

Raising the question of peace outside churches of all faiths

John Dear | Jan. 24, 2012 On the Road to Peace

Last summer, 85-year-old Mennonite peace activist Peter Ediger decided to take his passion for peace to the churches in Las Vegas, where he lives. Peter works for *Pace e Bene*, the Franciscan nonviolence program. Like many of us, he's concerned that the churches in the United States are ignoring, if not blatantly rejecting, the nonviolence of Jesus. So he wrote to area churches and announced that he would visit a different church every Sunday morning, keep vigil outside as parishioners entered and then join their worship service. During his vigil, he would hold up a large sign asking them about Jesus' Sermon on the Mount commandment, "Love your enemies."

His one-man *satyagraha* campaign has been going on for six months now. When I heard about it, I called him to find out how it's been and what he's learned. He sent me a journal of his experiences.

From the start, he wanted to avoid self-righteousness, anger or violence, he wrote. "I hope I'm going in a spirit of love and less out of a spirit of judgment," he wrote.

In an effort to be peaceful during his peace vigil, he decided to write to every church the week before he visited them. Here's his letter:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I greet you in the name of Jesus, whose coming into the world was good news then and is still good news today. The good news that God loves the whole world, including enemies, needs to be heard anew in our world today.

What would happen if Christians here, there and everywhere would take seriously Jesus' invitation for us to love our enemies? Could this help break down the dividing walls of hostility in our world, and save us from our destructive cycles of violence and counter-violence?

This fall I am visiting different churches in the Las Vegas area each Sunday. I am coming with a sign which I will hold near the church entrance. The sign reads: "Jesus says, 'Love your enemies.' What does your church say?" When the service begins, I will join in worship with the congregation. I look forward to being with you next Sunday.

My hope is that this visitation will encourage conversation among people of faith and move us all to become more active in living out and sharing the good news of gospel nonviolence. Our world urgently needs this witness. I pray that the Spirit may richly bless all the ministries of your congregation.

Before he set off, he told his own church he would spend the next year visiting the other Christian churches in the Las Vegas area on Sunday mornings. The pastor gave him a formal blessing. As he left, one parishioner came up to him and said, "Sounds a little scary to me."

Alas, I thought the same thing. You'd think that greeting Christian sisters and brothers with the good news of Jesus' call to love our enemies would be warmly welcomed. But on second thought, maybe not.

Peter's been at it now for six months and reports that most churchgoers have been gracious and welcoming. The pastors, on the other hand, have almost all been anxious, nervous and threatening. At least they haven't had him arrested. Here's what's happened so far.

At Trinity United Methodist Church, he was welcomed with friendly greetings and enjoyed the service and sermon. The next week at Community Lutheran Church, he learned that the pastor had urged everyone to "welcome him with love, treat him with dignity and show the radical grace and acceptance that Jesus calls us to. I invite you to go out of your way to welcome him if you see him. Please inform others as well, so the love of Christ is showered on this man on a unique mission." He received many positive greetings, and was publicly introduced during the service, welcomed and thanked for visiting. He was off to a good start, and grateful for the conversations.

Next stop, All Saints' Episcopal Church. They identify themselves as "a military friendly church." The priest, a retired administrator of the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant in Colorado and the Nevada nuclear weapons test site, also welcomed Peter, but Peter was dismayed by their public support of the U.S. military.

His visit to St. Viator's Catholic Community came during the anniversary of Sept. 11. "I do not love my enemies," one Catholic said to him on his way in to morning Mass. There the priest spoke of forgiveness and how Jesus breaks the cycle of violence. "Make me a channel of your peace," they sang at the end. "Where there is hatred, let me sow love." Peter was moved, but left with questions about their support of war.

And so it went. Central Christian Church, with its superdome-like auditorium, proclaimed "A place where it's OK to not be OK" as its motto. Peter wondered how OK they would be with his sign. Sure enough, a staff worker approached and told him he was not allowed to hold his sign and threatened to call the police.

"I need to think about this," Peter answered. "How about we pray?"

Of course, the staff worker answered. So they joined hands and prayed for guidance. Then another church worker approached and told him the sign must go. So Peter left it in his car.

He then sat through the preacher's sermon on "The Spiritual Joyride."

"'JOY,' the pastor said, "means 'J for Jesus, O for Others, and Y for You.'"

At Victory Missionary Baptist Church, he was greeted by the church's own large sign: "You can be sure you are going to heaven." When the pastor met Peter, he told Peter that he can rest assured he's going to heaven. When Peter asks about Jesus' commandment -- "love your enemies" -- the pastor responded that the Bible offers many texts that support war, and talked about how God blessed King David's wars. Later, during the service, he preached about discerning true from false prophets and his concern that Christians do not take seriously the reality of eternal hellfire. Peter left wondering where the love of God and love for humanity fit into the pastor's war and hellfire equation.

At First African Methodist Episcopal Church, he was likewise welcomed by the pastor, who later preached beautifully about becoming "change agents for God" to fix broken relationships. But Peter wondered about the focus on personal relationships and how we might instead fix the world's broken international relationships. Maybe that's what Jesus had in mind when he commanded his followers to love their nation's enemies.

At First Presbyterian Church, an usher approached and told Peter, "We need to get rid of evil." Perhaps he thought Peter wanted to keep evil. Then the pastor ordered him to get rid of his sign and threatened him with trespassing. Just then, one of the church elders appeared and invited Peter to their Monday community meeting to discuss the issues, so Peter agreed, and joined in the worship service.

