

## Quakers take on world issues with committee

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AKRON - When asked if they consider themselves to be radicals, Greg Coleridge, Reggie Witsaman, Valerie Lovegren and Dana Williams seem perplexed, frustrated, even a little amused by the question.

In February, it was revealed that the Department of Defense monitored an anti-war rally in downtown Akron organized by their group, the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee.

The AFSC was founded by Quakers in 1917 to give conscientious objectors a way to serve civilian war victims during War World I.

“We are the social-action arm of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers),” said Coleridge, director of the AFSC’s Economic Justice and Empowerment Program.

Akron is one of about 30 offices across the country.

Coleridge said their activities are not rooted in politics but in morality and economic and social justice.

“You can’t avoid conflict,” he said. “You can control how you respond to it.”

A resident of Uniontown, Witsaman said she wasn’t surprised by the government investigation.

Mainstream stance?

“I think many of us have an understanding that the government has an interest in people speaking out against war,” she said.

“In times of war, they need people to acquiesce,” said Lovegren, a math professor at Case Western Reserve University.

“We feel the exact opposite is true,” Williams said. “That’s when you need to think about the issues. I think the word ‘radical’ is used to denigrate someone’s political position or any kind of dissent or paradigm shift. Public opinion polls constantly show us in the mainstream concerning Iraq and humanitarian-aid issues. We’re very much in line with what Americans believe.”

“I grew up like Pollyanna,” Lovegren said. “Now, some people think I’m radical and that’s OK.”

The AFSC is active in several causes, including immigration, humanitarian aid, democracy and Third World debt relief.

Coleridge contends the issues are interconnected.

For example, he said he believes that illegal immigration stems from free-trade agreements which benefit corporations, but have decimated economies abroad. He concedes there are immigration problems but noted, “A law is not always equated to what is ethical. One needs to look at the basic conditions of what is occurring. It’s not a clean, black-and-white issue.”



*Members of the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee, including (left to right) Akron office director Greg Coleridge, Victoria Lovegren, Dana Williams and Reggie Witsaman, say many of the world’s problems are interconnected and can be solved through nonviolent means. The national organization was started by Quakers in 1917.*

“It’s no coincidence that in the 1990s, immigration to the United States was the highest ever at the same time we entered into NAFTA,” Williams added.

## Opposition to Iraq

The members pull no punches about Iraq, noting their opposition as early as 2002.

“Any decision we make is going to be a bad decision because of the quagmire we’re in,” Coleridge said.

Williams said he’s dismayed at the construction of permanent American military bases in Iraq.

“It’s the same thing the Islamicists have been saying about a foreign presence on their soil,” he said. “The United States has not solved the problem. ...You can’t offer freedom from above, from the outside. Freedom is messy and complicated. Liberation means liberating yourself. Perhaps we shouldn’t have imposed sanctions, starving the very people who may have formed an opposition government. But we’re not interested in that kind of liberation. What we’re doing is kind of arrogant, presumptuous and ethnocentric.”

Coleridge said the AFSC also assists other organizations, such as the Industrial Excess Landfill group in Lake Township, which has been investigating contamination there for more than 20 years.

Though AFSC is a Quaker organization, Coleridge, who is not Quaker, said it’s had limited dealings with area churches. The office’s individual mailing list stands at about 7,000.

## Response of war

The four said the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 was a tragedy, but Williams said they should have been treated as a crime.

“Something on that scale, you have to deal with what it is — a crime,” he said. “When there was a bombing in Oklahoma, we didn’t send fighter jets to bomb Michigan or to get Tim McVeigh. You have to hold people accountable through the law, not by bombing a country.

“There were more people killed in Afghanistan than in the Twin Towers. What kind of solution is that? You don’t send bombs to kill Osama bin Laden. I don’t like the guy either, but justice is a legal definition.”

Coleridge said the United States squandered an opportunity when it initially had the world’s support.

“We took the ‘dinosaur’ route, which has led to the abyss and quagmire we have today,” he said. “The religious community needs to come to the front. We have to ask whether the response of war itself, has passed its time.”

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