

Paul R. Dekar

Creating the Beloved Community : A Journey with the Fellowship of Reconciliation
(Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2005, 326pp.).

The Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) began symbolically on the eve of the First World War as Henry Hodgkin, a British Quaker, and Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, the German pastor of Potsdam and chaplain to the Kaiser, parted after the creation of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches. They said “We are one in Christ and can never be at war.” A few weeks later, Germany and England were at war. Henry Hodgkin helped draft a statement first for the Quakers and then for the creation in England of the Fellowship of Reconciliation which said in part “That the Power, Wisdom and Love of God stretch far beyond the limits of our present experience, and that He is ever waiting to break forth into human life in new and larger ways.”

In Germany, Siegmund-Schultze faced the death penalty for his pronouncements against the war and was forced into exile. He lived until 1969, thus seeing the Second World War as well as some of the most aggressive phases of the Cold War.

Hodgkin who had been a missionary doctor in China had good contacts among American Quakers as well as among the YMCA which had been active in China and with others such as Grace Hutchins, a former principal of a school in Wuchang, China, who became the associate editor of the FOR magazine. He drew upon these contacts to organize a branch in the USA in November 1915. What was remarkable for the time was that among the 68 founding members, half were women. Some of the women went on to help found shortly afterwards two, not specifically religious, peace organizations: Emily Greene Balch and Jane Addams – the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom; Tracy Mygatt and others – the War Resisters League.

After the war in 1919 Christian peacemakers met in England to develop an international body; the International Fellowship of Reconciliation was officially founded in 1923 with England and the USA as the strongest groups. Paul Dekar’s book is a journey primarily through the US branch but as events in the rest of the world crowd in on the US, peacemakers from other countries appear in the narrative.

At the end of the First World War, the newly organized US-FOR turned its attention to economic injustice which had been partly hidden by the war effort. FOR leaders were active in defense of trade unions and cooperatives, public ownership of important means of production, a universal minimum wage. As Reinhold Niebuhr, the chair of the national council in 1931 and 1932 wrote “A society which tries to create truth, beauty and goodness while it rests upon untrue and unjust foundations deserves to be convicted of hypocrisy and must inevitably lose the good will of those who are victimized by its injustices. There can, therefore, be no health in the cultural and spiritual life of Western society as long as its present economic system is not seriously modified.”

Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party candidate for US President a number of times was the FOR Executive Secretary in 1917-1919 and continued as an active leader as was his brother Evan. A.J. Muste, who was one of the best known of the Executive Secretaries, wrote in 1929 as the economic depression got under way, “The Fellowship of Reconciliation envisions as the goal of history the kingdom of God, an order of society in which there shall be no master and no slave, no exploiter and no exploited; where each human being shall be regarded as an end in himself; where each shall contribute according to his ability; and each shall share according to his need; an order of society based on cooperation, not competition and strife; where fellowship shall be a reality and not a lovely dream or a pious wish.”

Closely linked to the struggle against economic injustice was the challenge to racism. Many African-Americans were both poor and discriminated against in housing, employment, transportation and education. FOR activists helped to adopt techniques of Gandhian non-violence to challenge racism. As Bayard Rustin, one time FOR staff member wrote “At times freedom will demand that its followers go into situations where even death is to be faced. Resistance on the buses would, for example, mean humiliation, mistreatment by police, arrest, and some physical violence inflicted on the participants.

“But if anyone at this date in history believes that the ‘white problem’ which is one of privilege, can be settled without some violence, he is mistaken and fails to realize the ends to which men can be driven to hold on to what they consider privileges.

“This is why Negroes and whites who participate in direct action must pledge themselves to non-violence in word and deed. For in this way alone can the inevitable violence be reduced to a minimum.”

The title of the book “Creating the Beloved Community” comes from an oft-used phrase of Martin Luther King Jr. in describing the aim of overcoming the tripartite personal, economic, and political oppression. As James Lawson, who later became FOR chairperson, wrote in 1959 “ Only if the Negro is strong enough to love and forgive, while pressing on for a new society, will the end to segregation and racial hatred arrive.”

As Dekar points out “FOR members have not typically held a narrow view of peacemaking. FOR members have sought not only to oppose war, but also to identify and alleviate causes of war.” As Alfred Hassler, FOR Executive Secretary from 1958 to 1974, wrote “ Those of us who believe in the ability of non-violent methods to deal effectively with this problem of social change and revolution must consider whether it is enough to apply the tactics of non-violence to individual circumstances in isolated places, or whether we must not now seek a total strategy that envisions a non-violently organized total world community in which the well-being of all is the responsibility of all.” He went on to stress the necessity for individuals of all countries to identify as world citizens and to shape a wider vision of the world at peace. He saw the need to provide concrete, visible, and simple means by which greater numbers of people might contribute to shaping life on earth in different ways and to use new technologies in more appropriate ways.

Dai Dong, a Vietnamese term for “a world of great togetherness” was such a transnational effort linking war, ecology, poverty and other social issues, especially at the time of the 1st UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm 1972. As Dekar notes “Dai Dong and FOR highlighted a people-centered development vision that embraced an agenda markedly different than that of the world’s governments.”

As we look over the history of FOR, we are reminded of a talk in 1967 of Martin Luther King Jr. “The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal.”

Rene Wadlow

