

Accompanying War with Peace

A Christian Witness in Baghdad



Photo: Christian Peacemaker Teams

Beth Pyles

Beth Pyles (M.Div., 2005) is a candidate for ordination in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and recently returned from Baghdad, where she served with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). Ministry is her second career; Pyles practiced law for 22 years before entering seminary. As a member of CPT, she spent seven weeks in Iraq in September and October 2005, four weeks in Amman, Jordan, and then eight more weeks in Baghdad from January to March 2006. She is now home in Fairmont, West Virginia, seeking a call to a Presbyterian church that feels a similar sense of call to the ministry of peace and justice in the larger world. When she returns to Iraq depends in part on the results of that search.

by Beth Pyles

Although I am Presbyterian, I have been a philosophical pacifist since I was a child growing up during the era of the Vietnam war. But other than espousing a general belief that war and killing are wrong and only led to more violence, I did little to promote peace. I entered PTS in the summer of 2001 and was in Princeton when the 9/11 attacks took place. From that horrible day until now, I have felt that we of the United States have been far too eager to use the violent force of war to avenge our loss and impose our collective will on others. Struggling to find a way to enact the peace of Christ, I learned of the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams and joined them as a reservist following my seminary graduation. I spent two weeks on a delegation to Colombia in May and June 2005, and one month in training in Chicago in July and August 2005 before heading to Iraq. CPT emerged from the traditional peace churches in answer to a simple question: "What would it look like if Christians devoted to making peace were as intentional in their training and effort as soldiers are to the

craft of making war?” Traditional CPT work usually includes accompaniment, literally walking with people in an effort to defuse the violence and provide a witness to the world of what we have seen.

In Iraq, accompaniment includes going with Iraqis to governmental and coalition locations where they would not otherwise go out of fear for their safety, as well as separate accompaniments of groups of Palestinians living in Iraq trying to leave the country. CPT has also worked on detainee issues, helping families locate their loved ones and advocating for their humane treatment and their due process rights, and helping to form two MPT (Muslim Peacemaker Teams) groups in Iraq, providing training and support and engaging in joint efforts.

I remember one Sunday in Iraq, a teammate went with me to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The service was in Arabic, but it was grand to be in worship with fellow Christians, even though my understanding was limited. The trip there was occasioned by car bombs; there were six explosions near churches that Sunday, apparently in reaction to racist anti-Muslim cartoons in a newspaper in Denmark. As we were driven to church by one of our drivers and his teenaged son, we saw smoke from one bomb, and a car on fire in the distance from another bomb. That bomb exploded in our driver's neighborhood. Our driver and his son are lovely people who smile and laugh a lot, but this was a quiet drive and the son sat chewing his fingernails until a quick cell phone call home established that all were well.

We decided to proceed to church and had to park more than a block away. The son escorted us down the road, admonishing us not to speak English. We made it safely there, accompanied by a 14-year-old boy/man. I came to accompany others, but spend much of my time being accompanied.

On the night of Friday, March 10, CPT in Baghdad learned that the body of Tom Fox, one of the four CPTers held captive since November 26, had been found by Iraqi police. The team in Iraq had made a commitment that whenever any of our friends were released, healthy or sick, alive or dead, we would accompany them home. As I was the team member scheduled to leave Iraq

next, I would accompany Tom's remains. Even though Tom was a civilian, his remains would be transported by military transport to Dover, Delaware, for an autopsy. I received permission to accompany him and got as far as Anaconda Air Force Base in Balad, Iraq, only to be turned back two days later, permission denied. In the meantime, I stayed on the base with the Army Reserve Mortuary Unit that received Tom's body. I was treated with kindness and respect and spent time in vigil and conversation with young soldiers. Even though I could not accompany Tom's remains, I was allowed to walk with them onto the transport plane.

It was pre-dawn. My new friends brought out Tom's casket and I saw that it was draped with an American flag. I was surprised; Tom was not a soldier (as a conscientious objector, he served in Vietnam as a member of the Marine Corps band). For the soldiers, it was an act of honor and respect, and I was touched and even smiled a bit at the irony.

They loaded Tom's remains into a van to take to the plane and I rode along. The cargo plane was immense, and entering into its empty hold felt like stepping into the *Close Encounters* space ship; this was alien territory for me. The plane's engines were running, drowning out all other noise. I walked behind the soldiers, who took Tom's body to the front and set the casket down on the floor of the plane. The soldiers saluted. I approached and read from John 1, ending with the declaration that the darkness has not overcome the light. When I returned to the outside of the plane, with the same respect, but without the flag or salutes, the soldiers carried in the body of an Iraqi detainee (all detainees who die in U.S. or coalition custody are taken to Dover for an autopsy). As they walked by, I started to recite the Muslim "Allah Akbar," meaning



Photo: Christian Peacemaker Teams

Both Pyles's former CPT colleague Tom Fox talks with Iraqi children before he was taken captive. Fox's body was recovered in March.

"God is great," but I could not remember any more, so for Tom and this unknown detainee, I recited the words of Job 1, "Naked I came into the world, naked I will depart. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

And I laughed through my tears that even in death, Tom was accompanying an Iraqi safely to his destination. There could be no more fitting end than to see these two comrades in death side by side, ministered to by young soldiers from Tom's home.

No more anger, no more fear, no more violence; only kindness and peace. And I wondered how many more will die before moments of peace for the dead can be transformed into a lasting peace for the living.

Back in Baghdad, we struggled with how to honor the memory of our friend in a way that, as he did in his life, promotes peace and reconciliation. We dream of starting a date palm grove, each tree a living memorial to those who have died—Sunni, Shi'a, Christian; it is the dying here that is the great unifier across so many divides. Perhaps the living can come together in peace as they honor the dead. We dream, we hope.

On Thursday, March 23, CPT learned that the three colleagues who had been held in Iraq had been found alive. As we remember joyfully the release of Norman Kember, Jim Loney, and Harmeet Sooden, we remember the many thousands, even millions, in Iraq who continue to be held in captivity: the captivity of detention without due process, the captivity of uncertainty about the lives of loved ones who have been disappeared, the captivity of the hostages taken from family and friends (during the two months following the kidnapping of my colleagues, more than 350 Iraqis were kidnapped), and the captivity to the fear and dread of living in the chaos and brutality of war and violence. ■