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OP-ED COLUMNIST

A Crazy Dream

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

In the documentary film “Pray the Devil Back to Hell,” a woman whose family had endured the agony of civil war in Liberia talks about a dream she had in 2003 in which someone urged her to organize the women of her church to pray for peace.

“It was a crazy dream,” she said.

Prayer seemed like a flimsy counterweight to the forces of Charles Taylor, the tyrannical president at the time, and the brutally predatory rebels who were trying to oust him from power. The violence was excruciating. People were dying by the tens of thousands. Rape had become commonplace. Children were starving. Scenes from the film showed even small children whose limbs had been amputated.

The movie, for me, was about much more than the tragic, and then ultimately uplifting events in Liberia. It was about the power of ordinary people to intervene in their own fate.

The first thing that struck me about the film, which is playing in select theaters around the country now, was the way it captured the almost unimaginable horror that war imposes on noncombatants: the looks of terror on the faces of people fleeing gunfire in the streets; children crouching and flinching, almost paralyzed with fear by the sound of nearby explosions; homes engulfed in flames.

It’s the kind of environment that breeds feelings of helplessness. But Leymah Gbowee, the woman who had the crazy dream, would have none of that, and she should be a lesson to all of us.

The filmmakers Abigail Disney and Gini Reticker show us how Ms. Gbowee not only rallied the women at her Lutheran church to pray for peace, but organized them into a full-blown, all-women peace initiative that spread to other Christian churches — and then to women of the Muslim faith.

They wanted the madness stopped. They wanted an end to the maiming and the killing, especially the destruction of a generation of children. They wanted to eradicate the plague of rape. They wanted all the things that noncombatants crave whenever the warrior crowd — in the U.S., the Middle East, Asia, wherever — decides it’s time once again to break out the bombs and guns and let the mindless killing begin.

When the Liberian Christians reached out to “their Muslim sisters,” there was some fear on both sides that such an alliance could result in a dilution of faith. But the chaos and the killing had reached such extremes that the religious concerns were set aside in the interest of raising a powerful collective voice.

The women prayed, yes, but they also moved outside of the churches and the mosques to demonstrate, to protest, to enlist all who would listen in the cause of peace. Working with hardly any resources, save their

extraordinary will and intense desire to end the conflict, the women's initial efforts evolved into a movement, the Liberian Mass Action for Peace.

Their headquarters was an open-air fish market in the capital, Monrovia. Thousands of women responded to the call, broadcast over a Catholic radio station, to demonstrate at the market for peace. The women showed up day after day, praying, waving signs, singing, dancing, chanting and agitating for peace.

They called on the two sides in the conflict to begin peace talks and their calls coincided with international efforts to have the two sides sit down and begin to negotiate.

Nothing could stop the rallies at the market, not the fierce heat of the sun, nor drenching rainstorms, nor the publicly expressed anger of Mr. Taylor, who was embarrassed by the protests. Public support for the women grew and eventually Mr. Taylor, and soon afterward the rebel leaders, felt obliged to meet with them and hear their grievances.

The moral authority of this movement that seemed to have arisen from nowhere had become one of the significant factors pushing the warring sides to the peace table. Peace talks were eventually held in Accra, the capital of Ghana, and when it looked as if they were about to break down, Ms. Gbowee and nearly 200 of her followers staged a sit-in at the site of the talks, demanding that the two sides stay put until an agreement was reached.

A tentative peace was established, and Mr. Taylor went into exile in Nigeria. The women continued their activism. Three years ago, on Jan. 16, 2006, in an absolutely thrilling triumph for the mothers and wives and sisters and aunts and grandmothers who had worked so courageously for peace, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was sworn in as the president of Liberia — the first woman ever elected president of a country in Africa.

Liberia is hardly the world's most stable society. But "Pray the Devil Back to Hell" reminds us of the incredible power available to the most ordinary of people if they are willing to act with courage and unwavering commitment.

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