

Writing peace out of the script

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Introduction

The book *118 Days: Christian Peacemaker Team Held Hostage in Iraq*, edited by Tricia Gates Brown (CPT, 2008), includes a chapter that article describing the story of media coverage of the 2005-6 crisis from two different but overlapping perspectives. That of Ekklesia, through its independent Christian news briefing service, and from the perspective of a small group of activists and friends of Norman Kember who handled media enquiries in the UK during high interest times (<http://www.cptuk.org.uk/>). Here we publish online for the first time a slightly longer version of the Ekklesia material, focusing on handling and responding to media responses in Britain, especially, but to an extent internationally (given the global reach and re-configuration of the media in the digital era). The complementary material by Tim Nafziger can be read in the book (http://books.ekklesia.co.uk/product_info.php?products_id=2248), and web background on the CPT Iraq hostage situation is available through Ekklesia's briefing here: <http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/research/270306cpt> .

There was a brief pause in the conversation, just after I had started to explain what Christian Peacemaker Teams (www.cpt.org/) was and the thinking behind its practical methods of “getting in the way” of self-reinforcing violence.

“Well that’s very interesting”, the journalist responded. “It raises a lot of important questions, I can see. It’s just that in terms of what my news organization wants right now, it’s really not the story, I’m afraid.”

The reporter in question was based in the UK and was freelancing for a newspaper syndication service. He wanted some background on the latest Iraq hostage crisis because his agency was being asked for “news and updates” about the situation. He knew something about the region and the increasingly fractured post-war context, but the issue of who these “peace activists” were and why they had got caught up in such a dangerous situation was not something his antennae picked up.

So, after a couple of fruitless telephone calls, he decided to type “Christian peacemakers + Norman Kember” into his news search engine. Lo and behold, several stories from Ekklesia (www.ekklesia.co.uk) came up. He figured that this “Christian think tank and news service” might know something he didn’t and that it could provide just the one-stop information he needed. He gave us a call. This pattern repeated itself many times during the four long months before Harmeet Sooden, Jim Loney and Norman Kember were freed on 23 March 2006 — following the tragic killing of Tom Fox.

From 28 November 2005 through to the end of March 2006, Ekklesia found itself considerably preoccupied with the Iraq kidnap story. As a UK-based web agency with a global reach, we had a range of reasons for being interested. Our work involves promoting alternative Christian perspectives on policy issues and on reporting concerned with religion and public life. In this, we increasingly work with both the mainstream secular and church media. Our viewpoint is shaped by commitments and insights directly sympathetic to the outlook of the “historic peace churches” - the Quakers, Mennonites and Church of the Brethren - who founded Christian Peacemaker Teams. We also have links with CPT first established through the British ‘Root and Branch’ alliance, which includes the Anabaptist Network UK and the London Mennonite Centre.

It was natural, therefore, that we would take a particular interest in a news story where the practical possibilities of nonviolent direct action, conflict transformation, and peacemaking were at issue — and where the lives of friends well-regarded in our broader circles of collaboration were at risk. Between 26 November 2005 and April 2006 we ran more than 150 news reports and comment pieces related to the crisis, alongside two specific briefings, one on CPT itself and one tackling the growing number of largely-confused or unfounded media allegations against both the captives and those supporting them.

As we became more observant of, and involved with, the wider media coverage of the CPT Iraq hostage situation, the questions grew bigger and bigger. How was ‘the story’ developing? What shaped the way people came to see these events? What were the turning points in perception? And what longer-term lessons could those concerned for peace with justice learn about handling the media circus? In short, what writes peace in and out of the script?

A Western-centric drama?

For the Western news media, North American and European hostages in the Middle East are big stories because they personalise and dramatise what may otherwise seem like one endless series of nameless tragedies in faraway places. They become, in fact, mini-soap operas with their own recognizable cast of heroes, villains, victims, and clowns. Their stuff is the daily drama of hopes and despairs writ large. Their setting is an exotic but mostly unexamined stage. No one knows how long the mini-saga will last, but everyone realizes there can only be two outcomes: tragedy or triumph.

