

Lifting Candles Together

**A mini-guide for
organizing public peace
witnesses and vigils**

ChristianPeaceWitness.org



Why Christians choose to witness publicly for peace

We at Christian Peace Witness for Iraq believe that public prayer and witness change us and change the world. Research shows that people who take action for peace have more hope during bleak times. Amid all our activities, can we find time to speak out, to give our communities and our children hope that war is not the only means available to confront countries with whom the United States disagrees?

A Cloud of Witnesses: In the late 1980s, countless East Germans gathered weekly in churches to light candles and pray for peace. They brought down the Berlin wall after decades of patient witness. Churches played a central role in organizing the ‘People Power’ movement in the Philippines that nonviolently ousted the brutal Marcos regime. In South Africa, public Christian witness prevented a bloodbath when apartheid finally was overthrown. Recently in Myanmar/Burma, the witness of monks inspired the country and the world. The U.S. civil rights movement had significant Christian leadership and participation.

Christ is calling Christians in the United States to offer a public alternative to violence and war. We witness for peace because as disciples of Jesus Christ, that is our call and our message—peace with God and neighbor sum up the Christian gospel. We witness because we cannot be silent. We witness because we have hope the world can be a different place. We witness because we want to invite others out of despair or inaction or violence into the hope of love, truth, justice and peace. We witness because we choose to be faithful to Jesus, Prince of Peace.

Christian Peace Witness for Iraq is an ecumenical group of Partner organizations and leaders who feel called by our faith to raise an effective Christian voice for peace. We are dedicated to ending the war with Iraq and encouraging an Iraqi-led peace process. CPWI was formed in the fall of 2006 and has encouraged and organized peace

witnesses throughout the country.

The five commitments of our witness may be summarized as:

- End the U.S. war and occupation
- Support our troops
- Support an Iraqi-led peace process
- Say NO to torture
- Say YES to justice

For the details and biblical background of our commitments visit ChristianPeaceWitness.org.

Approaching people about a vigil or witness

Background: It is tempting to feel other Christians are apathetic. When we look more closely we find that what looks like ‘apathy’ is a mask for a sense of powerlessness and a lack of leadership. Many people without a local, supportive climate for discussion and dissent simply let their attention be absorbed in their busy lives. In our CPWI experience, ‘apathetic’ people often respond when we are able to communicate warmth, dignity, community and confidence about Christian peace witness.

How to be inviting: Center yourself in prayer. Offer a space to witness TO something, not just protest AGAINST something. A positive emphasis allows us to inspire with God’s vision and to give people who have doubts about their earlier support of the war a safe place to change their minds. Avoid appeals to guilt and fear. Sidestep our culture’s tendency to marginalize and stereotype dissent. Tap into the richness of biblical justice-seeking and peacemaking. Inspire people with stories of Christians and their public witness. Use Bible stories and passages for hope.

Consider another angle: Many of us have participated in vigils calling for the safe return of our troops, and it can be hard to energize new audiences to attend events wrestling with same political question of withdrawing US forces. You

might consider looking at the conflict from a new angle. What about a vigil for Iraqi refugees?

An Example: Begin by connecting with your contact in-person or by telephone, perhaps by asking how things are going. Listen and ask appropriate follow-up question(s) about their response. Here's an example of a way of opening up space about Iraq:

“Lately, I’ve been thinking about what God is inviting Christians to do about “Peace on Earth.” I am touched by how many of my Christian friends are frustrated, wounded and angry about the war in Iraq. More and more they are using words like ‘anguished’ to describe their feelings.

The Reality: “I see growing numbers of people in our communities who have no place or time to express their feelings about the war. I sense that there are dozens of Christians in our area who have strong questions or frustration or anger about this war. If you and I were to set up a time and place for Christians to express these feelings, we might be surprised at the response. What do you think?

