

Worship and Action Update, 3/5/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Over the past week, Friends at Poplar Ridge Monthly Meeting have been thrust into engagement with our government and public visibility as the result of the indictment and arrest of four men in the Syracuse area. Ruth Ann Bradley, pastor of Poplar Ridge Meeting, provides this report:

“Last Wednesday (2/26/03), four men of Arab descent were arrested for the transfer of money into Iraq through a Syracuse-based charity, Help the Needy, without the proper government license. The indictments contained *no* allegations of terrorism. The founder of Help the Needy is Rafil Dhafir, a United States citizen and oncologist. He is known by a member of the Poplar Ridge Monthly Meeting and was invited to present at a “Soup and Sharing” program at the meetinghouse last spring. The organization was founded in 1994 “for relief of the Iraqi people” and holds a tax exemption ID number under Section 501(c)(3). Dhafir is currently being held without bail.

“Three members of Poplar Ridge MM who made contributions to the charity were visited unannounced at their homes last week to be questioned by an FBI agent (accompanied by a state police officer). All those questioned reported that they were treated politely and with respect and that they were viewed as victims of fraud. The implication by the agent was that their contributions might have been used for other than humanitarian purposes.

“Poplar Ridge Friends have been busy with keeping in close communication with those directly and indirectly affected, with fielding calls from reporters, and in reaching out to the Islamic community of Syracuse. The effects of our government’s policies and the political climate of our nation and world have literally “hit home.” Although stressful at the start, we are gathered and at peace. We may have been helpful in turning the local press coverage from the assumption of their guilt and links to possible terrorism, to the presumption of their innocence - no small feat in these times!

“We are strengthened in our knowledge that we are held in the wider body of Friends. It is our continuing intention and prayer that we will reflect the Light of God’s Spirit during this time of darkness. May the blessings of God’s peace and power be with you.”

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Our government has insinuated that Help the Needy and the four indicted individuals somehow have links to terrorist activity and organizations by attempting to associate them with another charity and by tying their arrest to the simultaneous indictment and arrest of an unconnected individual in Idaho for unrelated activity. See "5 Tied to Islamic Charity Indicted in N.Y., Idaho", by Susan Schmidt, in the Washington Post, Thursday, February 27, 2003, p. A02, available online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A8329-2003Feb26.html>.

In fact, there does not appear to be even a suggestion in the indictments that Help the Needy and the individuals were involved in anything more than raising funds for aiding poor and ill children in Iraq and then forwarding the funds to Iraq without a "license," which might violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act.

Newsday has reported on the work of Help the Needy and the fear the arrests is causing in the Syracuse Muslim community in an article "Muslims fear backlash from arrests," by William Kates, March 1, 2003, which is available online at: <http://www.nynewsday.com/news/local/wire/ny-bc-ny--charityarrests0301mar01.story>.

The *Syracuse Post-Standard* has published two articles about the experience of Poplar Ridge Friends with Help the Needy and government investigators. These are both available online:

"Doctor told donors he was helping Iraqi children"
Peter Riede, Sunday, March 2, 2003
<http://www.syracuse.com/search/index.ssf?/base/news-5/103795781378800.xml?syrneocit>

"Dhafir spoke, left brochures for Quakers"
Beth Beer, March 3, 2003
<http://www.syracuse.com/search/index.ssf?/base/news-7/1046684115267154.xml?syrneocit>

In the next week, we hope to make available some guidance on Friends' and Friends organizations' rights and responsibilities when the "Constable" comes calling.

As war on Iraq seems to be descending upon us, Friends are wrestling with faithfulness to our calling in increasingly intolerant times. Like the Muslim community described in the *Newsday* article, we know that God calls us to aid those in need. And like Friends at Poplar Ridge Meeting, we know that God calls us to reach out to neighbors under stress. We know that, in the words of Ruth Ann Bradley, we must continue to "reflect the Light of God's Spirit during this time of darkness."

Yet we have begun to experience official suspicion of faithfulness to God's call. We have begun to feel approbation for speaking and acting Truth to power.

In these times of deepening darkness, we can still "hear anew the call to pray and work for peace." In the actions of Poplar Ridge Friends, "We hear the murmur of a great

people ... gathered in peace." We confirm again that "Grounded in shared worship, we experience fresh guidance and inward power to act."

Peaceable Greetings,

*Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship & Action working group*

"One needs to be slow to form convictions, but once formed they must be defended against the heaviest odds."

"Whenever you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, try the following experiment: Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless person you have ever seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be for any use to him or to her.... Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away."

Mahatma Gandhi

"The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' But ... the good Samaritan reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

Martin Luther King, Jr.