In the meantime, minute attention is paid to the twists and turns of the story — or, in the absence of any real news, what people *think* the story is or 'should be'. And it is in these terms that the conventions of 'the narrative' and 'the script' are written by those who have to keep people watching and reading. They are experts at their craft. They know what communicates and sells to a broad or narrow audience, and they know how to tailor the plot details to the kind of story that can be told — and the kind of story that cannot.

The 'dominant narrative' (the generally accepted version of events) is frequently established in the earliest stages of an event and this was certainly the case in the CPT Iraq hostage situation. At its starkest, it went something like this: "A well-meaning but essentially naïve and ill-prepared group of peace activists — Christians who are fish out of water in a conflict-ridden Muslim environment — have been kidnapped by a militant group after political advantage or money. By being there and being caught out, these Western activists have caused danger to those in contact with them. If they are to be freed, it will most likely be because of financial inducement, diplomatic effort, or military bravery. Some admire their intent to bring peace, but hardheaded realists know that they are at best misguided and at worst irresponsible. Their chances of getting out of this alive are limited, but if they do it will be a warning to fellow activists that they should keep their idealism out of the real grown-up world of politics and violence. This is a war on terror, not a playground for wishful thinking."

As the weeks elapsed, further refinements were added to this dominant script. Christian Peacemaker Teams, a "previously unknown" group, were portrayed in many quarters as essentially "anti-American". The default presumption, based on little if any serious research, was that CPT had recently blundered into a situation it did not really understand. That its impact on the conflict was minimal or zero. That its aim was to offer gestures of peace with little or no substance behind them. That it was either colluding with insurgents and terrorists or simply blinded to the reality of the situation on the ground. That its attitude to the soldiers who had been sent to Iraq as part of the US-led coalition was one of disregard, hostility, or ingratitude.

Of course, there were many contrary examples of good journalism that probed well beneath such simplistic stereotypes, but the overwhelming image was at least mildly negative towards "the peace activists" — with public opinion in Britain, for instance, running approximately 60 per cent critical, 25 per cent neutral and 15 per cent supportive towards them. This was reflected over the four months, with a range of variances according to the scale of coverage and what was going on, in opinion surveys (of different degrees of thoroughness or reliability), print and broadcast reporting, online commentary (especially blogs), and phone-in or discussion programmes on radio and TV.

Challenging the dominant narrative

Throughout the CPT Iraq hostage crisis, Ekklesia's coverage of events was shaped by three realizations. First, we recognized that the overriding priority for Christian Peacemaker Teams itself would be to handle the media interest in such a way as to ensure that the possibilities of Harmeet, Jim, Norman and Tom being released were heightened rather than imperiled—and that this would necessarily limit what they were able to say and do. We shared the core concern, but we recognized that (in a modest way) we also had a greater freedom and a different kind of responsibility: that of demonstrating that committed reporting can show a

concern for the truths sometimes obscured by affected neutrality.

Second, we believed that it was important to put into the public arena facts and issues that were being lost or distorted by the dominant narrative. With up to 20,000 unique daily visitors to the site in that period — among them a range of journalists and commentators reaching much wider audiences — we had some capacity to do this, though Ekklesia is, of course, a tiny fish in a vast media ocean.

Third, we thought it might be possible for us (much more than CPT and those directly involved) to offer a direct challenge to false information from time to time. That did, indeed, prove to be the case. Four examples stand out in memory.

In the immediate aftermath of the news that Harmeet, Jim, Norman, and Tom had been kidnapped, a flurry of diplomatic activity and comment ensued. In early December 2005, a story circulated that a local Iraqi negotiator who was seeking to contact the previously unidentified kidnap group, the Swords of Righteousness Brigades, had been abducted. In the words of reporter Michelle Shephard, writing a story for the Toronto Star which was picked up by other agencies and outlets, “A source told the Toronto Star the local negotiator has not been heard from since Thursday [13 December 2005] and had recently met face-to-face with members of the group believed to have kidnapped the activists.”

