

Bishop, other protesters, arrested near White House

By Erik Alsgaard

WASHINGTON (UMNS) – Nearly 70 people, including a United Methodist bishop and dozens of other religious leaders, were arrested near the White House March 26 during a peaceful demonstration against the war with Iraq.

Demonstrators gathered in Lafayette Park, in the shadow of a statue honoring Revolutionary War-era military engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko, singing songs, offering prayers and carrying signs protesting the war.

Those arrested included United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague, Chicago Area; Jim Winkler, top staff executive of the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, based in Washington; and Linda Bales, staff executive with the Louise and Hugh Moore Population Project, part of the Board of Church and Society.

Others arrested included Roman Catholic Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit; Rabbi Arthur Waskow of Philadelphia; Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked the Pentagon Papers in the 1970s; and Nobel Peace Prize laureates Jody Williams and Mairead Corrigan Maguire.

Those arrested were charged with demonstrating without a permit, according to Sgt. Scott Fear, U.S. Park Police spokesman. The group was given a court date and released.

“The Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church has sought four times to have an audience with President Bush,” said Sprague in a press conference at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, before the demonstration. “There has been no response other than a terse ‘thanks, but no thanks.’”

Following the press conference, the group walked the few short blocks to the White House, trailing behind a banner that read, “War is always defeat for humanity.”

The rally was aimed in part at getting a message of peace to the president, according to Sprague. Bush has met with only one representative from a religious group about the war – Italian Cardinal Pio Laghi, a papal emissary, before hostilities began.

“The White House is not hearing from the Council of Bishops,” Sprague said. “Given that reality, it demands strategies that are out of the ordinary – atypical rather than typical.”

“I feel it’s time to get out there on the front lines,” Winkler said. “Our board has stated that war is wrong, and now that it’s started, it’s still wrong. This war is unjust, unnecessary and uncertain.”

At the press conference, Winkler noted that both the president and vice president are United Methodist. “But I am here to tell them that Jesus is not in support of this war,” he said.

“I think this war is a diversion from the pressing needs of humanity,” said Bales. “What we need is a different vision.”

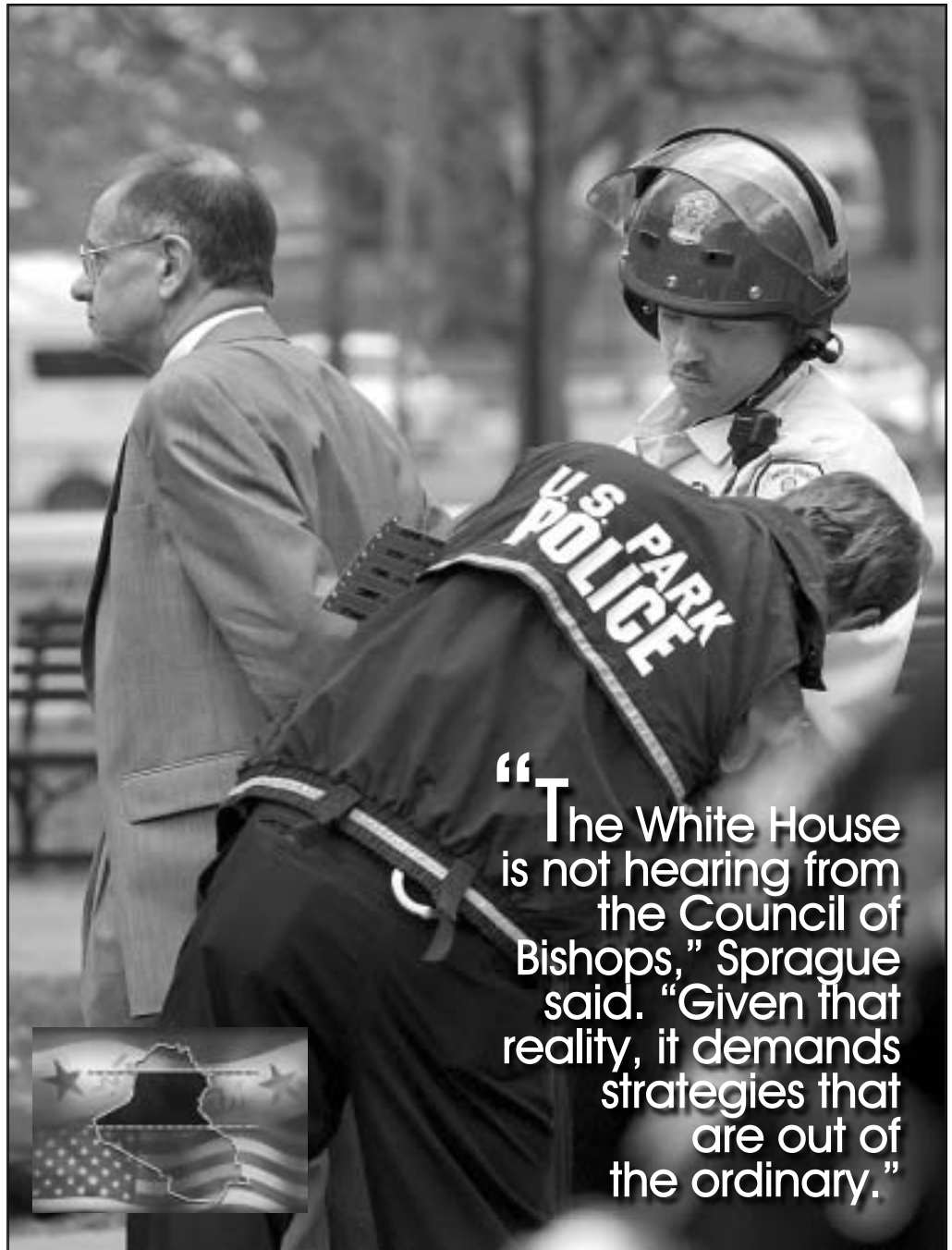
At a worship service prior to the press conference, Sprague preached on Ezekiel 33:1-9.

“What do we do in these perilous times?” he asked his listeners at the United Methodist Building on Capitol Hill. “Simply and profoundly, tell the truth in love.”

He noted that 43 percent of the population in Iraq is under the age of 15. These are the people, he said, who will suffer most.

“What are we to do?” he asked again. “You, you the United Methodist Church, I have made you a sentinel. Tell the truth, with a pastoral heart and a prophetic head.”

The service closed with a prayer from the Rev. Chester Jones, top staff executive of the United Methodist Commission on Reli-



United Methodist Bishop C. Joseph Sprague is arrested during an anti-war protest outside the White House on March 26.

gion and Race, based in Washington.

“We pray for peace,” he said, “even though it may seem impossible. But I still believe, because through you, all things are possible.”

After being released from jail on the night of March 26, Bales said there was no question in her mind that the demonstration and arrests were worthwhile. “I would do it again,” she said. “It was a time of

healing and a time to vent our sadness and grief over the war.”

A passerby, seeing the demonstration, was overheard to say, “Too little, too late.”

Said Bales, “It’s never too late to work for peace.”

Alsgaard is managing editor of the *UMConnection* newspaper and co-director of communications for the Baltimore-Washington Conference. ■