

# My Response to the DRAFT and My Experience in PAX

Part 3

By Lowell Bender

## RETURNING

Two years, which at first seemed so long and distant, were rapidly drawing to a close. In some ways though, the thought of returning home prompted as many questions as did leaving. The four of us who left together would return together.

The trip home was a time to reminisce. Once again, the ship sailed on waters as far as one could see. Near the middle of the ocean, a storm struck, adding an extra day to our return trip. With very high winds and huge waves, the ship was slowed to ride the waves instead of forcefully plowing into them. Watching the waves through glass windows, one could see mountainous waves moving slowly toward the ship, giving a feeling of surely being swept away with them. However, as they approached, the ship would rise and ride the cresting waves.

Finally, after eleven days, we approached New York. As the Statue of Liberty came into view, there was a feeling of awe and elation. I was returning to American soil. This was home. But in another sense, home was now on both sides of the ocean.

## REFLECTING

In looking back, I suppose the main question may be, “Would I do it again?” The answer is an unequivocal yes. The belief that I was in God’s purpose for my life helped to sustain me during times of uncertainty and testing. While there was a certain amount of adventure, much of the time was spent in just plain working and living. It led me to believe, and I continue to believe, that more important than projects performed are relationships built.

Pax helped me to gain exposure to a world I otherwise would not have known. It broadened my view of the church family from all nations and tongues. It allowed me to see close-up glimpses of some of the sufferings caused by war and the evils of self-serving leaders. I was able to see the



*Pouring the Porch.*

vast discrepancy between abundant wealth and abject poverty.

The Pax experience also helped to validate my decision to seek CO classification. Often I wondered about our Mennonite “peace position” and why so few churches hold to this position while so many denominations believe otherwise. Was Jesus really serious when He taught in Matthew 5 that we should not resist evil and that we should love our



Nearly-completed houses

enemies? Was that only a Jesus thing, or was it meant for Christians today? After all, it doesn't seem practical and it doesn't make sense in today's world.

In my searching process, I have concluded that there are four basic assumptions that serve as a guide for me. **First, Jesus as Central.** The road to salvation leads through the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. Is Jesus who He claims to be? If so, we need to take seriously what He taught by word and example. Redemption became the business of the church, and Jesus is the Redeemer. Can we agree that the church's primary allegiance is more to the cross on the hill than to the flag on the pole? Will we truly allow Jesus to be Jesus?

**Second, Gospel as Universal.** The Good News message was not a geographic, political, or time message. It was for all peoples, for all places, and for all time. Standing before the throne will be a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language. The Great Commission makes it clear that the responsibility of believers is to share the Good News to all nations. Will we share this Good News except for a time-out for war?

**Third, Church as Body.** The church as the bride of Christ becomes the visible body of Christ on earth. Again, it becomes global and supercedes all cultural and political boundaries. My neighbor is my opportunity and responsibility for sharing Christ's love. And so we can sing, "In Christ there is no east or west, in Him no north or south; But one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world." We can also sing, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God ... " Will our brother in Christ become our enemy in war?

**Fourth, Discipleship as Personal.** Throughout the Scriptures, we are reminded that salvation is not a group process. As with salvation, so discipleship is a personal matter. Each person assumes responsibility to "walk in His steps." Neither the state nor the church can totally release

one from personal responsibility. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, one of the most repeated defenses for participation was, "I was just following orders." Will we obey God rather than man?

The question of participation in war is not a simple one to answer. One question for the conscientious objector is, if I am unwilling to fight to defend my country, how can I enjoy its freedom and be content to accept the good life it offers? An even more probing question is, if I am not willing to fight, am I willing to suffer the consequences?

On the other hand, if I am on the front lines of war and kill an enemy soldier, I am either taking the life of my brother in Christ, or taking the life of a person who is not saved. How can I wash my hands of the responsibility for that ultimate act? In either case, it's a person for whom Christ died.

One can also argue that the Christian's responsibility is simply to obey the government. As a Christian, would I hold to this position whether I am an American, Nazi German, or an Iraqi citizen? Should I obey my respective government without question? If not, at what point should I object?

These questions bring me back to my original questions more than forty years ago. As a Christian, what is my responsibility, and on what should I base my decisions? I continue to believe that peace is a way of life that permeates the totality of the Christian's life and walk. The Old Testament prophesied the coming of the Prince of Peace. The New Testament proclaimed the announcement of peace on earth, goodwill toward men. This is the Pax that all Christians are to experience and live. **BB**



*Lowell Bender is a member of the Cherry Glade Mennonite Church, Accident, Maryland, where he recently completed a term as Elder. He is retired from Garrett College, McHenry, MD, where he served as Dean of Continuing Education and Workforce Development for many years. Currently he serves as CMC representative to the MCC East Coast*

*Board. He also serves on various community boards. In an update to this story, Lowell writes, "Our Salzburg Pax Unit plans to return to the Salzburg community this September for a "Jubilee" celebration representing 50 years since the beginning of the project. We will celebrate with the church the events of the past 50 years. Approximately 10 Paxers along with their spouses plan to participate. Most of the adults for whom we constructed houses are now deceased, but their children have fond memories."*