

Dunker Punks Podcast



Transcription details:

Episode Number: 81

Episode Name: Christianity, Peacemaking, Tea...

Date: April 13, 2019

Episode Description: Monica McFadden interviews Tori Bateman about her trip with Christian Peacemaker Teams to Iraqi Kurdistan.

Speakers in audio file:

S1: Emmett Witkovsky-Eldred

S2: Monica McFadden

S3: Tori Bateman

Transcription:

Hey Dunker Punks, thanks so much for tuning in. This time on the show, a story about Christian Peacemakers partnering with people living amid violent conflict, tea served atop pristine, snowcapped mountains, and even some goats defying physics to cling to the side of impossibly-steep cliffs. You don't want to miss it. So we'll be right back.

[Intro music]

[background music]

Emmett: This week's episode comes from the Church of the Brethren office of Peacebuilding and Policy in Washington, DC. The audio is presented by Monica McFadden and Tori Bateman, two Brethren volunteers, volunteers working at OPP to advocate to congress Brethren values of peace and justice. In today's episode, you'll hear Monica interview Tori about her recent experience on the delegation to Iraqi Kurdistan with Christian Peacemaker Teams. We've heard about the work of Christian Peacemaker Teams a few times before, and each time I'm just left in awe of the good work that they do and the humble spirit of service that characterizes the way that they approach their work.

As you'll hear, CPT goes into conflict zones around the world, to support peacemakers, community leaders, and civil society organizations on the ground. They go to help, not to lead. They offer protection, but not through violence or force, and they're constantly learning how to achieve those goals in a better, more inclusive fashion. They strive to understand the colonialist history that so often disjoins good intentions from positive results. When people from the United

States go abroad, hoping and meaning to serve. And they always have their eyes on undoing oppression: within their organization, within our society, and within the communities that they go to serve. I'm happy to hear once again from Christian Peacemaker Teams, this time from the perspective from a volunteer joining a CPT delegation. With all of that said, I hope you'll enjoy this interview with Monica and Tori, about Tori's experience in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Monica: Ok, so to start out, what is CPT, and what is a CPT delegation?

Tori: CPT stands for Christian Peacemaker Teams, and it's a peacebuilding organization that was founded in the mid 1980's by churches, including the Church of the Brethren. Um, mission of peacebuilding and building lots of partnerships. Uh, their mission statement is 'building partnerships to transform violence and oppression'. And they're doing that all over the world right now, um, they currently have teams in Colombia, Israel, Palestine, and Iraqi Kurdistan. And Iraqi Kurdistan is where I was able to travel this past month.

I was with a CPT delegation, which is a group of people who may or may not already be engaged with CPT, who have the opportunity to see what the organization is doing on the ground, and also to meet with local peacebuilding partners there. The expectation is that, once you've been exposed to the human rights issues, and the work being done by CPT in the location you visit, you'll go back home and get involved in advocacy in your home community around these issues. So that could look like educating your faith community, uh you could contact your government, you could write articles and share photos, or find other ways to amplify the voices of people who have been impacted by human rights issues on the ground.

M: Great, so, uh can you tell me a little bit more about the region? I feel like a lot of people don't really know that much about Iraqi Kurdistan.

T: Iraqi Kurdistan is the northern part of Iraq. And it's populated by an ethnic minority that also extends into Turkey and Iran, um, in that mountainous region sort of where those countries, uh, come together. Um, and Iraqi Kurdistan specifically is a semi-autonomous region. So, it, rather than being completely controlled by the Iraqi government in Baghdad, they have what they call the KRG, the Kurdistan Regional Government, um, which has a lot of autonomy as far as governance goes, in the northern part of Iraq.

Um, the, the Kurds have faced a significant amount of oppression in the past. People may have heard of the Al-Anfal Genocide, which was perpetrated by the regime of Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. During this time, the regime relocated Arab families into primarily Kurdish areas, they destroyed Kurdish villages and killed Kurds. Some estimates, uh, say the number of Kurds killed was over 180,000. Uh, in 1988, the city of Halabja was chemically attacked. We had the opportunity to visit that city while we were traveling, and saw first-hand the mass graves. Um, and also had the chance to see the museum that includes a lot of photos and evidence from the attack.

I'd also like to set the scene a bit, since often the Middle East conjures up pictures of camels or giant sand dunes in people's minds. Iraqi Kurdistan is absolutely beautiful, and about as far away from a desert landscape as you can imagine. There are so many snow-capped mountains, uh, we actually had a really great snowball fight on one of our bus trips. And the sides of these mountains have these, like zig-zag paths on their sides, which are created by the massive herds of goats that are somehow, like magically clinging to these really steep inclines. In

the valleys, there are some really bright, green fields of wheat, and rice, uh, and wildflowers. So definitely not a, uh, camel and sand-dune type Middle Eastern landscape. It's a very beautiful and green, uh landscape.

