." According to this theology, the two kingdoms—church and state—have their respective moral standards. The church is expected to live "within the perfection of Christ." This is in contrast to the state, which is considered "beyond the perfection of Christ." The state is ordained by God to keep order and may use armed force for that purpose; Christians, however, must abstain from any use of armed force.

For Canadian Mennonites and Brethren in Christ, abstaining from the use of armed force has meant seeking assurances from the state that we would be afforded military exemption during wartime. Such assurances were offered by Upper Canada when Mennonites and Tunkers (an earlier name for Brethren in Christ) first began to enter Canada from the United States in the 1780s; it happened again when Mennonites from south Russia sought re-settlement in western Canada in the 1870s. During wartime, Mennonites have found it important to communicate with government officials to determine whether these earlier assurances would be honoured. In a sense, these communications could be considered a form of public peace witness. However, the primary concern was to ensure continued exemption privileges for young Mennonite men. It was not yet a form of advocacy for those beyond Mennonite and Brethren in Christ communities.

World War II marked a turning point for Canadian Mennonites and Brethren in Christ. For the first time, Canada demanded that conscientious objectors perform alternative service. Many CO's served in road construction, national parks, hospitals and on farms. The experience convinced the church of the importance of demonstrating a visible commitment to peace at all times, not just during wartime. Voluntary service programs developed directly out of alternative service as an expression of that commitment.

Iraqi Diplomat Came to say “Thank you”

A senior diplomat from the Iraqi Embassy in Ottawa called the MCC Ottawa office to ask for an appointment. When he came, on November 8, 2002, it was simply to say thank you.

Bill Janzen, MCC Ottawa director, had written to inform him about MCC's current relief efforts in Iraq. MCC was planning to send a shipment of 28,000 school kits— assembled by children and others from supporting churches—for distribution to schools in Iraq. The letter outlined other ways MCC was responding to the Iraq crisis.

"We pray to God that there will not be a war. Also, we are urging the government of Canada...to do all it can to prevent a war," Janzen said in the letter.

The diplomat's visit lasted about 40 minutes. It took place just after the UN Security Council had adopted a resolution making war more likely. It was clear that this weighed on the diplomat, said Janzen. The possibility of a war had come closer. "He was worried and sad."

Janzen showed him the letter to the Canadian Prime Minister signed by nearly 2,500 people from Canadian Mennonite churches, as well as some other material sent out by MCC. When the diplomat saw that the first point in MCC's 'call to action' was "pray for peace with Iraq", he said, "this is the most important."

Janzen said the diplomat's "thank you" should be directed not to him but to the people in the churches who supported the relief effort and the call for peace.

Adapted from MCC News Release

Public Witness for Peace: A Toolkit for Christians

1. What is a public peace witness?
2. Historical overview
3. Biblical motivations
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5. How to's
 - a) communicating with your MP
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 - c) writing a letter to the editor
 - d) participating in marches and rallies
 - e) holding a public prayer service
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6. Stories
 - a) high school student . . .
 - b) standing in the public square
 - c) Iraqi diplomat says thank-you