

Christians protest the war: Under the peace witness banner

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Rick Ufford-Chase, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), was arrested last September in Washington, D.C., while demonstrating against the Iraq war along with four other Presbyterian ministers. “We wondered what we might do to invite other Presbyterians to take similar action,” he said.

Ufford-Chase, executive director of the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, contacted peace groups such as Sojourners/Call to Renewal. What developed was a worship service and rally at the Washington National Cathedral and acts of civil disobedience near the White House on March 16—four days before the fourth anniversary of the war in Iraq.

Though snowstorms and icy wind may have reduced the numbers at the “Christian Peace Witness for Iraq,” well over 3,000 people showed up for the early evening worship service. Many who worshiped at the cathedral walked three miles carrying candles to Lafayette Park, which is across from the White House.

Protesters who broke demonstration rules by staying on the White House sidewalk were handcuffed and required to pay \$100 fines, according to the Associated Press. A total of 222 protesters were arrested, including Ufford-Chase, one of six former PCUSA General Assembly moderators who took part in the protest.

Ufford-Chase said he felt the event marked a turning point in Christian opposition to the war. “There was clear, strong resolve and consensus that Christians will not rest until this war comes to an end,” he said. “I expect that something more will grow out of this.”

As the war and military occupation begins its fifth year, the Democratic majorities in Congress are seeking to put pressure on the Bush administration to make plans for withdrawal. More than 3,200 members of the U.S. military and an estimated 60,000 Iraqis have been killed since March 20, 2003. By the end of this year, the war costs

will have reached \$500 billion, according to some estimates.

The peace witness banner encapsulated the goals of the demonstration: “End the occupation, support the troops—bring them home, commit to rebuild Iraq, say ‘no’ to torture, say ‘yes’ to justice.”

President Bush, absent from the White House on the weekend of the protest, on March 19 reiterated his commitment to the war. “It can be tempting to look at the challenges in Iraq and conclude our best option is to pack up and go home,” Bush said. “That may be satisfying in the short run, but I believe the consequences for American security would be devastating. . . . Four years after this war began, the fight is difficult, but it can be won.”

Ufford-Chase and fellow organizer Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners/Call to Renewal, disagreed with the president. “The war can’t be won,” Wallis said. “The war shouldn’t have been fought in the first place. In fighting this war, America is losing its soul.” The three dozen Christian groups involved in planning the protest mounted “a kind of a Christian witness long overdue,” Wallis said.

The event might have been larger except for traffic tie-ups, said Dan Nejfelt, media coordinator. “Foul weather caused us to lose four buses coming from Pennsylvania with at least 170 people and a bus carrying 58 from Harrisonburg, Virginia,” he said. Before the event, sponsors estimated that 700 would seek arrest.

Organizers distributed 3,200 tickets for the cathedral service, which appeared full to observers, “and there were more than 400 at our overflow location, New York Avenue Presbyterian Church,” Nejfelt said.

One speaker, Raphael G. Warnock, senior pastor at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, criticized Congress as “too morally inept to intervene to stop the war.” Addressing Bush as “my Christian brother,” Warnock said Americans do not need a surge in troops, but “a surge in conscience and a surge in activism and a surge in truth-telling.”

Celeste Zappala, a United Methodist from Philadelphia, stirred those gathered at the cathedral with her story of how a uniformed man came to her door to inform her of the death of her son, Sgt. Sherwood Baker, who served in the National Guard. United Methodist bishop John Schol of the Washington area, another participant, said he and his bishop colleagues “have committed ourselves to acts of prophetic witness on

behalf of peace.”

Among those who traveled far was Lucas Johnson, a member of the Baptist Peace Fellowship board and a student at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. He caught a bus to Washington with Presbyterians and returned to Atlanta the next day. Lamenting the “human cost of the war,” Johnson apologized for Baptists who make “subtle and more blatant endorsements of this war in the name of the Christian faith.” Johnson said he took part in the peace witness “not just to speak out, but as an act of repentance.”