



Briefing on media accusations against Christian Peacemaker Teams

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forwarded by Nancy Hawkins

Since Christian peace activist Norman Kember returned to Britain on 23 March 2006, following four months of captivity in Iraq, numerous media outlets have printed hostile, inaccurate, poorly researched and sometime vitriolic accusations against him and his colleagues. Ekklesia, the respected UK religious think tank, which has also developed a fruitful exchange relationship with Christian Peacemaker Teams in the UK, has been covering the story of the hostages and their release in detail since its inception.

We have produced well over a hundred news stories and several briefings, as well as commenting to the media in the UK and internationally. What follows is a rehearsal of the most common allegations followed by straightforward responses to them.

The intention is not to go into detail (that is available elsewhere on www.ekkleisia.co.uk) or to speak on behalf of CPT, but to clarify from Ekklesia's perspective those major misconceptions which are in danger of being received as 'facts' in some quarters. The concern is to seek the truth of the situation and present information which, in spite of being made available to media sources, is still overlooked.

Allegation: Norman Kember and the Christian Peacemakers have been slow and grudging in thanking the soldiers who rescued them.

Response: Norman Kember, Harmeet Singh Sooden and Jim Loney were immediately grateful to those who set them free. The London Times reported a local security official noting Dr Kember's thanks. Pat Kember thanked all involved. Family friend and fellow activist Bruce Kent relayed CPT's "unqualified gratitude" on BBC Radio 4. James Loney has issued his own statement of thanks. Christian Peacemaker Teams in Chicago and Toronto put out two statements on the same day as the release of their three colleagues. The one in the evening was specifically about their gratitude and regretted any impression to the contrary due to misinformed comments from some quarters. CPT spokespeople reiterated their thanks constantly. The day of the release itself was a stressful and difficult time for all involved – not least those who had been held hostage for four months. It seems that some hostile to CPT's mandate have been eager to make political capital out of their trauma by creating a media 'row'. Doug Pritchard of Christian Peacemaker Teams comments: "Our original statement, written an hour after we got news of the release from a member of Jim Loney's family in the very early morning of 23 March, did not thank any-

one except God – because at that time we knew almost nothing of the circumstances of their release. So we could focus only on our joy at their freedom, our grief over Tom's death, and our appreciation for the messages of concern received over previous months. Later that evening, after our Baghdad team had met with the men themselves, we were able to issue our addenda with specific thank-yous."

Allegation: The CPT thank-you only came after criticism by people like General Sir Michael Jackson.

Response: General Sir Michael Jackson, a very senior British Army representative, spoke to ITN and Channel 4 News the day after the release. He alleged that Dr Kember had not shown gratitude to his rescuers and said he was "saddened" by this. However he then qualified his statement by saying that a thank-you may have been issued, but if so he was not aware of it. This indicated that his contention was not based on actual knowledge, a point ignored by almost all who reported it. It is most surprising that a senior military official should be so ill-prepared and that he was unaware that Christian Peacemaker Teams had in fact issued a thank-you the day before – on 23 March 2006, 9pm Eastern Time. It was (and is) posted on www.cpt.org. One day later, army spokespeople were still repeating the accusation, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Ekklesia sought clarification from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and was told on 27th March by a MOD spokesperson; "information about the thanks had not filtered through to the MOD when General Sir Michael Jackson made his statement". It has been suggested by some that the military are consciously 'spinning' against CPT, using established contacts in the media. We hope this is not so.

Allegation: Norman Kember's arrival statement was disrespectful to the armed services.

Response: Dr Kember prefaced his unqualified tribute to the courage of those who freed him by saying that it remained his conviction that armed force cannot deliver a long-term solution in Iraq – a point which the great majority of the world's population and many experts are in agreement with. Importantly, he also asked people to remember the soldiers killed in Iraq as well as the suffering of ordinary Iraqis. CPT has shown courtesy and human respect to the armed forces, even while disagreeing with the use of armed force and advocating non-violent alternatives. By contrast, their critics have frequently ridiculed or abused CPT's work, often on the basis of little or

no knowledge.

