Exploring Gospel NONVIOLENCE - 2

Stories of nonviolence in action

The stories below could be used in various ways:

- as articles for parish newsletters
- to enlarge as part of a display in church
- for quiet reflection during a prayer service, followed perhaps by the prayer about Witnesses for Peace and Nonviolence
- to start a group discussion about nonviolence. What nonviolent actions can you pick out in these stories? What nonviolent attitudes underpinned those types of action? What do you think of Gandhi’s comment that ‘Nonviolence is not a cover for cowardice, but it is the supreme virtue of the brave’? What are the advantages of nonviolence over violence?

St John XXIII and the Cuban Missile Crisis

In October 1962 the United States found proof that Soviet missiles had been positioned in Cuba. President Kennedy announced a blockade on Soviet ships approaching Cuba and for a week a nuclear war seemed a terrible possibility. Using every diplomatic avenue behind the scenes, Kennedy asked Pope John XXIII to help defuse the tension. At his weekly audience the Pope delivered this veiled comment: 'The Pope always speaks well of those statesmen, on whatever side, who strive to come together to avoid war and bring peace to humanity'. He sent a message to Moscow appealing for negotiations to continue for the sake of peace. These encouraging signals enabled President Khrushchev to overrule more combative colleagues, withdraw the missiles from Cuba, and portray himself as a dignified peacemaker. Khrushchev later said: ‘What the Pope has done for peace will go down in history’.


Revolution by Candlelight

In East Germany the Protestant Church provided a unique haven for independent citizens’ groups to meet beyond the control of the State. At St Nicholas Church in Leipzig Pastor Christian Führer started regular ‘Peace Prayers’ in 1982 and the small group persevered despite harassment by the secret police. In 1989 widespread election fraud provoked furious demonstrations across the country. The East German Church Federation called for a democratic multi-party system, economic reforms, a free press and freedom to travel. Thousands now attended Monday peace prayers in Leipzig, where they were urged to use nonviolence. Tension was at its height on 9 October 1989, with thousands of extra Stasi police on the streets, and a bloody confrontation expected. Three citizens’ leaders met Communist officials in private and agreed that if the protestors remained peaceful so would the police. After the prayer service 70,000 unarmed people holding lighted candles marched through Leipzig. It was a turning point. Each week numbers increased as prayer services followed by protest demonstrations erupted all over the country. On 4 November half a million marched in Berlin; on 8 November the entire Communist leadership resigned, and the following night the border between East and West was opened and the Berlin Wall came down.

Source: Ronald J. Sider, Nonviolent Action, Brazos Press, 2015, pp 95-100

A section of the Berlin Wall - now a museum piece - outside the Imperial War Museum in London
Political courage in Northern Ireland

No one should underestimate the real achievements this [Good Friday] Agreement means… It took enormous courage for many of these politicians (traditional opponents) to sit down together, agree to discard some long-held dogmatic principles and accept compromise and change. It took enormous courage for them to recognise each other’s ‘identity’ and agree to each person’s right to different political aspirations. It took enormous courage to admit that violence is not the way forward and to pledge themselves to nonviolence and democracy.

_Mairead Corrigan Maguire, The Vision of Peace: faith and hope in Northern Ireland_, Orbis, 1999, p 121

Liberian women are tired of war

For more than 20 years Liberia suffered from brutal civil wars - until a group of women decided they’d had enough. Leymah Gbowee coordinated the Women in Peacebuilding Network in Liberia and brought Christian women together in 2003 to pray and work for peace, soon joined by Muslim women. 2,500 women picketed President Charles Taylor’s motorcade every day with signs reading ‘The women of Liberia want peace now’. Taylor agreed to peace talks with opposition warlords and a delegation of women then kept vigil outside the negotiations in Ghana. After seven weeks and no cease-fire they escalated their nonviolent protest, forming a human barricade across the doors, so the male negotiators could not leave until agreement was reached. When security guards tried to arrest the women they threatened to undress - a cultural taboo for the guards to witness. Three weeks later a peace deal was signed. The women went on to work alongside UN Peacekeeping Forces, persuading fighters to hand over their weapons and go back to school. Their voter registration campaign in 2005 increased the proportion of women voters from 15% to 50%. Liberians elected President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who, together with Leymah Gbowee, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011.

_Kenyan Muslims shield Christians_

A group of Kenyan Muslims travelling on a bus ambushed by Islamist gunmen protected Christian passengers by refusing to be split into groups, according to eyewitnesses. They told the militants to kill them together or leave them alone, a local governor told Kenyan media. Some of the Muslim passengers gave non-Muslims headscarves to try and conceal their identities when the bus stopped. One hundred passengers, mostly women, were on the bus at the time of the attack, according to Kenyan officials.

_Nonviolent resistance in the South Hebron Hills_

Residents of the South Hebron Hills experience continual harassment from nearby settlements but remain firm in their commitment to nonviolent resistance. Each day they graze their sheep in contested areas and resist settler attempts to drive them from their lands. International volunteers from Operation Dove have maintained a presence there since 2004.

Recently the shepherds, accompanied by the volunteers, were arrested following a nonviolent action during which villagers repaired the road which links At-Tuwani village to Yatta. This is an example of nonviolent resistance and of the importance of the witness of volunteers. The volunteers were quickly released and the shepherds were held for several hours, released only after paying a fine.

_Source: www.tinyurl.com/South-Hebron_
Prayer - Witnesses for peace and nonviolence

Reader 1 Loving Creator and giver of all life,
We thank you for the many people who have gone before us:

Reader 2 For those who have lived out Jesus’ example of love
Reader 1 For those who have worked tirelessly to make sure that all people are treated with dignity
Reader 2 For those who have taught us how to pray
Reader 1 For those who have shown us how to forgive
Reader 2 For those who helped us to cross boundaries
Reader 1 For those who have tried to live your way of nonviolence
Reader 2 For those who have lived out your kingdom of justice, love and peace
Reader 1 Even for those we’ve struggled with. We name them now before you...

People can be invited to come forward to light a candle and, if they wish, name out loud a person who has been an example of peacemaking for them.

Reader 1 We know that we do not go alone, for the path is brightened by those who have gone before us.
May our lives also be a shining example to others.

All: Jesus, following your way is not easy. Give us courage, strength and wisdom. Convert out hearts to your way of nonviolence. When we are afraid, help us to remember your words, ‘Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; but the kind of peace I give you is not like the world’s peace’. Thank you for giving us this example and forgive us for the many times we fail. Amen

Pax Christi

Catholic Nonviolence Initiative