

British Baptists Rejoice at Hostages' Release

Baptists in the United Kingdom rejoiced at Thursday's news of the rescue of Norman Kember and two other Western peace activists held hostage since Nov. 26 in Iraq. Kember, a 74-year-old retired medical physicist, is an active member of Harrow Baptist Church.

According to reports, a British-led rescue operation, acting on a tip from a man captured by U.S. troops three hours earlier, rescued Kember and Canadians James Loney and Harmeet Singh Sooden without firing a shot. The hostages were reportedly tied up when they were found, but there was no sign of their captors, a previously unknown group called the Swords of Righteousness Brigade.

The announcement came two weeks after the fourth held activist, Tom Fox, was tortured and murdered, his body found left on a Baghdad street.

None of the surviving three hostages appeared to be seriously injured. Loney and Sooden were treated in a hospital, while Kember relaxed at the British embassy in Baghdad. "It's great to be free," he said in a brief [statement](#) released by the embassy. "I'm looking forward to getting back to the U.K."

David Coffey, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and current president of the Baptist World Alliance, said he rejoiced at the news of Kember's release and prays for "his full recovery to health and well being following this extreme ordeal."

"I know that Pat and Norman and the Harrow church family have been greatly strengthened by the prayers and support of so many," Coffey, said. "As we greet this news with joy, we grieve with the family of Tom Fox, and continue to hold in our prayers all those who have been caught up in this long ordeal."

With Kember's safe release, his pastor, Bob Gardiner, described him as "a man who devoted much of his energy to bringing in the kingdom of God."

"His view of the kingdom is grounded firmly in the teaching of Jesus: he cares passionately about freedom and justice," Gardiner said. "But there could never be

freedom without peace.”

A committed pacifist, Kember has campaigned on issues of homelessness, domestic violence and conflict resolution. He and his wife, Pat, have helped give free food to homeless people in central London every Sunday for the last 10 years. On a broader stage, he has campaigned against war and for trade justice. He has been prominent in the “Make Poverty History” [campaign](#) supported by many British Baptists.

He is a former secretary of the Baptist Peace Fellowship and a trustee of the Christian peace organization, Fellowship for Reconciliation.

Allen Betteridge, retired pastor of Queens Road Baptist Church in Coventry president of the Baptist Peace Fellowship [said](#) he was “absolutely thrilled” to hear of release of his friend of more than 40 years.

“It’s tremendously good and so unexpected after the killing of Tom Fox a couple of weeks ago when we really did fear that each one would be killed eventually,” Betteridge [said](#). “When Norman is fit and strong again, he’s going to have a great story to tell us.”

Gillian Collins, secretary of the [Baptist Peace Fellowship](#), described the last four months as “times of great strain and difficulty, tempered only by the wonderful outpouring of support for Norman, his co-hostages, their families and friends by so many people from this country and across the world, from Muslims, Jews and people of no faith as well as from Christians.”

“May this combined concern for each other continue to grow as we all work together for peace and justice,” she said.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said he spoke with Kember’s wife. “Of course it goes without saying that she is absolutely delighted, elated with this news,” Straw said, urging British and international media to respect the family’s need for “time and space to deal with what is happy news.”

Kember’s family released a statement saying: “We are very pleased that Norman and his friends are safe. We are grateful for all the support we have had from so many people since Norman was taken hostage. We also thank everyone who has worked so hard for him to be set free.”

A spokesperson for the I Muslim Association of Britain, which before Christmas appealed to the kidnappers to safely release the four hostages, [said](#) the group was “greatly relieved” by the news.

Coffey of the Baptist Union of Great Britain applauded “strenuous efforts of members of the British Muslim community to negotiate the release of the hostages.

“I hope we will continue to keep the future of Iraq in our prayers as we seek the way that make for peace for all its peoples, including the Christian community,” Coffey said.

Christian Peacemaker Teams issued a [statement](#) saying they were “filled with joy” at the release of three team members, while calling the gladness “bittersweet” because Fox was not with them.

“We believe that the illegal occupation of Iraq by Multinational Forces is the root cause of the insecurity which led to this kidnapping and so much pain and suffering in Iraq,” the group said. “The occupation must end.”

Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics called the release of Christian hostages “good news in a place where bad news prevails,” adding that their work, along with that of their deceased colleague, “deserves our gratitude and beckons us to consider deeply their witness.”

“Peacemaking is at the core of Jesus’ call to discipleship, but it is too often at the outskirts of what churches in American teach and practice,” Parham said. “We, American Christians, are so entangled with a culture of militarism and materialism that we barely hear the call to peacemaking and rarely honor peacemakers.”

“This news affords American church people an opportunity to measure our faith against those who have acted with sacrificial and risky discipleship,” Parham said. “It’s a time to give thanks for the witness of the leadership among our British Baptist cousins, from whom we have much to learn about peacemaking and seeking justice.”

At least 430 foreigners are known to have been taken hostage in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion three years ago. They include 41 U.S. nationals, some of them

Iraqi-Americans. Seven are still being held, including Jill Carroll, a 28-year-old American journalist abducted Jan. 7 while on assignment for the *Christian Science Monitor*.

A column in [The Guardian](#) on Thursday said Kember was aware of the risk he was running before visiting Iraq as a “gesture of solidarity” with Christian Peacemaker Teams.

In an interview on Christian radio, Kember said, “I hope to meet ordinary Iraqis of various backgrounds, Shiites, Sunnis, Christians, and just hear their stories, then come back and talk about it.”

Asked if going to Iraq was brave, he answered: “I don’t know, I’ve done a lot of writing and talking about peacemaking. I’ve [demonstrated](#), you name it I’ve been on it, but I feel that’s what I’d call cheap peacemaking.”

Asked if going to Iraq could be more costly, Kember replied: “It could be.”

Geoffrey Whitfield of the Human Rights and Social Justice Research Institute, who has known Kember for 50 years, said, “He would know that it was a very frightening situation and he would have the strength to handle that fear.”

“He is a very meticulous man and he will have thought through all the possibilities of the dangers that he was going to be confronting,” Whitfield said. “He wouldn’t be a man without fear. He would be a man who handled his fear creatively and positively. Although he is harmless as a dove, he would also be very switched on.”

[Bob Allen](#) is managing editor of *EthicsDaily.com*. Mark Woods of The Baptist Times contributed to this report.

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Statement by Robert Parham, executive director of the BaptistCenter for Ethics,

on release of hostages:

The release of Christian hostages is good news in a place where bad news prevails. Their work, as well as that of their deceased colleague Tom Fox, deserves our gratitude and beckons us to consider deeply their witness.

Peacemaking is at the core of Jesus' call to discipleship. But it is too often at the outskirts of what churches in America teach and practice. We, American Christians, are so entangled with a culture of militarism and materialism that we barely hear the call to peacemaking and rarely honor peacemakers.

This news affords American church people an opportunity to measure our faith against those who have acted with sacrificial and risky discipleship. It's a time to give thanks for the witness of the leadership among our British Baptist cousins, from whom we have much to learn about peacemaking and seeking justice.