Allegation: The Christian Peacemaker activists imperilled the lives of soldiers and others by their recklessness.

Response: CPT as an organisation, and its volunteers as individuals (including Norman Kember), have made it explicitly and repeatedly clear that in the event of a kidnapping or ransom situation, they did not wish violence to be used to free them – both as a matter of principle and to ensure that others' lives were not risked. Not unreasonably they say that it is unfair to accuse them of requiring others to risk their lives when this is manifestly not so. They have no control over the actions of bodies like the army, the intelligence services and the FCO. For this reason, CPT worked with diplomats over the release issue, but not military personnel. CPT workers are prepared to risk their own lives where necessary, but they are scrupulously careful not to imperil others – even to their own cost.

Allegation: Christian Peacemaker Teams went to Iraq for publicity and to cause a nuisance.

Response: On the contrary, CPT has been guarded in its relations with the media and responsible in its cooperation with Iraqi and other partners. Most of the work it undertakes in the areas of human rights, civil society cooperation, peace advocacy and detainee action has been undertaken in conditions of confidentiality. There has been public opposition to the war and occupation, but this has been carefully distinguished from the details of on-the-ground humanitarian operations in Iraq. In fact, even through the four months of the kidnapping ordeal, much of the world's media has paid little attention to the actual work of CPT.

Allegation: CPT parachutes in and parachutes out of conflict zones.

Response: This is demonstrably untrue. CPT was in Iraq well before the coalition forces invaded. It has long-term work in Palestine-Israel and Colombia and maintains regular relations with long-term humanitarian and conflict transformation experts around the globe. Much of the recent comment on CPT's work ignores the wider tradition, both practical and academic, of developing non-violent responses and initiatives from within civil society to situations of conflict and armed tension. In Britain the respected Bradford University School of Peace Studies is one institution which has resourced such approaches in the context of a mature and developing understanding of global issues and security concerns.

Allegation: CPT's actions are naïve, foolish, 'self-indulgent' and 'not at all Christian'.

Response: It may be that CPT operatives assume a level of personal risk in situations of conflict which others would find unacceptable, but they are far from naïve

about the dangers or responsibilities involved. To describe Tom Fox, who has been murdered, and others who have risked their lives as 'self-indulgent' would be considered by many to be gratuitous in the extreme. CPT is a Christian organisation with its roots in the centuries-long traditions of Anabaptism and Quakerism. Its sponsors include the Mennonites, who are known for their long-term peace advocacy and humanitarian work. CPT is also ecumenically recognised and supported by Protestants and Catholics, as well as many of other faith or simply 'good faith'. The tradition of principled Christian non-violence has its origins in the early churches, and though it has been a minority one in later imperial Christian history (Christendom), its practitioners contend that it is central to the Gospel message. There has been a growth and recovery of practical Christian non-violence in recent times, in contrast to the spread of what many call 'toxic religion' of different kinds.

Allegation: Dr Kember is declining to speak about his captivity or rescue.

Response: This accusation was made on Channel 4 (UK) on 24 March 2006. It is false. Dr Kember and his family, friends and supporters have asked for a period of respite and recovery from his ordeal. That is all. He attended his Baptist Church in Harrow on Sunday 26 March, but chose to sit at the back with his wife Pat and to engage in personal greetings rather than public statements at this time. He will choose what to say, and to whom, when he is ready.

Allegation: The military operation to free the three proves that non-violence doesn't work.

Response: There have been wild speculations in some of the farthest shores of the media that force and even torture was used to discover the whereabouts of the CPT hostages. While there is more to be revealed about the circumstances of the release, it is clear that the actual freeing was violence-free, and much of the intelligence work has been through civil channels. The picture of exactly how much the rescue was down to intelligence work of US and UK forces is still unclear. The Guardian newspaper has reported a 'Western security source' as saying that the hostages owed their freedom to a rift among their Iraqi kidnappers. US General Rick Lynch has also implied that the necessary intelligence to locate the hostages was found, not in the weeks preceding the captives' release, but just a few hours before. Some sections of the military and government in the West appear keen to talk up their role, presumably as an antidote to worldwide condemnation of their actions in invading Iraq in contravention (as many argue) of international law. Non-violence does not operate at the same level as the use of force – it seeks to create alternative, long-term conditions for conflict resolution and the elimination of injustice, rather than quick-fixes with still-damaging consequences.

