

Responses to Previous Issue

Perry Bush, "Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History," *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Spring 1999 (17:2), 5-27.

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Martin worked under Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) in Vietnam with farmer refugees for five years during the war.

So we Mennonites in Vietnam – and at home – ultimately opted for respectability above peacemaking during the Vietnam war. We were willing to compromise our peace principles seriously in order to maintain a dubious mission of feeding hungry farmer refugees during that war. We in Mennonite Central Committee work were often co-opted – mostly against our will – into serving the overall US military aims in Vietnam. Our service to war victims often became part of the US mission to “win the hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese people. A major impulse behind all that was Mennonites’ desire to maintain some respectability in North American society. And that impulse for public acceptance continues to be a deadening influence on North American Mennonites today.

That, slightly overstated, seems to be the thesis of Perry Bush’s “Vietnam and the Burden of Mennonite History.” Provocative stuff, I say! Of course, Bush’s paper documents far more nuance than I suggest here. The author notes some of the numerous times Mennonites in Vietnam and in North America did confront US war policy makers. He also documents MCC medical assistance missions to North Vietnam during the war when such “consorting with the enemy” was considered treasonous by many.

Still, overall, Bush concludes it was “MCC’s decision to prefer service work to peacemaking in Vietnam.” I am delighted to see this thesis developed. Many times, during my own five years in Vietnam with MCC during the war, I poignantly felt the weight of the compromises. In one small example, the US military helicoptered 200 highlander folks from their mountain homes on suspicion that they were friendly to the Viet Cong rebels. They dumped these Hre tribal people out on a barren field with mere tents for shelter. A nearby well was contaminated, unlike the pure streams in the hills. We visited the

settlement regularly and watched as one after another of the children – and then the old people – contracted dysentery and died. My wife Pat sat with one emaciated man in the hospital who quietly died beside her. In the midst of her own grief she reached out and gently closed the lids over his haunted eyes.

Would it have been better for us, for MCC, to refuse to take soup and equipment to boil the contaminated well water day after day to try to save the lives of those Hre people? To refuse to be complicit in the death-dealing strategies of the military? Frankly, I don't know. I wrestle in my soul with such questions to this day. I can construct extensive arguments on both sides of the question. It might have been more effective for us all to resign in protest and devote all our energies back in the United States to stop the war. But I suspect that if Mennonites had not been directly involved in Vietnam, there would have been less – not more – Mennonite prophetic witness against that war.

In the end, I still believe that our call as human beings, touched by the grace of God, is not a call primarily to purity, whether political, moral or religious. It is a call to enter, to touch, to weep, and to work. But discerning when to enter, how to touch, where to weep and to work – those are the tough questions. And that's where Bush's critique is so helpful. While I may believe a bit more strongly than he that for MCC the "service work" and the "peacemaking" were not an either-or but went hand-in-hand with Mennonites in Vietnam, I agree that MCC and our coalition of Vietnam Christian Service could have been much more prophetic and bold in our cries for peace. We could have done better at choosing particular projects that, by their own dynamic, would have spoken more eloquently to the paramount need for peace. The Quaker project of providing artificial limbs for victims of mines and shelling was particularly effective in that regard.

We did make unnecessary compromises in our use (later discontinued) of US military transport and US government food supplies. We were too slow in our reaching out to "the enemy," the people in North Vietnam and Viet Cong areas of the south. Most of all, despite some good attempts, we were too hesitant and anemic in our witness to Washington.

To be sure, as Bush also documents, Mennonites did "engage the powers" in a cry for peace. MCC introductions, for instance, inspired a searing four-part series in the *New York Times* on the Saigon regime's political prisoners. And some Mennonites ensured that a US Congressional delegation

to Saigon met political prisoners and refugees, a meeting that led to the major vote in Congress to stop funding the war in early 1975.

As delinquent as we often were, and as frustrated as some of us became with our organizational constraints, I must remember that 1999 is not 1965. In the mid-sixties anti-communist hysteria was still raging strongly not only in North American society but throughout the Mennonite Church as well. I remember with chagrin how excited I was, as a high school sophomore, to shake hands with our potential political savior, candidate Richard Nixon!

I believe the Vietnam experience, then, became a time of significant conversion (at least as significant as conversions can be with institutions and large groups of people) for the Mennonite Church. Engagement with Vietnam – in all its complexities – helped us to break our reluctance “to speak truth to power.” Prophetic centers of Mennonite witness, such as the Washington and Ottawa Offices and Christian Peacemaker Teams, trace some of their roots, I believe, back to what we learned through our involvement with Vietnam.

Yet we must conclude, sadly, with Bush that the impulse to maintain respectability in our societies remains one of the most beguiling sins of our church. It is a major scandal to the gospel we profess that we Mennonites are not out in greater numbers in the parliaments, the congresses, the media, and the streets whenever our nations’ militaries are killing fellow human beings in Iraq or Kosovo. It is unconscionable that Christian Peacemaker Teams cannot respond to urgent cries for engagement because of the shortage of volunteers and budget from our churches.

We are still being seduced by the idolatrous mirage of social respectability and affluence, and we must be grateful, however begrudgingly, for prophets among us like Perry Bush who are courageous enough to name our stupor of sweetness and invite us to a path of redemption and life.