

Churches united over Puerto Rico bombing

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

The ongoing dispute over U. S. bombardment of a Puerto Rican beach has united the island's churches across normally divided lines. "For the first time in our country, all religious sectors have come together, says Bishop Juan Vera of the independent United Methodist Church of Puerto Rico. "We're Catholics, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Protestants, all united in an embrace of solidarity, all wanting as Christians to defend life, all demanding peace for Vieques," he said.

At the center of the controversy is the Navy's 60-year-old bombing range on Vieques, a small beach-lined island east of Puerto Rico's main island. Navy exercises were suspended a year ago after stray bombs killed a civilian security guard, releasing pent-up resentment in the U.S. territory.

Dozens of protest camps sprung up on Vieques as protestors invaded military property to prevent a resumption of testing. Church groups operate at least two of the camps. They stand in the way of an agreement between the local government and President Clinton allowing the Navy to resume limited training until Vieques' 9,300 residents decide in a referendum whether the Navy should leave. The agreement would terminate any target practice after 2003.

With tensions rising in late April after the Pentagon dispatched two warships to the area in advance of a rumored forceful removal of demonstrators, religious leaders erected an ecumenical chapel as part of their ongoing demonstrations. "We understand that the U.S. government presents itself before the world as profoundly democratic," Bishop Vera said at the chapel's dedication. "At the beginning of a new millennium, a new century, with an extraordinary amalgam of possibilities, we ought to look for another way to resolve the problem of Vieques in a way other than that in which they resolved the problem of Elián," he said referring to the forced removal of Cuban refugee Elián González from his relative's home in Miami by federal agencies.

Vera was joined in the service by Wilfredo Estrada, Secretary General of the Puerto Rican Bible Society who represented most Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and Bishop Alvaro Corrada del Río of the Roman Catholic archdiocese. Lutheran, Episcopalian and other churches groups also participated.

U.S.-based denominations, including United Methodists and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, have been deeply involved in the growing dispute. "We were heartsick at the sight of the destruction we found, including poisoned lagoons, craters and live and exploded bombs," said United Church of Christ president John Thomas after an April visit to the island. "We were heartened, however, by the signs of life--birds, butterflies, flowers--which have begun to emerge as a result of the peace which has continued for the past 11 months." The UCC adopted a resolution in 1981 calling for the cessation of training exercises on Vieques.

At the dedication of the chapel, the Bible Society's Estrada said, "This is probably the most extraordinary moment of our 12-month struggle. This is the symbol that we will have no more bombing here." Estrada is the chief spokesman for the Vieques Ecumenical Coalition, a grouping of most of the nation's church bodies who opposed the resumption of military training. Estrada said that the chapel represented "the unity that the most diverse religious groups and non-religious groups have reached in the past months."

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