

Tricia Gates Brown

Getting in the Way : Stories from Christian Peacemaker Teams
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There are a number of interpretations possible for the motto of the Christian Peacemaker Teams “Getting in the Way”. A Taoist would recall the words of Lao Tzu “Let the Tao (Way) be present in your life, and you will be genuine. Whoever is planted in the Tao will not be uprooted.” A Christian might recall the way as a pilgrimage on which the Pilgrim must have an awakened eye, an open ear, a giving hand, and a steady foot. Others, looking at the work of the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) will see “getting in the way” as people who put their bodies in the way of others who are trying to get things done, often violently.

The CPT was created in 1988 by three ‘historic’ Christian peace churches: the Mennonite of the USA and Canada, the Church of the Brethren, and the Friends United Meeting.(Quakers, largely in the US Middle West who are more organized into ‘churches’ in contrast to the ‘silent meetings’ of Quakers strong on the East Coast). These three church groups already had an international peace outreach doing both development work and peace activities in areas of tension.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) had been formed in 1982. Although PBI had no official religious link, much of the early staff were Quakers, and at one point the PBI staff worked out of a Quaker study center in Massachusetts.

Thus, the need for a trained, full-time corps of peacemakers to carry out work in conflict zones in cooperation with local peace groups or groups working on behalf of endangered people was already felt. Some experiences were underway, and two structures being put into place by PBI would prove helpful to CPT as well. The first was that teams on the ground would need reserve members who could not devote one or two years of their time, but who could be present for a few weeks or a month when events were moving fast or new opportunities opened. This was particularly true for PBI work in Central America where the political situation at times changed quickly.

The second structure which proved crucial is an alert network which can alert media, political leaders, the diplomatic community, and some people whose names or positions would be recognized in the countries where the peace teams were working. Such an alert network proved useful when team members were arrested or expelled and when the leaders of peace groups with whom PBI was working were under threat and sometimes killed.

As Tricia Brown notes in her introduction “The stated goal of Christian Peacemaker Teams is ‘violence reduction’. CPTers stand in the way of violence by such acts as accompanying civilians threatened with violence. Teams also use conversation, video, photography, and journalism to discourage individuals in tense settings from acting violently. In addition, CPTers provide a ‘ministry of presence’ by living in the thick of the conflict, choosing to reside in places of wearying tension. Sometimes this presence alone lessens the turbulence. It also allows CPT to respond more immediately and spontaneously as events unfold around them. At times, they literally ‘get in the way’ and stand between aggressors and unarmed individuals.” However, as with the regular military, there is also a lot of ‘hurry up and wait’. As Tricia Brown writes CPTers “are people who choose to live in conflict zones to create space for local efforts of non-violent resistance. They talk to soldiers,

guerrillas, and paramilitaries; they accompany school children and farms; they advocate for human rights, support local initiatives in non-violence, and disseminate reports of what they witness. But that is only part of the story – the glorious part. The majority of their time is taken up with the daily grind of living in sometimes Spartan conditions: negotiating car repairs, figuring out who will do the dishes, holding lengthy team meetings based on consensus decision making, and spending countless hours visiting with local partners.”

Currently, there are 45 full-time CPTers and 135 reserve corps members. Long term efforts are in the West Bank of Israel-Palestine and in Iraq since the 2002 war. The other area of acute violence with CPTers is Colombia. There is also work with several indigenous communities in Canada concerning tensions with the government concerning land and fishing rights.

In addition to full-time and reserve CPTers, CPT organizes delegations to sites of conflict to offer encouragement to communities facing violence, to meet with religious leaders and to advocate for more just government policies when they return home.

The accounts of the CPTers offer a good cross section of the types of work undertaken and the impact that the experiences have on the lives and thoughts of the writers. Some have written a daily account of their activities, other a telling moment, and others a reflection upon the sum of the experiences at a later date, dealing with depression and fear.

These are realistic accounts indicating the compromises which one needs to make, the need to live with ambiguities, the difficulties of having one’s work and motivation understood. There is an emphasis on the role of prayer, of fasting, of the use of liturgy, especially in a moving chapter by Bob Holmes, a Roman Catholic priest active in the Catholic Worker movement who reflects upon CPT’s work in Colombia. CPT is open to those who identify themselves as Christian and is not limited to Mennonite, Brethren and Quakers. There are some photos which put a human face on both the CPTers and those with whom they work.

For those wanting more information:
Christian Peacemaker Teams, PO Box 6508,
Chicago, IL 60680, USA
Website: www.cpt.org

Rene Wadlow

