

Onward Christian Organizers

This is a short piece that appeared in my favorite blog [TomDispatch](#) in February of 2006. Tom Engelhardt, who writes and edits the blog, is a good friend and asked me to write a piece about Christians in the movement. It seems that some of our secular leftist friends are sometimes surprised to find Christians on their side. So I wanted to introduce ourselves.

I don't always find the invisibility comforting.

Almost any column in any progressive magazine analyzing the reactionary politics of the far right these days will at some point get around to taking a hard look at the Christian right that has given so much energy and supplied so many foot soldiers to that movement. Fair enough! It's a disturbing connection that should be teased apart. But then, it seems, the lefty columnist sometimes can't resist the temptation to lump all Christians together, as if everyone who believed in God and tried to follow Jesus cared only about preventing gay marriage and making abortion illegal.

As a Christian -- and a leftist -- myself, I can take the occasional lampooning, but it makes me wonder whether you on the secular left, especially the intelligentsia, realize I'm here, realize how many of the foot soldiers of the Left *are* Christians (or other religious people) whose activism springs from deeply held faith.

The first recorded words of the young man I do my best to follow are that he was sent to "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." It's not just a liberal agenda, but a radical one.

I don't have much in common with Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, Jr, or Cesar Chavez, except this: We all are (or were) Christian, and we've each spent much of our adult lives in the trenches of the movement for peace and justice. Most of those who have gone to prison for long sentences for hammering on nuclear warheads, or stopping nuclear trains, or crossing the line at military bases have been Christians, and they have often submitted to those long sentences because they believed their faith gave them no other option and would sustain them in the dark months of prison.

The four members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), kidnapped and still in captivity in Iraq, went to that country fully cognizant of the dangers of abduction but believing that their faith called them to peacemaking. Indeed, CPT is one of the few western non-governmental agencies left in Iraq, having been there almost continuously since before the 2003 invasion. Within three months of the fall of Baghdad to American troops, long before the Abu Ghraib photos surfaced, Christian Peacemakers were actively documenting and reporting the ways in which Iraqi detainees were being abused in prison. All because of their Christian convictions.

We're not (mostly) looking for accolades or more attention, but perhaps you should understand that not all religious people are your enemies or ascribe to us imperialist or conquering missionary visions. As a physician and writer, I've been working in the inner city of Washington D.C. for more than two decades as part of a network of institutions initiated and maintained by people from one church with less than 150 members. As part of those efforts:

* Jubilee Housing has offered low-cost housing to hundreds of low-income residents for over thirty years.

* Columbia Road Health Services has provided medical care for homeless people and other low-income people from around the city for almost thirty years.

* Jubilee Jobs helps place over 1,000 people a year in entry-level jobs and then returns a year later to assist them in obtaining living-wage jobs. It's active in the District's living-wage campaign.

* Christ House is a 34-bed infirmary for homeless men and women too sick to be on the streets yet not sick enough to be in the hospital.

* Joseph's House and Miriam's House offer home, community, and hospice care to homeless men and women with AIDS and cancer.

* Samaritan Inns provides intensive in-patient recovery for men and women with addictions and then 6-month follow-up programs and long-term housing for hundreds.

* Manna has built close to 1,000 houses for very low-income people to *purchase*.

* Academy of Hope is one of the largest adult education programs in the city.

All of these organizations hire and serve religious and non-religious people without distinction; all began well before anyone talked about "faith-based initiatives." And that's just a very partial list. And from only one faith community. Indeed, take away the institutions in Washington DC that have been initiated and largely maintained by people of faith and there's not much left in the way of non-governmental services specifically for the poor. I doubt it's strikingly different in other cities around the country.

And it's not only in charity work but also in activism for justice that we're present. Bread for the World organizes churches politically to speak out on issues of world hunger. While the Children's Defense Fund isn't overtly religious, its founder and director Marian Wright Edelman is a deeply spiritual Christian as are many of its workers. Most of the liberal churches have offices in Washington, lobbying for peace and justice.

We're your friends.

You may not have noticed us because most of us don't proselytize for our faith; we hope to *be* the body of Jesus, not talk about it. And we aren't actually out to convert you to our religion, although we will try to convert others to our work for the poor and the oppressed. In fact, the only time Jesus is recorded as having said anything about who is going to be rewarded and who punished, he gave the good word to

anyone

who saw the poorest of the hungry and gave them something to eat, the thirsty and gave them something to drink, strangers and invited them in, those needing clothes and clothed them, those who were sick and looked after them, those in prison and came to visit them. It doesn't really matter whether you "praise the Lord" or, in fact, what you

say

about what you believe. What counts for us is what you

do
for the poor and oppressed.

I'm as frustrated as you by the Christian right. Any Christian who believes that homosexuality is a more important issue than justice for the poor just hasn't read his Bible straight. But religion (of any stripe) has always been hijacked to support the Establishment; God is made captive to the King, and the poor have to approach God on the King's terms. That's not the faith that Jesus proclaimed.

So, give us a break. Not all Christians are alike, and more of us, I suspect, are on your side than on the other.