

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
JUSTICE AND WITNESS MINISTRIES

700 Prospect Ave.
Cleveland, OH 44115-1110
Phone: 216.736.3700
Fax: 216.736.3703



Kelly Burd
Minister for Leadership Development

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Seeking Peace While Facing War

Kelly Burd

Over Memorial Day weekend I heard of yet another local young adult who died in Afghanistan. I thought back to the Memorial Days of my childhood when, sheltered by age and innocence, I viewed war as antediluvian and obsolete. When my family went to Memorial Day parades and related events in our small town, I saw only war veterans the age of my grandparents. Uniformed men, mostly of retirement age, marched in the parade and read the names of their deceased compatriots. These events never involved anyone I knew. As a child I didn't understand the magnitude of suffering and loss involved in war or the frequent and recurring reliance on war as an attempt at conflict resolution by world leaders. But I would learn.

Today, the word "veteran" holds a different image for me. It is the face of women and men in their twenties and thirties. It is a face posted on the local news with mention of bereaved family members. It includes the face of my spouse and my nephew and their friends. Now I see that each generation lives with the consequences of war, and that the cost of war is horrendous and incalculable – to those who are serving in our military, to their

families, and to those in whose land the fighting takes place, especially families, women and children.

Of the more than two million American troops that have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, countless numbers of them face several obstacles, including Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), delayed services from an overburdened Veterans Administration, and challenges to GI Bill education benefits. Last year our military lost more troops to suicide than in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq. According to the United States Interagency Council on the Homeless, approximately 1 in 4 homeless people are veterans. Once our military personnel return home, many of them join the masses of vulnerable citizens whose needs go largely overlooked.

We are a nation that, often in the same breath, praises its military personnel and condemns those who are dependent on public housing, homeless, mentally ill or substance abusers. We fail to recognize they are many times the same person. Meanwhile, our nation's politicians are feuding over federal budget proposals, most of which designate well over a third of the budget to military spending and cut crucial support services for veterans and other at-risk citizens. I am reminded of a saying, widely attributed to Mahatma Gandhi that *a country's greatness can be measured by how well it cares for its most vulnerable populations*, and I pray that compassion will guide our representatives' ultimate decision.

How do we give public witness to peace and justice as our nation continues to expend its valuable citizens and resources on war? The war in Afghanistan is one of several policy issues addressed in the *2011 UCC Public Policy Briefing Book* www.ucc.org/justice/uccbriefingbook/. It includes information and advocacy resources to help us call for and work for a responsible end to the war in Afghanistan. Congregations can learn about becoming a Just Peace Church at www.ucc.org/justice/just-peace/.

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