It doesn't have to be complicated: “For example, we could quite easily set up and hold a vigil for 20 minutes after a worship service. We could ask our pastor to add a prayer about peace (and perhaps a song and/or a reference in the sermon) and a comment during announcements about the vigil, inviting folks to join us outside. If we convey a tone of warmth, community and openness (assuring people this isn't partisan or political), we might be surprised at who joins us. Six or 8 people would be fine. We might also consider a vigil at a busy intersection or in a public space, like across from public building or park or mall. What do you think?

Invitation: “Are you hungry for a way to witness to peace? Have you noticed that there are many Christians who feel strongly about Iraq and would be open to a way to express

their feelings? Would you be interested in helping share opportunities for them to join a public Christian witness?”

Tips for Expanding your Contact List

Most of us have a far larger network of potentially interested people than we realize.

- Start with the individuals and groups you know.
- Ask your pastor, friends and co-workers to brainstorm with you for 10 minutes.
- Invite every new contact to help you think of other contacts.
- Speak to friends in other denominations.
- Ask local peace groups who they work with in the religious community.
- Use the Internet:
 - Google your city/region AND words like faith AND peace AND/OR protest.
 - Check out congregational websites. Add to your list those with statements or activities on peace.
 - Check out the map of resources at Faith in Public Life www.faithinpubliclife.org
- Call churches and ask for contact information of their Peace & Justice Committee or similar group.
- Look for faith groups on college campuses in your area: Sojo, Bread for the World, Religious Peace Fellowship, Intervarsity, denominational centers, etc.
- Ask about campus chaplains with a reputation for justice and peace work.
- Look for interested faculty and students in seminaries and Bible colleges.
- Explore camps and retreat centers, monasteries and convents, Peace Houses, etc.

Ideas for an initial group meeting

Introduction: Hello. My name is Courtney Dillard.

I'm affiliated with Christian Peace Witness for Iraq (CPWI). Thank you taking this time to gather and talk together. Christian Peace Witness for Iraq is an ecumenical group of Partners who feel called and committed to raising a Christian voice for peace. We are dedicated to ending the war with Iraq and encouraging an Iraqi-led peace process. CPWI was formed in the fall of 2006 and is encouraging organized vigils and witnesses around the country. Many of us in CPWI have been active on this issue since before the Iraq War began.

In March of 2007 CPWI completely filled the Washington National Cathedral with thousands of Christians committed to peace. From there our candlelight witness flowed to the White House, surrounding it with prayer and light. Over 200 Christians were arrested for civil disobedience.

CPWI offers a national voice for Christians across the country. I became involved with CPWI after the elections of 2006 did not change our country's direction in Iraq and my sense of anguish and helplessness and outrage grew. I've found Christian Peace Witness offers an avenue for dissent that is Christian, positive, effective, and hopeful.

Prayer (see our website for suggestions)

Find the issue: I'd be grateful if you might share a little bit about what you (or your church or group) are doing about peace. How do you feel about the war with Iraq as a Christian? As a citizen (if that's true) of the United States? About the administration's response to public frustration with the war? How do you think your group or congregation feels about the war now? How have these feelings changed over the past five years? What might be the responsibility of Christians in the United States at this time? What might we learn from the witnesses who have gone before us?

(Be certain to get complete contact information for everyone who attends.)

Inspiration: Bible study, story of Christians who

witnessed for peace, etc.

Explore the issue: I've read the writings of various faith-based Washington groups, and they think the Bush administration is unlikely to change course. CPWI believes the time is ripe to encourage Christians to speak for peace with Iraq through vigils and other witnesses, letters to the editor of the local newspaper, visits to the offices of federal legislators, etc., to put pressure on the administration and build an unstoppable call for an end to the occupation of Iraq. (Explain the position of a local federal legislator) Do you think it's possible to persuade him/her to withdraw support of this war? What kind of pressure from the religious community might be most effective?

Highlight focal point(s) for change: Many of us in the Christian community have remained quiet on this issue, though peace is a central to Jesus' life and teachings. We want peace, but we are unsure of whether we can change the situation. The war is wrong and it is time that we gave more space for widespread Christian anguish and frustration. By working strategically together, we believe we can be both faithful and effective.

