

Christian Peacemaker Teams:

Uniting Word and Deed through “Being-With”

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The dominant paradigm through which Mennonites perceive Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) is that we are people who “get in the way” between two warring parties. Expanding and challenging that perception, former CPTer Sheila Provencher offers that “CPT was and is in Iraq to work.... But above all, we are there to listen. To just ‘be-with.’ And we all agree—it is worth our lives.”²

Over the past decades, CPT has intentionally moved away from the “getting in the way” paradigm, but Mennonite perception of our work has yet to catch up. Today, the invitation to potential CPTers is to stake your life on the spiritual practice of “being with.” We understand this practice as being with yourself and with others: on your work team, your family, your enemies, or your global neighbors. We develop your stamina for difficult conversations. This practice requires you to sit in devastating contexts, and insists that you cultivate an analysis of power relations. Our new mission statement, adopted in 2012, reflects this new paradigm: Building partnerships to transform violence and oppression. In other words, in order to deal with evil we seek to build strategic and powerful partnerships alongside those whom we are with.

This commitment to *being-with* transforms personal character and results in advocacy that creates social justice. Our evangelism—if I can use that word—happens inside the structures of the current church, mosque, and temple, rather than being focused on non-Christians. For a more extensive read on the “creative missiological tension within CPT,” see Alain Epp-Weaver’s excellent review of CPT primary source materials.³ In that piece, Epp-Weaver notes that with an approach that advocates interposition between two armed parties, “missional agency is located primarily in the self-sacrificial (even heroic)

¹ Sarah Thompson is executive director of Christian Peacemaker Teams.

² Quoted in Kathleen Kern, *In Harm's Way: A History of Christian Peacemaker Teams* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 497.

³ Alain Epp Weaver, “‘Getting in the Way’ or ‘Being-With’: Missiologies in Tension in the Work of Christian Peacemaker Teams,” *Mission Focus: Annual Review* 19 (2011): 260–77.

activity of the CPTers. While Provencher might not reject this vision of CPT's work, her statement above voices a concern about the limits of action and positively values the... 'being-with' of accompaniment: in this missiology... the missional agency shifts... from the CPTer towards the people amongst whom CPTers live.⁴ As CPTers, we are invited to open ourselves to transformation by the light of God in those we accompany.

We invite people to be formed by disciplined engagement in the rigorous contexts we find ourselves. This is a project of repentance, repentance for many of the situations that religious institutions—particularly the Christian church—helped to cause. Over the course of our institutional life we have developed some expertise in dismantling the oppression the church still continues to uphold. This is a gift to the church, allowing for grassroots expressions of faith to replace Christendom.

We are who we are because of nearly thirty years of peacemaking in the field alongside those most impacted by imperial, racist, heteronormative, and sexist violence, regardless of their religious tradition or perspectives on faith. "By accompanying communities marginalized and uprooted by systems of power, CPTers, in the words of Wendy Lehman, sample 'the frustration and powerlessness one feels in the face of (seemingly) overwhelming force.'⁵ Faith-rootedness does make a difference in this work, but we observe that faith that produces peace is not limited to those who believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and their Lord.

In their article, "Keeping Good News and Good Works Together," Ronald Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh ask, "What might have happened if top Mennonite leaders had dared to wholeheartedly endorse CPT...?"⁶ Indeed, here is the larger question for the Mennonite church, leaders and lay people alike. At our steering committee meetings, representatives of our sponsors (of which the Mennonite Church USA is one) consult and discuss with us to discern how best to follow our divinely inspired mission. From the beginning we have been sponsored by multiple denominations. As we have a multi-faith peacemaker corps, discussions are underway about sponsorship from organizations with diverse faith affiliations. The invitation for deep endorsement and participation

4 Ibid., 262.

5 Ibid., 269. Lehman is quoted by Tricia Gates Brown, *Getting in the Way: Stories from Christian Peacemaker Teams* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2005), 99.

6 Ronald J. Sider and Heidi Rolland Unruh, "Keeping Good News and Good Works Together," *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Voice*, eds. Stanley W. Green and James R. Krabill (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2015), 50. This essay is reproduced elsewhere in this journal.

by Mennonites remains strong.

I invite each Anabaptist church to support one person to be a CPTer. It is in the material context of walking Palestinian children to school, standing alongside Colombian farmers, examining the Doctrine of Discovery, or participating in a co-existence workshop in Iraqi Kurdistan that we can have these important and protracted conversations.

Sider and Unruh state, “If Jesus is only another great prophet, there is little compelling reason to go around the block or the world inviting others to believe in him.”⁷ Jesus’ tactics for nonviolent direct action, community building, inclusion, faith renewal, and enemy love have unique and important aspects to them. Carol Rose, who served as our co-director and then director from 2004 to 2012, loves to tell the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman (Matthew 15:21–28). For Rose, this story gives us a way to understand our being-with task of openness to transformation by the other, even those we have been taught to hate and despise, as Jews were taught to hate Syrophenicians.

Without a particular type of belief, there can still be a lot of motivation for gutsy peacemaking contained in examination of the tactics of the social movement we call Christianity.. We stand on the shoulders of ancient and modern prophets who challenged the church. We seek to honor them with our work together today. Each CPTer is on a faith journey, and our organization aims to be a container for each of us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. We definitely haven’t gotten through the arguing and grumbling part, but folks are shining like stars (Philippians 2:12b–15).

Sider and Unruh request a more intentional grounding. Structures for our grounded intentionality include organization-wide training in the history of religious peacemaking, taking a deep look at our traditional texts, naming what is life-giving and what isn’t, together in community. Intentionality includes team discussions. We know we need to share this world with people who hold different and similar truth claims, so we are giving careful thought to what that means on the scale of CPT as an organization. CPTers are not reducible to a lowest denominator of belief; we do not feign that we all believe the same thing! We wrestle with the differences in our conceptual frameworks. These frameworks tend to be quite influenced by personality, material reality, and family systems. They tend to vary more in between people of the “same” faith background than between two given people of “different” faith traditions. We have valuable conflict and dialogue about what shared power and access means. As an organization we are currently Christian-identified but have a multi-faith

⁷ Ibid., 51.

membership.

For some CPTers, the deity and resurrection of Jesus is central to their peacemaking. Those CPTers that believe differently do not try to take that away from them. Everyone is invited to draw upon whatever is most central to their being in our shared work of being-with. People are deeply motivated for many reasons to love enemies, lay down their life, and work in an intense team environment to create space for peace. We respect all paths to these practices. We continue to fulfill our mission of building partnerships to transform violence and oppression. Come join us.