

# Churches oppose troop surge in Iraq: Encourage "a robust diplomatic effort"

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Mainline church leaders are expressing opposition to President Bush's plan to escalate U.S. troop presence in Iraq. Some clergy drew parallels to Martin Luther King's impassioned pleas decades ago against the ultimately fruitless American war in Vietnam.

The president told a nationwide television audience on January 10 that the only way to achieve victory in Iraq is to send some 21,500 more troops to help the Iraqi government, beset by sectarian killings, to achieve stability in and around Baghdad.

"We are disappointed by the lack of vision and imagination which sees more force as the only answer," said Jim Winkler, the chief social justice spokesperson for the United Methodist Church, of which Bush is a member. "This is not a time to escalate a failed policy of war but to begin a serious attempt at a robust diplomatic effort."

Even as Democrats, newly in control of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, debated what steps to take to oppose or curtail, if possible, the Bush administration's plans, Winkler urged Congress to withhold any additional money to continue the costly war that was launched in 2003.

"Congress should provide funding only to bring U.S. troops home and to aid in rebuilding Iraq," said Winkler, general secretary of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society. The denomination, like most mainline churches, has opposed the U.S.-led invasion and occupation since its prelude four years ago when the administration argued that the Iraq regime had weapons of mass destruction—a claim found to be false.

In his statement January 12, three days before the King holiday this year, Winkler recalled that the civil rights leader said the people of Vietnam must have seen us as

“strange liberators” amid the destruction caused by the fighting. “So, too, is the United States viewed today by the people of Iraq,” Winkler said.

When King “broke his silence” about the Vietnam War 40 years ago at the Riverside Church in New York City, said John H. Thomas, the top official of the United Church of Christ, the black Baptist minister warned that “procrastination is the thief of time” and “too late” is the pathetic excuse of remnant civilizations.

“We still have a choice today: Nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation,” said King then, as quoted by Thomas. The UCC general minister-president assessed Bush’s speech as “morally deficient.” The war “that failed to meet the criteria for a just war . . . cannot achieve the goals of a just peace,” he said.

Thomas said that people of faith must not be naive about the “reality of evil” in the world. He commended the bipartisan Iraq Study Group report, which called for a diminishing but more strategic military force and for diplomacy with Iraq’s neighbors.

Thomas said the war in Iraq has deterred the U.S. from “meaningful attentiveness to the tragedy of Darfur, the unresolved conflict between Israel and Palestine, and the crushing poverty faced by so many people in the world.”

Noting the need for “a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians,” Katharine Jefferts Schori, new presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, said she was saddened by the president’s failure to address peacemaking in the larger regional context. “Others have pointed out that the road to peace goes through Jerusalem, not Baghdad,” she said in a statement.

“We continue to pray for our soldiers and their families, as well as for all the people of the Middle East, seeking God’s wisdom in the search for peace with justice,” she said.

The National Council of Churches statement characterized Bush’s call for more troops “morally unsupportable.” In the wake of “the barbaric execution of Saddam Hussein,” which the NCC said “mocks” the ideals of democracy and justice, the White House decision to escalate the military force contradicted both the Iraq Study Group recommendations and the November election results.