This story was significant for a number of reasons. It was part of a pool of speculation, often derived from questionable sources, which those seeking the release of the men regarded as profoundly unhelpful. It suggested that direct contact had been established with the kidnappers, contrary to the experience and knowledge of everyone else involved on the ground. And it illustrated how the media is sometimes overly keen to make itself a key protagonist in the story it is reporting — often at the expense of accuracy.

Christian Peacemaker Teams was rightly concerned not to feed such stories, and the various theories about the kidnappers and their motives being circulated by 'security experts'. Ekklesia decided to probe further and to email a peace worker with direct contacts in Baghdad, who said the negotiator abduction story was unfounded. We then contacted the editorial teams at both the Star and one other Canadian agency to ask if (without revealing their sources) they could confirm that their claims had been corroborated by at least one reputable source. No such assurance was forthcoming and in one case we received no reply at all. So, along with SooToday, a paper in Jim Loney's local area, which also had a syndicated web presence, we ran a report pointing out that there appeared to be no substance to this rumour and that CPT had denied it. There is some evidence that this helped to stem the rumour's further circulation a little, though it did briefly resurface several weeks later (unqualified) in a London newspaper.

In the broad media environment, 'rebuttal' is often a double-edged activity. It can feed a story which would be better left simply to wither, and it can absorb time and energy which might be better spent putting out a positive message. But when false or highly dubious information circulates, especially when it is given credence by otherwise reputable sources, it may be helpful to make available a corrective or a more substantial source.

Much of the time, however, one is dealing with a more mundane reality: when a story loses focus on what, in the broader context, are very important factors. In the case of the CPT hostage crisis, for example, media coverage tended to ignore or misrepresent why Christian Peacemaker Teams was in Iraq (to support local civil and religious groups involved in peacebuilding and violence reduction); how long it had been there (well before Western troops had arrived) and what it was achieving (some modest but significant relationships and interventions which are only possible for those who come in without military protection or commercial motives). Ekklesia was able to provide this information, alongside a number of other NGOs and 'new media' (that is, digital) outlets.

Similarly, Ekklesia (along with information sources such as Sojourners magazine and webzine and Mennonite Weekly Review in North America) was able consistently to point out that hostage-taking was much more an issue impacting ordinary Iraqis than international visitors, that violence on all sides was proving demonstrably to be the problem not the solution, that the US-led invasion and occupation of the country remained the backdrop to resistance and internecine disorder, and that 'conflict transformation techniques' were not a new idea but formed part of a credible tradition of action and research.

We also tried to highlight the truth that Christians, Muslims and those of good faith were finding unexpected common cause in the midst of this small human drama — and that this indicated that efforts to build peaceful relationships and to resist violent resolutions in a situation of escalating low-intensity war were not “foolish” at all, but offered tangible, small-scale hope in a context of otherwise deepening conflict. Moreover, there were many concrete stories that illustrated this, and which also demonstrated why the “clash of civilizations” thesis (Huntington, 1996) is a self-fulfilling prophecy which feeds the forces of division it purports to expose.

For us, this, together with the deep commitment of local petitioners and vigil organizers, the work of CPT under immense pressure with few resources, and the extraordinary efforts of Anas Altikriti (Muslim Association of Britain) and other Islamic supporters, was the *real* story. It was also key to understanding what was going on while efforts of many different kinds were being made to free 'the four', when on the surface of the narrative, it appeared "nothing was happening" (as one reporter suggested to me).

Keeping the story alive through the dark days of silence from Baghdad was a major task in itself, so that those connected with the kidnapers would know international concern remained solid, and those in captivity (not just Harmeet, Jim, Norman and Tom — but all in detention or held hostage in Iraq) might come to know they were not alone and not forgotten.

