

**Tony Norman**

## Their radical protest: 'Love your neighbors'

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By [Tony Norman](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In a brief statement before the hundreds gathered at Smithfield United Church of Christ on Sunday, G 6 Billion organizer Wanda Guthrie referred to those who would soon march to the David L. Lawrence Convention Center as a "cloud of witnesses."

"We're gonna flood the streets with justice / we are freedom bound," they sang at the urging of local folk singing legend Anne Feeney. Under a beautiful midday sky, nearly 200 people marched under the flags and banners of countries that won't be represented at the G-20 summit this week. They marched -- median age 50-something -- with dignity and purpose down Smithfield to Liberty where they hung a right, crossing diagonally as cars waited patiently.

At 10th Street, the mighty cloud of interfaith witnesses made a left toward the convention center as planned, but a phalanx of police officers prevented them from continuing on the route outlined on their permit. After a few minutes, the marchers agreed to adjust their route by a block to get to their destination -- Fort Duquesne Boulevard, behind the convention center.

Traffic slowed as the curious snapped pictures of marchers carrying flags of countries most Americans would have a hard time pronouncing, much less find on a map. Some cars honked in solidarity. Most didn't.

It was a different spirit than the one that prevailed at last summer's tea parties and the recent march on Washington. There were no signs or banners taunting world leaders. Laughter and smiles were in abundance, but rowdiness took a holiday. An anarchist would have been as much out of place in that crowd as an archconservative.

President Barack Obama was asked during an Oval Office interview with the Post-Gazette published that day whether he would have protested G-20 as a young community organizer. Mr. Obama insisted that he was never an advocate of mass demonstrations because they don't deliver on "concrete, local, immediate issues that have an impact on people's lives."

Of course, Mr. Obama's answer would be news to those who marched in countless civil rights, women's rights and anti-war demonstrations over the decades. It would also be news to those who filled stadiums to hear candidate Obama's stump speeches in 2008.

Last year, Mr. Obama told the crowds that propelled him to the White House that they were "changing history." It makes one wonder what he has to say to the peaceful protesters who marched to the convention center on a Sunday afternoon. There wasn't a single sign that compared him to Hitler or questioned his citizenship. Aren't they as

much history's change agents as those folks who cheered on what they hoped would be the end of Bush-Cheney era politics?

"We are asking the world and the world's powers nothing less than to love your neighbors," said Bread for the World's Rev. Diane Ford Jones to the crowd that gathered behind the convention center. Perhaps it is the kind of prayerful invocation that Mr. Obama no longer considers "concrete" now that he can convene international summits on his own authority. Perhaps, in the harsh glow of the Oval Office lights, the president has forgotten how much the rallies he organized last year have in common with demonstrations for simple human justice and dignity at the G-20 today.

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"It doesn't feel like Pittsburgh has any connection to the G-20," said Chris Matrozza, one of a nearly dozen people who gathered at a South Side coffee shop last week to discuss a Christian response to the conference this week. "They're just meeting here. They're not doing anything that matters to us. Why have it here?"

It was a provocative point. Mr. Matrozza's friends wrestled with the implications of ignoring it. They decided complacency is not an option. "The G-20 has responsibilities it needs to live up to," said Mike Holohan, a seminary student who has pored over articles and study guides about the conference ever since it was announced.

"How can we love everyone from the cops to the protesters to the paranoid businessmen?" Jennifer Keogh asked. "Whether you're Downtown during the protest or here [on the South Side], seeing the image of God in everyone else is key."

The friends agree that some of the security precautions could have the opposite effect if the unexpected happens. "We've created a fear-based system that everyone reacts to," Renee Greenlee said. They are equally critical of the overreaction of cops and the way some protesters romanticize violence and destruction of property. For guidance, they search the Scriptures, examine the place of protest in religious tradition and even quote Gandhi. They agree that following Christ means they must bear witness at G-20 even if the specifics are hazy.

"Peace is countercultural," said Marianne Holohan, a university instructor. There is no dissent on that point.

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