

Imperial Nature: Joy tempered by mourning

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Church leaders in many parts of the world, including General Secretary Samuel Kobia of the World Council of Churches, expressed relief and joy at the freeing of three members of Christian Peacemaker Teams held hostage in Iraq.

In a daring morning raid on March 23, a British-led force of 200 soldiers and experts, relying on a tip, gained access to a building in a rural area and found Canadians Jim Loney, 41, and Harmeet Singh Sooden, 32, along with Norman Kember, 74, of London. They had been abducted at gunpoint November 26 in Baghdad with American Tom Fox, whose body was found March 10 with gunshot wounds to his head and chest.

Kobia, writing to CPT codirector Douglas Pritchard, said that the ecumenical leaders “pray that amid all the pain and anxiety of this case, those engaged in the violence in Iraq may remember and heed the many voices, both Christian and Muslim, who made publicly clear that among the many people of faith concerned for peace there are also people called to be peacemakers.”

Bob Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, said his joy was tempered by mourning for Fox, a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). “His abductors undoubtedly singled him out because he was an American,” he said.

Some observers criticized the CPT’s methods and goals, including the group’s refusal to work with the military officials who sought to rescue the hostages.

Alan Billings, director of the Center for Ethics and Religion at Lancaster University in northwest England, criticized Kember and the peacemaker mission as “self-indulgent” and likely to promote further kidnappings because of the news attention that hostages receive. By “dropping in” on areas of conflict, Billings told the BBC, they were putting the lives of troops and others at risk.

On his arrival back in Britain March 25, Kember said, "I do not believe that a lasting peace is achieved by armed forces, but I pay tribute to their courage and thank those who played a part in my release." He added: "I now need to reflect on my experience—was I foolhardy or rational?" But later Kember said he saw "no point in regretting" his decision to go to Baghdad to try to help the Iraqi people.

At Harrow Baptist Church in north London, where Kember and his wife attended a service of thanksgiving, the pastor, Bob Gardiner, said, "The gospel makes us all take absolutely irresponsible risks for the kingdom."

In Chicago, Sara Reschly, a development coordinator with CPT, said March 29, "I have not been really surprised at the criticisms—in general, the idea of unarmed, nonviolent church people going into war zones is seen as abnormal and people become uncomfortable."

Reschly, who called herself a "peace soldier," said, "I have been more surprised at the volume of supportive calls and letters we have received at our two offices in Chicago and Toronto." *-Ecumenical News International*