News



Thousands of protesters participate in the "March on the DNC" on the opening day of the Democratic National Convention, Aug. 19 in Chicago. (NCR photo/Heidi Schlumpf)



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There was a lot of concern about violence at protests during the Democratic National Convention, but it was peace that motivated people of faith who joined thousands of other protesters at the "March on the DNC" on the opening day of the convention.

"I believe Jesus was a peacemaker whose message was that the call to discipleship involves engaging political forces," said Mark Frey of Chicago, who marched behind a "Christians for Ceasefire" banner with a group of Mennonites, Quakers and other Christians.

After hours of speeches in a Chicago park, the smaller-than-expected crowd marched a mile toward the United Center, where hours later President Joe Biden spoke and where Vice President Kamala Harris will formally accept the Democratic Party's nomination on Thursday. The protest's organizers represented a coalition of more than 200 groups advocating for various issues, including racism, climate change and reproductive rights. The majority of speeches and signs, however, were about the war in Gaza.



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Cornel West, who is running as a third-party candidate for president, told the crowd that the protest is not about politics. "This is about morality. This is about spirituality," he said.

Pro-Palestinian, student and religious groups have protested the Biden administration's military and financial support for Israel, which the Gaza health ministry says has killed more than 40,000 Gazans since the Hamas attack on Israel killed more than 1,200 citizens on Oct. 7.

In his speech later that evening, President Joe Biden acknowledged the protesters, saying, "They have a point."

U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who has been a vocal critic of the war in Gaza, said in her convention speech that Harris was "working tirelessly to secure a cease-fire in Gaza and bring the hostages home." The Harris campaign sponsored a panel discussion at the convention that included pro-Palestinian activists who highlighted war's toll against Gazans.

At the protest, Frey, who works as the finance manager for the organization Community Peacemaker Teams (formerly known as Christian Peacemaker Teams), said he showed up to communicate to decision-makers at the convention that Israel must be pressured to accept a cease-fire.

He was not the only protester who said they were motivated by their faith to speak out about the war in Gaza.



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Mollie Hartenstein of the Chicago chapter of Jewish Voice for Peace was part of a crowd of several dozen folks in matching red T-shirts. "I'm here as a Jewish American woman, and as a taxpayer, to call for an arms embargo and an end to U.S. funding of genocide," she said. "My faith teaches me that every life is sacred. I refuse to let my identity and my faith to be associated with an apartheid state."

Silvia, a Latino woman from St. Ita Parish in Chicago, said her Catholic faith inspired her to come to the protest, despite some friends' concerns about the possibility of violence.

"Jesus was an example of standing up for things that are unjust or not right," said Silvia, who asked that her last name not be used. "In his time, he was seen as a revolutionary man that caused a lot of tumult and concern because of his ideas."

She believes Catholics and other Christians must stand up for all the oppressed. "These are not my words. These are Jesus' words," she said.

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In his invocation Monday evening at the DNC, Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich prayed for peace, "especially for people suffering the senselessness of war."

"May our nation become more fully a builder of peace in our wounded world with the courage to imagine and pursue a loving future together," Cupich said. "And may we as individual Americans become more fully the instruments of God's peace."

At the protest, the Rev. Beth Johnson, minister of Unitarian Church of Hinsdale in the Chicago suburbs, was wearing her clerical collar as part of her witness for peace in the Middle East. Her denomination has condemned the violence in Gaza and called for a cease-fire.

"My faith is grounded in a radical love that calls for liberation for all," she said. "I can't be silent, because silence is complicity."

Although she declined to share her own voting plans, Johnson said she hoped the protests "send a message to the DNC and to Kamala Harris that this is an issue that is important to us and matters, and that we'll make decisions based on that."

Frey was on the fence about Biden but sees more "openness" and "compassion" from Harris. "But there are still big question marks," he said. "She's probably going to tow the same policy line that Biden does."

Silvia said her concerns would not cause her to change her vote, or to stay home, which she said would help the Republicans. "I think that would be a huge mistake."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.