However, for much of the media these concerns barely registered on their radar. With honorable exceptions such as Vatican Radio, the underlying story continued to be ignored. News is predominantly spectacle rather than perspective, event rather than process and precipice rather than plain. This becomes clear when there is a sudden flurry of responses. In the case of the CPT Iraq hostage situation, these occasions were another set of media-conveyed events, the 'hostage videos' periodically released by the kidnapers, showing fragile and bedraggled captives making orchestrated pleas for the Western powers to fulfill the political demands of their captors.

From spectacle to perspective

Al Jazeera, the autonomous Arabic network, found itself on the receiving end of videos from the captors. Inevitably it was criticized for showing them and for reporting anti-Western sentiment and violence. But it also broadcast appeals for the men's release (not least two moving statements from Norman Kember's wife, Pat) and offered much more context and detail than many of its critics, especially in the US and among some 'embedded' reporters.

For Christian Peacemaker Teams, however, these videos posed a number of challenges. As images, they degraded the humanity of both captives and captors. As political statements, they allied the case against war and occupation with counter-violence, blackmail, and the targeting of the innocent. And as 'spectacles' they detracted from wider messages and concerns about the suffering of the Iraqi people and the need for alternatives to force and killing as ways of resolving the political and military crisis in the region.

Ekklesia held that there was little one could do about these negative dynamics. They were simply part of the construction of the dominant narrative. Those close to the captives chose not to respond to them directly, not to use the video images of their friends and in a couple of instances, not to comment to those outlets which ran them. This was understandable, but we saw another angle — that the sudden glare of cameras and rattle of word processors occasioned by these 'displays' provided an opportunity once more to state the broader concerns otherwise overlooked, and to keep re-narrating the 'alternative script' from the perspective of those concerned with justice rather than victory. This is a key component of truth-telling in an environment where the powers that be otherwise skew 'the accepted version of events' towards their own vested interests.

In other words, it is important to acknowledge that truth is contested, that as in all contests, the powerful have an in-built advantage and that integrity in reporting and commenting is achieved not by false attempts at giving equal coverage to both the lion and its prey — when one side will always be vastly more 'equal' than the other — but by seeking to highlight silent voices, hidden viewpoints, unknown stories, and different slants.

Viewed as a simple competition between outlets with vastly uneven resources, this can seem a losing battle. But the militaristic metaphor is misleading. The digitally-driven media environment may be far from a level playing field, but it is certainly a playing field on which a whole range of hitherto un-encountered protagonists may participate, with the policed boundaries of editorial control exercised by newspapers, TV, and radio being challenged through a new cohort of bloggers, cable channels, web surfers, and free papers. This too, works in a variety of directions, but can be employed strategically to offer intelligent and humane perspectives which would otherwise be lost. Critical in this changing media arena, is the crossover between what would once have formerly been sharply differentiated 'alternative' and 'mainstream' outlets.

This became clear when, after the tragic news of Tom Fox's murder, there was great elation at the surprise

freeing of Norman, Jim and Harmeet. Once again, the dominant narrative asserted itself very rapidly. When news broke that SAS soldiers had been directed to the place where the three men were being held and had broken in to release them the media rapidly responded with stories of “our brave boys” being required to save a group of peace activists who had been working against their presence. How very ironic, they argued. Once again, it is soldiers not anti-war activists who prove the most effective peacekeepers.

What was conveniently ignored in this account, as in subsequent vitriolic accusations that CPT had “imperiled” the soldiers who were “called upon” to rescue them, was the fact that the freeing was actually achieved without violence. That the groundwork of intelligence was civilian, not military. That Christian Peacemaker Teams are explicit in asking the military *not* to risk themselves or to use violence to effect rescue should anything happen to them. And that the same soldiers who can, from time to time, engage in honourable actions to free prisoners or assist civilians, are themselves victims in a hopeless cycle of violence where they are mostly powerless to stem the escalation of insurgent brutality, and are (additionally) components of the tragedy they are asked to 'solve'. Those who disavow arms, on the other hand, can affect trust and cooperation through the same nonviolent means that make them unavoidably vulnerable — with the distinction that they are, in Gandhi’s formula, part of the peace they propose.