At St. Thomas More Catholic Church, Peter was asked to move his sign away from the entrance, so he agreed. During Mass, the priest preached about the commandment to love God and neighbor. But Peter left wondering why there was no mention of love for the people in Iraq and Afghanistan, whom we were trying to kill.

At Canyon Ridge Christian Church, one of the area mega-churches, an official saw the sign and announced that he reads Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder.

"But that's mature stuff, only fit for academicians," he explained. In other words, you can't talk about universal love and nonviolence with ordinary Christians.

Inside, the preacher told his 3,000-member congregation that they must become "debt-free." The focus of the sermon and the service was again on the individual. Peter was concerned that there was no mention of the global debt, the Occupy movement or the needs of the poor. What would happen if 3,000 devout Christians committed themselves to relieving the debt of the world's poor or to love for our enemies? Peter asked himself.

At University United Methodist Church, he met a sympathetic congregation. "You're preaching to the choir here," one parishioner told him with a smile. The pastor cordially welcomed him. His sermon later focused on Jesus' way of conflict resolution, based on Matthew 18:15-20, and Jesus' use of love and forgiveness to resolve conflict. Peter was moved, but then once again confused when the pastor proceeded to bless the U.S. military.

At St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church, church members told Peter they agreed with his sign -- but they simply do not allow signs on their premises. He was warmly welcomed and impressed by the pastor's sermon on Jesus' parable of the rich fool from Luke 12. "The Occupy movement has called attention to the growing gap between the people of great wealth and the many who struggle to get by," the pastor said. He warned against the temptation of accumulating wealth for oneself and forgetting about our brothers and sisters in need. People who do that "are fools," he announced.

At the International Church of Las Vegas, Peter engaged parishioners with his sign until the church security guard told him he had to leave. By then it was time to join the service. There, he heard the pastor launch his "Jesus Said Go" campaign, sending out short-term missionaries around the world. The focus of his sermon was the need to have a positive attitude. The message: Be like Tim Tebow of the Denver Broncos.

Like any peace vigil, Peter's witness cannot be measured for results. The witness and the spirit behind it are what count. I find Peter's effort an interesting attempt to raise a serious question with the entire Christian community in his city.

"What have you learned?" I asked Peter the other day.

"I'm learning how the churches differ radically from my view, but I know, too, I have something to learn from them," he said. "It's been good for me, for my own spiritual journey. It's been good going to worship with other Christians. The letter I sent to them has been important. I tell them I'm coming to worship and just to raise a question. Worship for me means both praising and discerning. So I join in the celebrating and the questioning. In the spirit of Matthew 18, I think if we have issues with brothers and sisters, we need to talk about it, and I think this is the important question that Jesus brings to the world: 'How do we see ourselves in relationship to the enemy?' I've noticed that all the churches lack an element of confession about the country's wars. There are a

lot of prayers for our military personnel, but no request for the Lord to have mercy upon us for what we have done this week to people in Afghanistan.

"I've also learned that while there are many good-hearted, welcoming people out there, the leadership in most churches is very cautious about speaking about the heart of the Gospel," he continued. "So the crisis we face in the churches about ignoring the heart of the Gospel, I think, rests with our leadership. I've begun to question their theological training. I think we need to ask more of those who train our pastors.

"I sense there's a readiness, even a hunger, among the grassroots, for the Gospel," he continued. "But we give them crumbs instead of the meat of the Gospel. We treat the people as if they are not ready to think seriously about the heart of the gospel by neglecting to speak about the radical call of Jesus' nonviolent love.

"So I'm sensing that the responsibility for the spiritual crisis we are facing in our culture rests with the leadership in the churches. We peace people focus much of our energy and attention on the structures which build weapons and wage war, and we need to do that, but we have not be ready to confront, question and challenge our brothers and sisters about our responsibility for the mythology that perpetuates war.

"That's my motivation," Peter continued. "I've been pondering how we can go to our military installations and say no to war, but how we have not gone to the churches and our brothers and sisters in faith who support war and also say no. We are hiding our light under a bushel and the world needs that light.

"I think we're in a deep theological, spiritual crisis," Peter concluded, "but at the same time, I think the grassroots have a readiness and a hunger for some real renewal and revival of the Gospel of love and nonviolence. I hope we can be awake and alive to the Spirit voice calling us to a new following of Jesus and his beautiful invitation to nonviolence."

Peter's vigil doesn't offer any answers. It raises questions, beginning with the essential question on his sign. And Peter questions us: What do we say about Jesus' commandment? Do we support his commandment or do we reject it? And if we say we support it, what does that mean? How do we show active, unconditional love for the people of Afghanistan who are being targeted by our guns, our drones and our bombs?

That question should haunt every church and spur us to nonviolent action. I'm grateful to Peter for raising the question.

"We should all be asking one another about Jesus' teaching to love our enemies," Peter told me on the phone. "It's urgent that we raise this question around the country, especially as the U.S. empire continues to spread around the world. We have to speak while we still can."

John will speak Feb. 4 at the Seattle Spiritual Books Festival and Feb. 6 in Portland. His new book, [*Lazarus, Come Forth!*](#) [1], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to [John Dear's website](#) [2]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, [*Divine Rebels*](#) [3] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including [*Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings*](#) [4]; [*Put Down Your Sword*](#) [5] and [*A Persistent Peace*](#) [6], are available from Amazon.com.

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[2] <http://www.johndear.org>

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[4] http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1

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