

Tool: Australian Nonviolent Direct Action Stories

(Christian set)

Time: 45-60 minutes

Goals:

- to introduce participants to a range of recent Australian nonviolent actions
- to help participants imagine themselves taking action by use of case studies that are more accessible than some of the famous international cases often referred to in other parts of NV training

Materials needed: Australian NVDA stories pack and Questions

How it works:

1. Break up participants into small groups of 2-4 (or as appropriate) and give each group copies of one story (or let them choose their own). Give each group a copy of the Questions [5 mins].
2. Small groups read the story and discuss the questions – they don't have to answer every question necessarily, let them go with the flow [20 mins – yes, they need it]
3. Resume plenary for small groups to report back with a quick summary of the action and their answers to 2-3 of the questions [20 mins].

Options: depending on group size and time, you could give each group 2 stories, or stay in a large group and read through a few together.

Time Saver: you could cut this to about 25-30 minutes by not coming back into plenary for report-backs.

Questions to hand out:

- What spoke to you about this story?
- Do you think the action was effective?
- Would/could you participate in such an action?
- What do you fear?
- What excites you?
- What do you need to know before you would take part in this kind of action?
- How would you need to prepare for such actions?
- Are you prepared to be arrested? (if relevant to your story)

Christians Against Greed

In 2005, CEOs from the world's largest corporations converged in Sydney to attend the Forbes Global CEO Conference. They were met by about a thousand activists protesting its neoliberal economic agenda.

Among the protestors was a group of about 60 students and young people calling themselves 'Christians Against Greed', which was "formed out of a desire to be a reminder to the many self-identifying Christian CEOs attending the conference that greed alienates us from God, from our neighbours, and from our true self"

After marching down George Street to the Opera House, the group took up a position just to the side of the main confrontation between activists and riot police, praying and singing. When the riot police eventually decided to disperse the crowd, something rather amazing happened. As two participants described it,

As people left the foreshore, undoubtedly disheartened, some stood around us, a mixture of interested and disinterested faces, and we kept on singing. As our singing continued the police lines halted, directly behind our circle. Although we were few, we kept on singing.

With helicopters overhead beaming down on us, our candlelight became ineffectual and our voices became muffled. With a mass of police at our heels, media, and onlookers surrounding us, we continued our prayer vigil. Led by one of our elders we shared in the Lords Supper.

With the police, media and activists alike, we shared in the body and blood of Christ broken for the poor of the world (Hirt and Hartley 2005).

Their participation was not ultimately just about protest, but was rather an act of prophecy and prayer. It was a declaration of judgement about the effects of the global economic system on the poor. And it was an example of the church witnessing to the alternative economy of God in a way that drew the public into its embrace, representing in a microcosm the vision of a reconciled people that lay behind their participation.

(extract from Whelan, J. "Christian Nonviolent Direct Action as Public Theology", conference paper presented to AAMS/PACT conference "Christian Mission in the Public Square", 2008. URL: <http://www.paceebene.org.au/2008/10/07/christian-nonviolent-direct-action-as-public-theology/>)

Pine Gap 6

Pine Gap is a military spy base for the United States located 20km outside Alice Springs in the Northern Territory. Pine Gap gathers military intelligence and uses a satellite tracking system to pinpoint targets in U.S. bombing raids on Iraq and Afghanistan. It is also the command centre for the 'Missile Defence System', an integral part of the US 'Star Wars' system enabling the US to dominate and control space.

At dawn on Human Rights Day 2005, a 'Citizen's Inspection' took place causing Pine Gap to shut down for five hours. A group of four Christian pacifists calling themselves "Christians Against ALL Terrorism" successfully broke into the base despite announcing their plans to security in advance and wearing rather visible white overalls with 'Citizens' Inspection Team' emblazoned in red.

The Pine Gap 6, as they became known, declared that in the context of the War on Terror and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, they "wanted to bring some moral and intellectual consistency into the debate on terrorism." In describing their motivation and critique of public policy, they wrote:

Christians Against ALL Terrorism condemns terrorism in all its forms, including the state terrorism behind the U.S and Australia's illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to be morally consistent, we cannot distinguish between the terrorist acts of a suicide bomber in Baghdad, or of a U.S jet bomber in Fallujah. In both cases innocents are murdered and maimed for a political objective.

We believe in a better way. Christ told us to love our enemies, to seek justice and taught us how to live nonviolently (Dowling, Goldie et al. 2006).

The group did not resist arrest, but did defend themselves in court under what is called the 'necessity defence'. Their testimony moved the jury to tears at several moments. The judge was so impressed by their conviction and nonviolent consistency that she refused to give them gaol sentences despite prosecution requests.

Despite the tiny size of their group, Christians Against ALL Terrorism successfully put Pine Gap back into the media spotlight and especially back on the map for the peace movement. In doing so, they opened space for discussion about Australia's complicity in acts of terror.

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Samuel Hill 5

'Talisman Sabre' is the name given to the largest war games exercise in the Southern Hemisphere. It involves 20,000 American and 10,000 Australian troops practising for war at a place called Shoalwater Bay, near Rockhampton.

As part of a wider peace convergence, five Christian activists entered the military training area at Samuel Hill, found the main control centre base and walked openly down the middle of the airstrip. When soldiers approached them, the group assured them that they were unarmed and peaceful, and asked them to play frisbee.