These were the kind of points those offering media comment and analysis from within the 'peace and justice' camp sought to make, against the flow of superficial cynicism and in opposition to those who sought openly to discredit or smear CPT — of whom there were quite a few.

From distortion to reflection

In the UK and beyond, two big stories in this regard were those concerning Norman Kember’s supposed “ingratitude” towards his SAS rescuers, and repeated accusations that the peace activists had irresponsibly put the lives of military personnel at risk. In both these instances, the dominant narrative, while remaining the most widely circulated account by definition, turned upon itself by virtue of small interventions which Ekklesia and others were able to make.

The “ingratitude” story emerged very shortly after the three men’s release was announced on 23 March 2006. On a day of much confusion, Christian Peacemaker Teams’ immediate response, at a time before their spokespeople had had any opportunity to talk with the released captives, was to thank God for their freedom and to reiterate the organisation’s core messages about an end to occupation and detention within Iraq. As CPT’s Doug Pritchard subsequently remarked, while the media wanted instant response, no one had any real idea what had happened or who had done what — so it simply was not possible to attribute specific thanks at the earliest stage. Moreover, Norman Kember’s very first comment was (understandably) one of relief and joy at his freedom, and concern for his family. Later that day, CPT put up a statement on the web thankfully acknowledging the soldiers’ for role in the (nonviolent) release. It also became clear that the men themselves had expressed gratitude to those with whom they had been in touch. When Norman Kember arrived back in Britain a little later, he expressed his thanks publicly — while making it clear that he still did not think that military force was the way to resolve Iraq’s many problems.

However, any commentators and reporters had already decided their story in advance of determining these facts. Indeed, the idea that peace activists would be naturally reluctant to thank soldiers seemed so obvious, and the notion that military action had proved 'superior' to nonviolence was so ingrained that the conviction that this is what had indeed happened took instant root — with little regard for what else was being said or done. Perhaps the catalytic moment in the UK was when the then-head of the British Army, the charismatically bullish General Sir Mike Jackson, went on Channel 4 television News on 24 March 2006, the day before Norman Kember arrived back in Britain, but the evening after CPT’s statement of thanks on 23 March.

In that interview, General Jackson declared: “I am slightly saddened that there doesn’t seem to have been a note of gratitude for the soldiers who risked their lives to save those lives.” He went on to say that if an expression of thanks had been made, he was unaware of it. Ekklesia’s Jonathan Bartley put the evidence to the contrary to the same programme the next day. They chose not to use that excerpt, but Bartley was able to make a rebuttal on a range of BBC programmes over the next few days. However, the response of the wider media to the British Army chief’s comment had been instant. It was taken as ‘gospel’, and the note of

qualification was immediately eliminated, as any good PR should realize it would be, given the trend towards simplification in transmission.

At that stage, I tracked down a press officer at the Ministry of Defence to seek to clarify why General Jackson had gone on record in this way, and what his sources were for this (inaccurate) remark. The person I spoke to on the phone was pleasant but uninformative. He ventured that Sir Mike had “obviously not realized” that thanks had been offered by CPT and Norman Kember to those who had released him, and that he was “apparently unaware” of what was on the Christian Peacemaker Teams’ website. Other than that he had “no further explanation” or comment. I politely asked whether it was usual MoD or British Army policy to send their most senior figure onto a national TV news programme to comment on events that neither he nor they appeared to have researched, but rather expectedly drew a blank. It seemed a rather ironic failure of ‘military intelligence.’

Nonetheless, Ekklesia was able to run a story (28 March 2006) indicating that “Army chief spoke without knowledge on alleged Kember ingratitude.” This was then picked up by several news agencies, and as an addendum to the saga by two national British newspapers. It was fairly widely syndicated on the web, too. As a footnote, Jonathan Bartley and I bumped into General Sir Mike Jackson in the week before he retired at the end of July 2006, at a Lambeth Palace reception hosted by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The General had little recollection of what he had said or of the whole incident. For the truth is that the dominant narrative does not have to struggle to assert itself. It is the accepted, commonsensical viewpoint which becomes the received account in such a manner that it no longer needs justification. This is why the subversive footnote and the well-documented counter-fact remain important. It is in this way that a wedge is maintained through which truth can continue to seep, feeding the hope and reason of those who would do and see things differently in the world.