M: So what type of work is CPT doing there in order to, um, to help?

T: So CPT has partnered with local civil society organizations through their, uh, people in Iraqi Kurdistan who are doing really awesome human rights work, trying to increase transparency and accountability. Um, to find ways to live peacefully with people in the Middle East. Um, one of their big projects right now is accompaniment of journalists. Uh, many journalists who are writing on things, for example, uh prison conditions in Duhok. Um, are then targeted by the security services for the reporting they've been doing. So CPT works with those journalists to try to keep them safe, uh, through the presence of an international NGO like CPT. Uh, when we were in Akre, we had the chance to meet with Sherwan Sherwani, who's a journalist who, uh, was the journalist who was covering the (M: hmm) prison conditions (M: ya) I just mentioned. Um, and he had been arrested on his way to a protest involving uh, involving other journalists and civil society activists who were protesting the Turkish bombings in the region. Um, so he was arrested, kept in solitary confinement, wasn't given access to a lawyer or his family while in the, uh custody of the Asaish, um. So we would hear a little bit about his experiences.

Uh, CPT works with him to raise awareness of his story in international media and through international NGO work. Um, and also provides a protective presence for him. So, when he was in the security forces prison, they went and tried to visit him. Um, they worked with his wife to try to figure out just where he was, when he was in custody. Um, and again, using their power as an international NGO to try to keep journalists safer, um, and to be treated better by the government and security services.

Um, they also work a lot with civil society, um, there's a lot of people in Kurdistan doing amazing work. For example, in like the end of 2016 through 2017 there were teacher strikes, um, where they were organizing for better pay. And the leader of those teacher strikes had a lot of threats on his life and his safety and his family's safety. So CPT actually ended up living with him for a while (M: oh wow), and people rotating in and out of his house, um, to provide a protective presence of an international NGO for his family. Um, their car ended up being burned at one point, and they continued to get lots of threats. So CPT was able to document, um, what threats he was getting, when he was getting them. Just, it generally, you know, facilitates some of that safety for him.

M: Mmmhmm

T: Um, another project that they're working on is trainings, they do something called the Alternatives to Violence Project, which was originally developed by a Quaker organization, for use in American prisons. And is now being used elsewhere around the world, um, to open up a dialogue around what peacebuilding is, what violence is. Um, to give people a safe space to begin really important conversations in their communities. Uh, what's really cool about the way that CPT has been doing these trainings in Iraqi Kurdistan, is that they started the trainings and then the Iraqi youth who have become facilitators through those trainings are now going out on

their own into places like Duhok and (M: Mmm) Mosul and running their own trainings. So it's really becoming something that's led by Iraqi youth.

M: Ya

T: Um, they're also developing a nonviolence training right now, um, with the Kurdish members of the team. So it's going to be the first nonviolence (M: Mmm) training in the region developed for Kurdish people by Kurdish people. Which is (M: wow) also really exciting.

M: Ya.

T: Um, and then the final, big project that they're working on, um, and really interesting one, is the cross-border bombings. Uh, the region person is very close to both Iran and Turkey, there are some political parties in the region, uh, the PKK and KDPI, which are designated as terrorist groups and have military operations against Turkey and Iran, and they're based in the Iraqi Kurdistan region in the mountains. Um, so those governments are doing a lot of military operations focused on those groups, that impact civilians in the region.

M: Mmm.

T: Um, so, for example, we were in Dupre and Kashkawa. Uh, two cities, two small villages, really, that have been impacted by some of the Turkey, Turkish bombings. Um, you know, their agricultural production is way down because they can't go out in the mountains to harvest (unintelligible) sumac. And also, their fields are being burned. So one of the uh, men that we talked to actually estimated that the village loses about 60,000 dollars a year in lost agricultural revenue because of the bombings. Um, in addition, uh, the military operations, the Turkish bases are sort of encroaching farther and farther into Iraqi Kurdistan's territory, um, and some of their training exercises, for example, uh have killed civilians. CPT put out a really interesting report, um, on a young girl who was killed by a Turkish mortar. Um, and the Turkish military group that had done that tried to cover it up, and her family still hasn't gotten justice for her. So, they're doing a lot of work partnering with those communities that have been impacted by the violence, trying to raise awareness of the bombings and find ways for the international community to rally around the imminent, innocent civilians that are being impacted by that really large geo-political conflict.

M: Ya

T: Um, so those are a couple of the projects, they work on a whole bunch of different things, and are constantly meeting new partners. Um, and finding new ways to engage with the local community as they seek out, to bring peaceful ways of existence.

M: Mmmhmm. Uh, is there anything that's kind of, interesting tidbits of like, Kurdish culture that you got to experience, or...

T: Ya, oh my gosh, I drank so much tea while I was over (mutual laughter)... Ya.