Allegation: Christian peacemaker Tom Fox was tortured before he was killed – which may have taken place in an escape attempt.

Response: There is no evidence for this. Two CPTers, the Rev Carol Rose and Rich Meyer, viewed Tom's body when it arrived back in the USA and did not see signs of torture. Christian Peacemaker Teams also have reports from two additional independent sources who examined the body more thoroughly. They also did not find signs of torture. Until the final autopsy report is released, CPT is rightly asking everyone to withhold their judgment. Similarly, the circumstances of Tom's killing have not been established definitively.

Allegation: CPT has achieved nothing in Iraq, unlike the coalition forces.

Response: The invasion and occupation of Iraq is increasingly and widely seen as hugely damaging to an already battered country which has exchanged brutal dictatorship for murderous chaos. The peace has still to be won, and the conditions for lasting justice and democracy are yet to be created. CPT's contribution has been in seeking to strengthen movements in civil society, to expose abuses, to support prisoners, to help forge cooperation between Sunnis and Shias, to assist in the creation of a Muslim Peacemaker Team, to counteract negative perceptions of imperial Christianity (which have brought suffering on the indigenous Christian population), and to show in practical terms that there are alternatives to war and terror as instruments of policy. CPT's evidence of the abuse of detainees four months before the mainstream media discovered what was going on in the Abu Ghraib prison showed that this scandal was not an isolated incident. This almost certainly saved lives. CPT volunteers have also given courage and hope to many people in a war torn situation.

Allegation: There is no legitimate role for Christians in a situation like Iraq.

Response: Christianity is a significant and (until recently) large indigenous minority presence in Iraq. The action of Christian guest workers whose agenda is not driven by military might or political ambition, but by the love of God seen in the self-giving of Jesus, helps to strengthen those working against factionalism, injustice, violence and terror in all its forms.

Allegation: CPT had no possibility to refuse military protection and no grounds for doing so.

Response: Groups and individuals have every right and possibility to refuse to use, sanction, condone or seek the support of violence and armed force. Jesus refused violence and, before his crucifixion, disarmed a follower who drew a sword when he was arrested. He called on his followers to respond to evil with good and to love even their enemies. For the first three centuries of the church the refusal of violence and military service was the majority tradition in Christianity. When Christian peacemakers look at the cross they see God-in-Christ absorbing rather than inflicting horror and suffering. Jesus' God refuses the violence with which many have wrongly contaminated religion. In Jesus' resurrection from death Christians see the hope of a life-giving rather than a life-taking abundance in the continual presence of God. Others may disagree with this stance or refuse to recognise its alternative force for good, but denying people their moral choice seems a curious way to defend the supposed efficacy of militarily sanctioned order.

Allegation: The military had no choice but to intervene to save these misguided activists, and every right to ignore CPT's request not to do so.

Response: Christian Peacemaker Teams are guided by conscience, by established good practice in non-violent tactics, by supporters on-the-ground and worldwide, and by Christian faith. They seek only the protection of each other, their allies and the love of God. That is why they did not ask for military assistance. And while they are wholeheartedly grateful to the individual soldiers for freeing them, there are serious moral and legal questions about the operational imposition of military solutions against the will and intention of those they effect – not least if those people are then going to be wrongly and unfairly blamed for exposing others to risk. The right to conscientious objection to military service was recognised by the United Nations in 1987. It is reasonable to argue that a similar right applies here. The right to refuse to perform military service was first recognised by the UK Parliament in 1916. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is enshrined in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention of Human Rights.