Create productive unity: Christians can come together on this issue and show our region and the country what we believe in, what we're willing to witness to and to offer a compelling way forward. We can all work together to encourage an end to the occupation and to support an authentic Iraqi peace process.

Build the vision: We do not want more symbolic protests that are ignored by the people in power. We want to work strategically, crafting activities that build our numbers and give confidence that we can make a difference. We want to emphasize the positive: bearing witness to the gospel vision of peacemaking and its power and centrality in our faith. We want to offer activities that move toward articulating clear objectives, such as focusing on specific legislators, operating within a manageable time frame and inviting participants to help reach out to others. What might we do together here locally?

Ask: We invite you and the members of your congregation to join this work. We recognize that taking a specific position and motivating members is not easy for many people, but God gives courage and strength. Can we come together and offer leadership? We believe that this war will end when Christians join together with courage and conviction. Would you be willing to partner with us as we focus our activities here in (the area)? [Give a little time for people to respond.] There are several ways that you can help. First, [give ideas]. [Give time for people to respond and commit.]

Wrap up: Thank you so much for giving your time for this meeting. I know you have many responsibilities that demand your attention. I really appreciate your commitment to be here. (Share the best ways to stay in touch.) Can you recommend any other clergy or congregations you feel might be interested in this campaign? Thank you again - you'll hear from us by [fill in date].

Closing prayer

Building Commitment

Approach potential Local Partners by being welcoming, by listening and by inviting commitment to Jesus' vision of peace and justice and participation in local and national Christian Peace Witness events. Christian Peace Witness for Iraq wants to help strengthen your local work and help you live out your Christian commitment by giving you tools for local vigils and national events.

We invite others to join by sharing a positive vision. We encourage commitment by introducing local activities and the national CPWI network as an intentional effort that has credibility, is well-organized, and has the potential to be effective.

Emphasize what your potential partners and leaders might find especially persuasive and credible: local interests and needs; the success of the national March 2007 event and the upcoming March 7, 2008 meeting in Washington, D. C.; the

quality of the national leadership; the diversity of Partner organizations; the clarity and integrity of material on the CPWI web site and the care being taken in the current planning process.

You can also encourage a sense of commitment by introducing the activities being planned and the scope of our organizing and outreach. CPWI offers a vision and a plan that include a range of creative activities. We also offer the coordination to bring Christians together and the possibility of a uniquely effective, unified voice.

One means for eliciting commitment is the CPWI pledge link. Groups that have together made a public commitment using a pledge are more likely to work towards the shared goals articulated in the pledge. The pledge gives focus and direction. When inviting local participants to sign the CPWI pledge, first emphasize the CPWI vision, current objectives and the outlines of our long range plan. Invite consideration of the pledge as local individuals and partners show signs of agreement with, ownership of, identification with, or 'buying into' CPWI goals and process.

Centering attention on commitment to CPWI's vision and plan has many benefits, including fostering a greater willingness to pitch in and help with tasks, to invite others to participate, to improve organizing skills and to build strong networks that grow over time.

Resources

Visit ChristianPeaceWitness.org for a full list of resources.

"Free" conference call services (each person pays their carrier fee) at FreeConferenceCall.com.

A blessing for Vigil and Witness planners

May your desire to work with
 God lead you to prayer,
May your commitment to Christian
 nonviolence guide your decisions,
May the gifts of the Spirit
 match your inadequacies.

May God give you the time to plan
 carefully what must be done
and serenity to overlook
 what can't be completed,
May Jesus give you a dedicated coworker
 for support and enthusiasm,
May the Spirit provide you with
 community, locally and around the
 world, all working for peace.

May you speak your faith
 so others can understand,
May you find hope when
 the news shouts despair,
May you be able to love
 the people who curse you,
May your passion and rashness
 be tempered with patience
 and humility,
May Christian nonviolence
 set your heart ablaze.

May you find the peace of Christ, which passes
human understanding.