Similarly, Ekklesia, small though it is in the grand scheme of things, was able to play a part in the unraveling of the 'script' which blamed the Christian Peacemaker Teams’ Iraq delegation for the alleged risk of the rescue operation. Speaking on the Jeremy Vine BBC Radio 2 radio programme on 27 March 2006, a leading counter-terrorism and security analyst, Colonel Mike Dewar, inadvertently poured scorn on the idea — by then widely circulating — that Norman Kember and his fellow CPT members had caused any danger to British service personnel by their actions. He has also defended CPT’s right to be in Iraq.

Colonel Dewar has been a vigorous supporter of the Iraq war and he is a practicing Christian. During the interview he made clear his contempt and distaste for nonviolent campaigners and he dismissed Christian peacemaking as “fundamentalism.” He mocked the idea that prayer could thwart dictatorship and described weapons as God’s “tools” for use “in the real world.” The Colonel told Christian Peacemaker Teams dismissively: “If you want to send back more teams, that is entirely your business.”

In response, Jonathan Bartley explained that CPT were concerned about the welfare of coalition soldiers as well as Iraqis, and that this is why they had categorically said that they did not want the lives of military or civilian operatives endangered through military rescue, should their volunteers be captured.

At this point, Dewar exclaimed angrily: “You needn’t worry, Mr Bartley, about putting troops in danger. It’s part of a soldier’s job to be in danger, so we don’t need your worries, thank you very much, about putting us in danger. British troops are out there in danger on a daily basis. And in fact they were extremely glad to be able to rescue them.”

So according to Colonel Dewar himself, the “endangering lives” thesis did not hold water. Once again, a curious attempt to blame peace for war had turned in upon itself, proving that even in the face of overwhelming odds, it is worth the patient attempt to elicit overlooked facts and those more nuanced interpretations of events which affirm the 'underside of history' in the face of often-jaundiced first drafts of the public record.

Continuing to re-write the script

This is just one account of interactions with the media during the 2005-06 CPT Iraq hostage crisis. There will be many other experiences and events among those who worked for the release of Harmeet, Jim, Norman and the much-missed Tom. The most important lesson to learn, I believe, is that no matter how remorseless

the media juggernaut— efficient in rapidly disseminating information, but often at some considerable cost to accuracy and understanding — it is always worth engaging. In an era of corporate power and mass consumption, cracks in the system, viewpoints from the grassroots, truth from the margins and wisdom from the outsider are the concrete ways in which a new kind of gentle energy can be nurtured and sustained.

Again and again, the dominant narratives of our time, most especially what theologian Walter Wink calls “the myth of redemptive violence,” assert themselves in such a way as to write peace and peacemaking out of the script. This is only to be expected. Expendng a lot of energy raging against the machine is likely to be futile. The appropriate response is not despair or collusion, but the cultivation of what the late Archbishop Helder Camara once called “small-scale experiments in hope.”