M: You got to drink tea on top of a mountain, didn't you?

T: Ya, so, throughout the entire uh, two weeks I was there, every place we stopped at, we were served tea. Tea upon tea upon tea. (background giggle) Um, in Kurdish culture it's very, uh, normal to offer guests tea, and to continue (mutual laugh) to offer them tea the rest of the time that they're there. So by the end, by the end of uh, two weeks I was full of tea. Um, at one point we went on a hike up a mountain, in Akre, to check out an old Zoroastrian temple, with some really cool views up there, and I was saying to myself, I thought, 'Oh good, this is finally the one event where I'm not going to be (mutual giggle) drinking so much tea'. And we got to the top of the mountain, and lo and behold, there is three tea cellars. (mutual laugh) With little, like fire things and a whole bunch of tea kettles up there, and we sat on this rug and (M: How did they do that?) we drank tea at the top of the mountain. So, you (laugh) you can't escape it.

M: That's pretty cool (laugh). So, what did you take away from the trip?

T: I learned a lot on this trip. Um, the most important thing that I think I took away, was a deeper knowledge of CPT's work in the region, and also how human rights reporting on the ground gets to people in power. Um, so much of things that we 'know', as far as politics and what's going on in the world, comes from people that are operating in these locations and seeing for themselves what's happening on the ground. Um, and it's really important that that, knowledge is able to get written down and given to people who are making decisions about, you know, military action in an area (M: Ya) or aid to the area. Um, so there's really a blessing to see how CPT is, for example, documenting the threats against journalists. Or, um, reporting communities that have been impacted by the bombings. Uh, see how the collecting that and how they're writing that down. So that then, we here in like, DC and the Office of Peacebuilding and Policy, and um, and other advocacy groups here can use that information to tell our elected officials 'hey, like, this is what's happening on the ground, and here's some of the actions you can take, to make the lives of these people safer'.

Um, I also gained a deep appreciation for NGOs that are doing the work of undoing oppressions. This is a framework that CPT has started using in recognition that the work of international NGOs can sometimes be problematic.

M: Mmmhmm.

T: Um, we have a colonial history (laugh) and there's a lot of unfortunate realities where international NGOs going into other cultural contexts can sometimes bulldozer over the local people. Um, they don't incorporate uh, the will of the people, or you know, show sensitivity.

M: Mmmhmm

T: Um, or they're there to make themselves look good or to feel better, rather than to actually engage in a situation in a helpful way. Um, and I really appreciated that throughout our delegation, these were conversations that we had, and that CPT was honestly trying to engage with, in a helpful way. Um, photos, for example, were something that were very intentionally, um, discussed as something that needed to be empowering towards the local people. You know, you're not taking pictures of, a sobbing woman (M: Mmmhmm) and posing her to make her look sadder than she is, or something (M: Mmmhmm). Um, so, really important discussions about

how to accurately reflect the people there, to empower them, kind of let them take leadership roles in whatever's happening and have us be a supportive component to that. To bring our privilege as an international NGO to help them be leaders in their own peacebuilding work.

So I really appreciated that framework, and the fact that NGOs are starting to have those discussions. Another thing I took away from the trip was the incredible potential of young people in the country. In Ranya, we went with the newly-established youth group that wants to organize around environmental issues in their community. We spent a lot of time with them doing some of the uh, Alternative to Violence Project training activities, and we also participated in an art project that they had coordinated around International Women's Day.

Um, I'll also mention that during this meeting, I made the terrible, terrible mistake of trying to explain the game Pterodactyl through a translator. Uh, this game involves not showing your teeth at all while trying to say the word pterodactyl, so you end up saying something more like (phonetic, garbled) 'hherrradactyl'. And (giggle) there's dinosaur squawking involved as well. Uh, the look of pure terror on the group's faces was a tad humiliating, and I definitely learned my lesson about trying to induce, introduce uh, embarrassing games in intercultural contexts. But regardless of my own social faux pas, I was really excited to meet with young people doing this work. Um, I was less excited to hear how some of the adult leaders in their communities spoke about their demographic. I really consistently heard older adults say things like, 'the youth can't do anything, the government has to do it for them' or, 'the youth in this area are in really bad shape'. And I think these are such disempowering messages for a group. Um, that I think can genuinely make a difference. So, I can't wait to see what groups... youth groups like the one we met with, uh, do and how they can prove them wrong.

[background music begins]

M: So, so then how can other people get involved in a CPT delegation?

T: So, there are several delegations each year to CPT projects, um, in Kurdistan, Colombia, and Isreal/Palestine, and this one, uh, Turtle Island (M: Mmm) in Canada, with the Indigenous People Solidarity Project. Um, and if people are interested in getting involved, they can apply very easily, it's www.cpt.org, and they can learn more there about the work of CPT generally, um, and then also apply for the delegations. And it's definitely something I would recommend. Um, a two-week trip, uh, to visit with partners is going to give you, uh, insights into a culture and the, uh problems they face and the amazing work that they're doing, um, that you wouldn't be able to get in any other way. And the teams, uh, that are there full-time, CPT staff is fantastic, and it's just really, awesome experience generally.

