

The work of Christian Peacemaking

Lesson 5: Christian Peace Activism

Connect – Extend – Challenge

For each of the examples of Christian Peace Activism complete the following reflection sheet:

Activism Type: _____

How does this **connect** to what you already know?

How has it **extended** your knowledge?

What are you still finding **challenging**?

What are the **advantages** and **disadvantages** of this form of peace activism?

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Prayer Vigil

Each year since 1982 Christians have gathered outside the Ministry of Defence on Ash Wednesday – a traditional day of fasting and repentance – in prayerful witness against nuclear war preparations.

Britain's nuclear weapons system, called *Trident*, consists of submarines carrying missiles which in turn carry up to five nuclear warheads. The explosive power of each warhead is equivalent to eight times the power of the atomic bomb which destroyed Hiroshima in 1945. One of four Trident submarines remains on patrol at all times.

Christian campaigners argue that the indiscriminate mass killing and environmental devastation that nuclear war would bring about make nuclear weapons profoundly immoral. That billions of pounds may be spent on replacing the Trident system adds to their feeling of outrage. They feel this money would be better spent on education, healthcare, or any manner of good work in support of society's most vulnerable.

The UK government remains committed to maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent – a system of defence which, it argues, protects the nation from attack by potential aggressors who would be put off by the possibility of suffering unacceptable losses themselves.

Pope Francis, in his World Peace Day message in 2014, echoed all of his recent predecessors in appealing for nuclear disarmament.

During the prayer vigil those present are marked with ash as a sign of their own repentance of violence and their own failings to live the ideals of peace. In prayer and action they also call on the government to repent of its own willingness to inflict mass slaughter represented by its commitment to nuclear weapons.



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Civil Disobedience



One night in January 1996, three women, Andrea Needham, Joanna Wilson and Lotta Kronlid broke through the perimeter fence that surrounds the British Aerospace (BAe) factory at Warton in Lancashire. They slipped past security guards, ran across a frosted runway to the hangar containing Hawk jet number ZH 955 and forced opened the door. Then, using household

hammers, they smashed the £12m plane's sophisticated electronics. By the time the security guards arrived at the scene the three women had been in the factory for more than two hours and had caused damage to the aircraft to the tune of £1.7m. They were arrested and, while waiting for their trial, the women prayed and prepared their defence.

East Timor is a long way from Lancashire. A small former Portuguese colony, it was forcibly annexed by Indonesia in 1975 and since then its people had suffered the most brutal persecution. Amnesty International estimated that no fewer than 200,000 people – a third of its population had been killed. The women believed that British-made Hawk aircraft were being used by the Indonesian military to wage war against the people of East Timor. They decided to take their action at the BAe factory because they were determined to prevent the plane from reaching Indonesia and being used against the people of East Timor.

In July 1996 they appeared at Liverpool Crown Court, charged with causing, and conspiring to cause, criminal damage. They entered Not Guilty pleas on the basis that they had lawful excuse by acting to prevent British Aerospace and the British Government from aiding and abetting genocide. The defence lawyers argued that the attack was not a publicity stunt but an act of last resort by women of principle who had so far unsuccessfully campaigned against the sale of the Hawks. Although the prosecution had told the court that the women's "genuine and sincere" beliefs were irrelevant to the issues in the case, the jury of seven men and five women cleared them of the charges.

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Boycotts and consumer choices



In December 2009 Palestinian Christians published a document which became known as *Kairos Palestine*. This was an appeal to the world, calling on the international community to stand by the Palestinian people who are living under Occupation. It was followed in 2012 by a response which explores how people in this country can support the Palestinian people in their struggle for justice and peace.

One of the many actions called for in these documents is a boycott of all goods that are produced by the Occupation.

This means refusing to buy Israeli goods produced in the occupied Palestinian territories and to refuse to use companies who operate in those territories. At the same time people are urged to support the Palestinian economy by investing in and buying from Palestinian businesses.

Boycotts have a rich history in Christian activism. The campaign against the slave trade included a boycott of West Indian sugar, whilst the struggle against apartheid in South Africa represents one of the most successful campaigns of this sort in recent times. A consumer, political, sporting, academic, and investment boycott of South Africa was a key part of the effort to bring down that unjust political system.

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Protests and demonstrations



On 15 February 2003 there were a series of co-ordinated protests held across the globe to express opposition to a war in Iraq that seemed inevitable. In London up to two million people marched in opposition to the war in one of the largest protests the country had ever seen.

The march was organised by the Stop the War Coalition, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and the Muslim Association of Britain but included people from every branch of society. There were toddlers, barristers, archaeologists, nuns, and politicians. The Eton George Orwell Society carried their banner as did the Notts County Supporters Say Make Love Not War (and a home win against Bristol would be nice).

There were two starting points for the march, which converged at Piccadilly Circus before continuing onwards to Hyde Park for a rally where campaigners, politicians, and celebrities addressed the crowd. Rev Jesse Jackson – a former US presidential candidate – led the crowd in chanting “give peace a chance, keep hope alive”.

A little over a month later the UK joined the US-led invasion of Iraq.

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Lobbying politicians



In April 2014 Bruce Kent, the veteran peace activist and vice-president of Pax Christi, went on a nationwide speaking tour under the banner *No Faith in Trident*. Bruce spoke to faith groups across the country highlighting the dangers, immorality, and expense of our Trident nuclear deterrent and urging people of faith to raise this issue with their Members of Parliament.

The tour ended with a national lobby of parliament by people of faith on the issue of nuclear weapons. Over a hundred people came to parliament to meet their MPs, urge them to support the abolition of nuclear weapons, and to champion the re-investment of the money saved (some £100 billion) into education, healthcare, and other essential services.

Many more people wrote to their MPs on this issue, more still signed a petition calling for the scrapping of Trident. All of these efforts made sure that the people who represent them in parliament know that there many who think that Britain should get rid of its nuclear weapons.

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Solidarity

The town of Bethlehem is of great importance to Christians as the birthplace of Christ, but it is very different from the romantic images depicted on many Christmas cards. The town, in the Palestinian West Bank, is surrounded by an eight metre high concrete wall designed to control who can enter and leave the town. This wall – the Separation Barrier – was constructed by the Israeli government to prevent terrorist attacks on their people by Palestinian citizens. The wall causes a great deal of difficulty for ordinary people in Bethlehem. Farmers are separated from their land, families are divided, and people require permits to travel to work or university - which can be difficult to obtain and often mean long queues at checkpoints.

In an area of the world well known for violent conflict, there are many people, Israeli and Palestinian, Christian, Muslim, and Jew, who are working nonviolently for peace and justice in the Holy Land. These people will not give up hope for a brighter, more peaceful tomorrow.

During Advent and Christmas, as we remember Bethlehem in a special way, Pax Christi members stand in solidarity with those peacemakers so that they know they are not alone and that people around the world are thinking, praying, encouraging, and supporting them. Christmas gifts and decorations made from Palestinian olive wood are bought to support the people of Bethlehem. Christmas cards are sent, and prayers are offered for peace and justice.