To our surprise and delight, they did. I asked to see their generals as we had two letters to give them. They then called their commanding officer who shut down the base, and they invited us inside for coffee and lunch. We spent about an hour and a half talking with both Australian and US soldiers about Iraq, violence and nonviolence, and the exercises themselves before being arrested by Queensland police and taken to Rockhampton.

The following statement was released by the group to explain their action:

We are 5 nonviolent Christian people who like the prophet Isaiah are working towards the day when people will "beat swords into plowshares and study war no more". As followers of the nonviolent Jesus we cannot stand by while our country plans the destruction of our brothers and sisters in other countries and the environment at Shoalwater Bay.

We believe that practicing for war only means more war. That is why we must imagine peace, embody peace, practice peace.

Another world is possible – that is why we act (Moyle, Powell et al. 2007).

The 'Samuel Hill 5' were one of two groups to enter the military base. In remaining in the open and engaging in dialogue with the armed forces, the group gave a public demonstration not just of commitment to a more peaceful world, but also of an alternate way to engage in protest. As they noted, "protests are often restricted to yelling from behind a fence. We wanted to change the dynamic, to engage face to face with the people behind the uniform, and for them to do the same with us."

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Uniting Church Members Face Court for Coal Protest

(Media release written for a Uniting Church magazine)

Two members of the Uniting Church were a part of a group of approximately 70 people who were arrested on Sunday 5th December 2010 for blockading coal wagons entering Bayswater Power Station – Australia's single largest source of carbon pollution.

Bayswater, near Muswellbrook in the Hunter Valley, is the site of a second proposed power station (Bayswater B), one of 12 new coal power stations on the cards across Australia. At the same time, coal mining is undergoing massive expansion in the Hunter Valley – with implications not just for climate change but also farming and other rural industries, and for human and ecological health. The NSW Government is approving record numbers of new coal mines across the state, and construction underway at the Port of Newcastle will see a doubling of coal export capacity with further expansion planned.

Approximately 130 people, including several Christians, occupied the railway tracks adjacent to Bayswater. They were supported by hundreds more who remained by the roadside, including a group of Christians who observed a silent prayer vigil. The protestors refused to leave until the NSW government declares a moratorium on new coal-fired power, and commits to no new coal in NSW and a transition to renewable energy. Ultimately, 73 people in total were arrested, including Justin Whelan, of Paddington Uniting Church, and Miriam Pepper, of South Sydney Uniting Church. Charges included enter and remain on rail infrastructure, failure to comply with police direction, and enter and remain on enclosed lands. In court, all first-time offenders had their charges dismissed under section 10 of the Summary Offences Act, while others received \$250 fines.

Mr Whelan and Ms Pepper have both been working on climate change and creation care for years – variously in the church, in government, and in their local communities. In recent times they have felt moved by their faith to participate in nonviolent direct action, as one part of the diversity of actions to address the causes of climate change and to support the flourishing of all creation.

"I am inspired by the long Christian legacy of nonviolent direct action," said Ms Pepper. "Throughout history, people of faith and love have shown their commitment to God's kingdom of justice, peace and reconciliation of creation by putting their bodies in the way of forces that deny life. As a part of my own small journey of seeking to participate in and witness to this kingdom, I felt called to take similar action."

"Dr King talked about times when silence is betrayal", said Mr Whelan. "The threat of runaway climate change is one of those times, and our political leaders remain trapped in denial about the seriousness of the potential consequences. Even those who publicly declare their concern seem trapped into doing virtually nothing. This action was a way for me to say 'enough is enough', but to do so in a nonviolent way."

Family Fun Day

Adapted excerpt from a report by Rev Simon Moyle on the Military's PR exercise at Talisman Sabre 09.

'One of the military's Talisman Sabre PR exercises was what they called a "Family Fun day" which ran this afternoon, and which consisted predominantly of a show of military equipment including Humvees, cannons and tanks on the streets of Rockhampton. Incredible when you stop to think about it – instruments of death paraded as "Family Fun".

We decided to do some street theatre to at least provide some questions over whether such things could be considered part of a family fun day.

As this had already been mentioned in the papers, the police were waiting – as were ASIO and military intelligence. I've never had so many pictures taken of me, and Julie and the kids too....more than a little intimidating and unnecessary. The police were pretty reasonable in their negotiation. Anyway, after about an hour's negotiation, we were allowed to go ahead with our performance.

We all walked in to the area together and stood in front of a tank and cannon. Margaret said, "This looks like a great place for a photo" at which point our "Afghani family" (suitably dressed) stood and posed. Margaret, camera in hand, said, "Ready...aim...fire!" and the Afghani family slowly died, covering themselves in strips of red cloth to symbolise blood. Behind them I unfurled a sign saying "Family fun? The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, but violence takes life away. (Proverbs 11:30)". Phil and Jake read a list of some of the 70 Afghani people killed in last week's attack on a funeral procession.

Reactions were mixed. People laughed, jeered, yelled abuse, most stood and watched silently, others apparently said "thankyou". Most people appeared to have been there for a day of family fun and hadn't really thought about it much. Hopefully, whatever side they come out on, they will have thought about it now.'