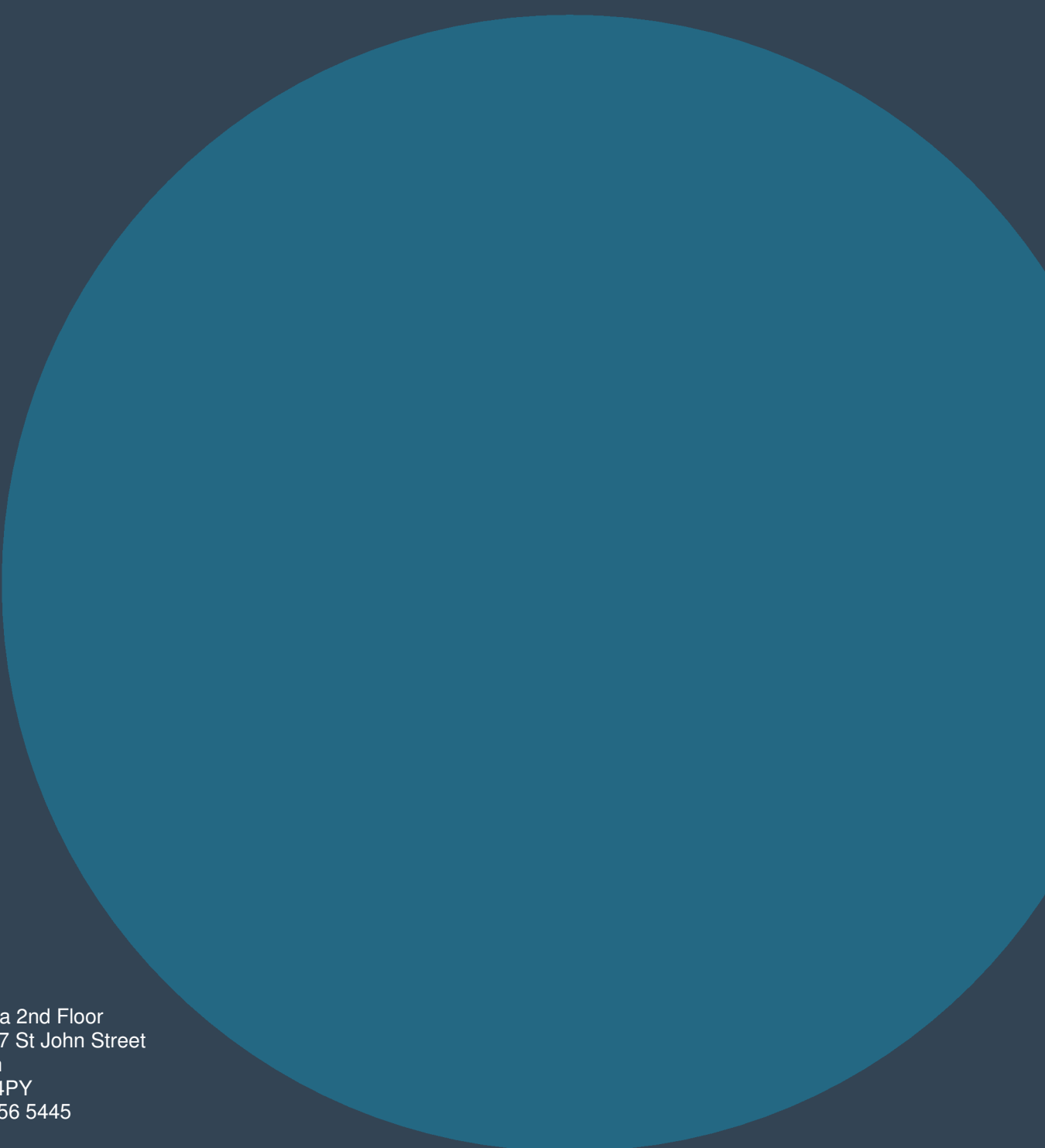
Such experiments arise from the constructive but vulnerable witness of persons like those who serve with Christian Peacemaker Teams in situations of seemingly intractable destructiveness — and above all in the local people whose ongoing resistance to the powers that be is the only final source of alternatives, when attempts to impose external 'solutions' by force inevitably break down. To be effective, however, alternatives need to spread. To spread they must be heard. And to be heard they must be re-inserted into the script, written out of it (in the sense of inscribed within and scribed without) — not written off, or written away. This is a vital ongoing task, both within the media environment, in terms of the practicalities of conflict transformation, and in relation to public policy on interventions in situations of conflict.

References

118 Days: Christian Peacemaker Team Held Hostage in Iraq, edited by Tricia Gates Brown (CPT, 2008) is available from Ekklesia (http://books.ekklesia.co.uk/product_info.php?products_id=2248), along with a range of other titles on CPT and peacemaking (http://books.ekklesia.co.uk/advanced_search_result.php?keywords=peace&x=...).

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