

Calling: A Journal for Leaders Who Nurture Vocation
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VOCATION AND CULTURE

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Dying in Darfur: Human Rights Work as Christian Vocation

Defending the rights of the powerless is a vocation of the highest order, and I am grateful to those who take it up. Like many Americans, I was moved by the horrific genocide in Rwanda when I saw the film portrayals in “[Sometimes in April](#)” (HBO) and “[Hotel Rwanda](#)” (MGM) some 11 years *after* the disaster. I vowed after watching those films, “We can’t let that happen again.”

But it is happening again. In a recent episode of “ER,” entitled “[Darfur](#),” Dr. Carter, working in a refugee camp there, is perplexed about the violence and wonders why the rest of the world has not been moved to intervene. His British counterpart, who is black, explains that white people worldwide just don’t care much about black people killing one another in Africa.

These slices of popular culture challenge a general complacency in U.S. society about civil disturbances in far away places. And they make those of us who care about Christian vocations wonder—what role does the church play in making sure genocide, anywhere and against any people, is confronted?

History reveals that the opinion and actions of the church do matter. Jean Hatzfeld, the author of “[Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak](#),” recently interviewed a gang of hill country Hutus who were imprisoned for their roles in the Rwandan genocide in 1994. One of them observed that after the immediate pull-out of all foreigners (many of whom were white church workers) the killers no longer felt they were “under the frowning supervision of whites...We were certain of killing everyone without drawing evil looks, without getting a scolding from a white or a priest.” Foreign disapproval does make a difference.

What is going on in Darfur?

The conflict is primarily ethnic: Arab Muslims are attacking African Muslims in the western part of Sudan. While both sides are guilty of violence, the Arab militias backed by the Sudanese government, seem to be taking the lead in the killings, clashing daily with rebel groups who are seeking more autonomy from government control. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, and millions have left their homes for refugee camps. U.N. efforts to end the violence are complicated by international ties between many U.N. Security Council member nations and the Sudanese government, and Sudan’s resistance to sending non-African peacekeepers to the area.

What can Christians do?

Further, Christians are increasing their human rights advocacy work, placing particular pressure on international policy makers to do something about the violence in Darfur. In March of this year, the Save Darfur Coalition (www.savedarfur.org), made up of 150 religious groups, began a 22 city campaign to raise awareness among people of faith about the war in Darfur. This coalition seeks to make enough noise to force the U.N. to intervene and save victims in Darfur.

Whatever it Takes: The Christian’s Vocation

What can we do about genocide in Darfur? Reverend Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs for the [National Association of Evangelicals](#) answers, “whatever it takes.” In his position as an

ordained Christian minister (Evangelical Presbyterian) Cizik works full-time advocating for human rights, challenging individuals and government officials in this country and around the world to pull off the blinders and take a realistic look at the situation in Darfur. On a policy level, he says, "There are permanent members of the Security Council who are large purchasers of Sudanese oil, and you can lay some of this conflict at their feet." On an individual level, Cizik comes down hard on white evangelical Christians who demanded action when the genocide was affecting Christians but are less vocal in cases, especially in the west, where Muslims are being raped and killed. "Do we only protect our own?" he asks. "This is a moral and spiritual issue that demands a response. We cannot remain silent—no matter who is being targeted. A Muslim child massacred in Darfur is no less valuable in God's eyes than a Christian child." Further, Cizik speaks to the question of racism. "If our indifference is to be analyzed, we have to at least ask ourselves if it is affected by the racial differences," says Cizik.

Born of a biblical commitment, Cizik's organization is taking a stand on issues that have not been universally popular with conservative Christians. It's familiar territory for Cizik. Even before he became a Christian, in the early 70's, Cizik was aligned with the civil rights and peace movements. "While I was running from the church for its failure to speak out on moral and ethical issues like civil rights, a friend invited me to a conservative church, where I came to know the Lord. I told the people in this church, 'I know Jesus, but you cannot expect me to change my politics!' They said, 'That's okay, all we want is your testimony, which I gave. So from the beginning, race relations, broadly understood, played a part in my ministry.'"

Action Steps

Cizik's organization, along with the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S., the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the American Society for Muslim Advancement and many others, are asking people of faith to join a letter-writing campaign called "[A Million Voices for Darfur](#)" to put pressure on President Bush and the U.N. Security Council to intervene in Darfur. In addition, Cizik is committed to encouraging young adults who feel called by God to human rights work to follow that call. "The doors are open for ministry opportunities if you perceive ministry in a wide open way," says Cizik. "Don't think ministry is necessarily a pastoral role. I did my seminary internship in a congressional office instead of a church. God's calling is as diverse and creative as God himself, and public service is a very important ministry."

Teresa Blythe is a Presbyterian, who holds an M.Div. and Diploma in the Art of Spiritual Direction from San Francisco Theological Seminary. She is a writer and spiritual director who works in the FTE Volunteers Exploring Vocation project as a facilitator. Teresa also is editor of the media column, "Critics Corner" for "Presbyterians Today" magazine and regularly writes reviews of religion books for "Publisher's Weekly" and other publications. She serves as the coordinator of the Hesychia School of Spiritual Direction at the Redemptorist Renewal Center in Tucson. Teresa is a frequent conference keynote speaker and workshop or retreat leader on topics of spirituality and popular culture. Her latest book is "50 Ways to Pray: Practices from Many Traditions and Times" (Abingdon Press, 2006). She may be reached at tblythe@jps.net