M: Great, well thank you so much.

T: Ya, thank you.

[background music ends]

E: So thank you so much for sharing about your experience in Iraqi Kurdistan as part of a Christian Peacemaker Teams delegation. And thank you, Monica, for helping to bring that story to life through your thoughtful questions. I really hope that some folks listening at home will be

inspired to join CPT delegations of their own, or to support Christian Peacemaker Teams in any way that you can. Visit cpt.org to learn more and to get started. Of all of Tori's vivid descriptions, of all of her awesome, and sometimes humbling experiences, the piece that sticks with me the most is the infectious nature of the principles of peace and nonviolence that CPT represents in Iraqi Kurdistan. And that their work has drawn out and highlighted from the Kurds and the Iraqis already working on the ground to cultivate peace and justice. I was struck by Tori's stories of Iraqi youth learning techniques of diffusing conflicts and preventing violence, but also learning how to become trainers who could go out and share those tactics and principles with others in their own communities.

I'm sure some of those people who hear that message will, in turn, become trainers in their own right. And on and on it goes. How inspiring to watch a network of peacefulness and non-violence spread out, underground, amid so much conflict and violence. Likewise, it was inspiring to hear of Kurdish youth and community leaders developing their own nonviolence trainings. A first-of-its kind program, by Kurds, for Kurds. To help them strive for their liberation and their rights, without resorting to violence. As is so often the case, when we get up close and see with our own eyes, the lives being lived in areas of conflict, we're met with a few surprising revelations.

First, hope is alive. It's thriving. In areas, that from a distance seem hopeless and desperate. There are people in every corner of the world with a gleam in their eye, a prayer in their heart, a vision for what life can and will be for themselves and their community.

Second, the fruit of violence and war is always bitter and unsatisfying. It always rots just as soon as we bite into it. It leaves our bellies empty and hungering for something more. Yet, the fruit of peace can be raised to be sweet and nourishing. If only we tend to it closely and carefully. We can bite into it and feel satisfied. Well fed. Feel well, feel whole. After years of cross-border bombings, and senseless and futile fighting, Iraqi Kurdistan has been left with nothing to show for it but villages reduced to rubble, and childhoods scarred by fear and trauma. But from a tradition of hope and peace that reaches back centuries, and carries forward into the future, we have to show for all that makes life good. And all that makes peace a worthy cause. The breathtaking beauty of a landscape capped with snow and zig-zagged with goat tracks. The pride and joy of beloved religious traditions and identity: Music, laughter, good company, and lots and lots of tea upon tea, upon tea.

[background music begins]

Tori's stories of her time in Iraqi Kurdistan bear witness to the simple fact, that wherever there is war, violence, or injustice; there are peacemakers seeking to make things better. It is our job to listen to those peacemakers, to lift them up, to offer a protective and supportive presence. To be there. To help. To let them take the future into their own hands, by following rather than leading. Since the mid-1980s, Christian Peacemaker Teams has sought to do just that. Moreover, they have always sought to do that better than they did it the day before.

So please, support Christian Peacemaker Teams. Join in their work. Visit cpt.org to get started.

[pause]

E: Thank you so much for tuning into another episode of the Dunker Punks podcast. If you liked the show, and I really hope that you did, be sure to subscribe wherever you get podcasts. And go and rate us, and review us as well. Most of all, be sure to share us with your friends, your family, your congregations. The Dunker Punks podcast is produced by a team of contributors from around the United States who are committed to being present and active voices for peace and justice. This episode was edited by Jacob Crouse, who also supplied our music. And no Dunker Punks podcast episode would be possible without the hard work of Suzanne Lay. It also wouldn't be possible without the Arlington Church of the Brethren, our generous host community.

We would love for you to join us. If you want to support the show as a contributor, or as a producer, an editor, a volunteer, a social media manager, a donor, anything, just reach out to us at dpp@arlingtoncob.org. You can find out more by visiting arlingtoncob.org/dpp or by going to dunkerpunks.com. You can also find us on all social media at Dunker Punks pod. Oh, and one last thing, we want to hear from you about your experience listening to the Dunker Punks podcast. What do you love, what not so much, what would like us to change or feature or add to the show. Just let us know by visiting our listener survey and completing it at bit.ly/DPPsurvey. That's bit.ly/capital D, capital P, capital P, lowercase survey. It's case sensitive, so be sure to capitalize the DPP. One more time, that's bit.ly/DPPsurvey. Thanks, as always for listening and being part of the Dunker Punks community. Until next time, thank you.