



Christian protesters hold ceasefire signs while standing between the National Christmas Tree and the White House in Washington, D.C., Dec. 11. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)



by Aleja Hertzler-McCain

[View Author Profile](#)

[\*\*Join the Conversation\*\*](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

Washington — December 13, 2023

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

Two blocks east of the White House, in a [historic church](#) that President Abraham Lincoln regularly attended and where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. preached against the Vietnam War, Catholics joined Protestants and Orthodox Christians on Dec. 11 for a worship service calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, adding their voices to an escalating cease-fire movement.

"As people of faith, we cannot stand by in silence as the U.S. sends weapons which only serve to escalate the bloodshed," said [Johnny Zokovitch](#), executive director of Pax Christi USA.

The service came after a weekend where The Washington Post reported that Israel [dropped](#) more than 22,000 U.S.-provided bombs on Gaza in the first month and a half of the war and that the U.S. [supplied](#) Israel with white phosphorus munitions that were used on a town in Lebanon.

According to their respective governments, [at least](#) 18,412 people have been killed in Gaza since the beginning of the Israeli military campaign after Hamas' Oct. 7 attacks, during which least 1,200 people in Israel were killed.



Fr. John El Massih, presiding pastor of St. George Antiochian Orthodox Church, leads a choir of the Orthodox parishes of Washington, D.C., at a cease-fire service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington on Dec. 11. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

The Christians gathered after a [day](#) full of cease-fire protests in Washington, D.C., many of which were faith-based. Earlier in the day, a group of 18 older Jewish women with Jewish Voice for Peace chained themselves to the White House fence.

At the ecumenical Christian cease-fire service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Christian leaders also called for the release of hostages and for humanitarian aid for Gaza. The service culminated in a walk to the National Christmas Tree outside the White House.

Speaking about the civilian infrastructure in Gaza that has been bombed, Jonathan Kuttub, a Palestinian Christian and human rights lawyer, said, "Nowhere is safe. We see that, but to utter the word cease-fire seems to be still a problem, controversial."





Jonathan Kuttub, a Palestinian Christian and human rights lawyer, speaks at a cease-fire service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 11. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

"Those who oppose the ceasefire are telling us that the only way to deal with problems is violence," Kuttub said.

[Eli McCarthy](#), peace fellow for the Franciscan Action Network, said, "They say a cease-fire will allow Hamas to get away with it. This is not true. Only with steps of de-escalation and a sustained ceasefire can we work for accountability."

"We need a political process that builds coalitions and new leadership in Gaza. We also need a political process to hold the leaders of Israel and the settlers accountable for their violence," McCarthy said, also echoing Pope Francis' [calls](#) for peace.

The Rev. [Tyrone Pitts](#), general secretary emeritus of the Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc., read from one of King's 1967 speeches calling for peace in Vietnam,

replacing Vietnam with Gaza.



The Rev. Tyronne Pitts, general secretary emeritus of the Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc, speaks at a cease-fire service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 11. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

"Some of us, as in King's time, have begun to speak out against the immoral and evil carnage of this war. But Dr. Martin Luther King, as many of us know, paid a price for speaking out," Pitts said, comparing those consequences to consequences that anti-war and pro-Palestine activists have faced today.

Many speakers spoke about the conflict's toll on children, including the [historic](#) numbers of children who have been killed in Gaza during Israel's military campaign. Several speakers alluded to the Biblical [massacre of the innocents](#), where Herod ordered all boys 2 years old and younger in and around Bethlehem to be killed after Jesus' birth.



"There are those who don't mind killing children. Because it will radicalize a population for generations to come, so that there will be perpetual war, and therefore a perpetually profitable war industry," said the Rev. Mark Thompson, a podcaster and activist.



The Rev. Mark Thompson, a podcaster and activist, speaks at a cease-fire service at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 11. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

Thompson, who encouraged those assembled to "find another route" like the Magi, spoke forcefully against people who denied the atrocities experienced by Israelis or Palestinians.

"The rapes of Israeli women are war crimes and killing of innocent civilians, especially children, is also a war crime," he said.

At a White House Hanukkah reception that took place during the service, U.S. President Joe Biden, a Catholic, [said](#) assistance to Israel would continue until Hamas

was defeated, but he warned that the U.S. and Israel must be careful of public opinion.

On Dec. 10, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken spoke about Israel's military operations on CNN's State of the Union. "The critical thing is to make sure that the military operations are designed around civilian protection," [he said](#). "I think the intent is there. But the results are not always manifesting themselves."

## Advertisement

A wide array of groups sponsored the service. They were:

- American Baptist Churches USA;
- American Friends of the Bethlehem Development Foundation;
- American Friends Service Committee;
- Christians for Social Action;
- Church of the Brethren Office of Peacebuilding;
- Church World Service;
- Determinetruth;
- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America;
- Franciscan Action Network;
- Freedom Road;
- Friends Committee National Legislation;
- Friends of Sabeel North America;
- Global Immersion;
- Global Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and United Church of Christ;
- Maryknoll;
- Network of Evangelicals for the Middle East;
- Pax Christi USA;
- Palestinian Christian Alliance for Peace;
- Presbyterian Church (USA);
- Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc.;
- Sojourners;
- Telos;
- The Voices Project;
- United Methodist Church — General Board of Church and Society.



Christian protesters hold a cease-fire sign, Pax Christi USA banner and a Palestinian flag as they pass the U.S. Department of the Treasury in Washington, D.C., Dec. 11. (NCR photo/Aleja Hertzler-McCain)

After the church service, the group walked to the National Christmas Tree, where they tried to make their voices heard over the space's music. The protesters' song of "Ceasefire in Gaza" could just barely be heard over "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year."

At the service, the Rev. Sarah Johnson, senior pastor at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, said her Christian faith "demands that I see my savior born in and among places and people where there is suffering and where oppression rules the day."

"If God doesn't shy away from being present in a hurting world, then neither can I," she said.