

## **Create Space for Peace**

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“But what do you do in practice” was a question often asked of me when I started to represent Peace Brigades International (PBI) shortly after its creation in 1981 at the United Nations in Geneva. Members of the founding PBI team were friends who had asked me to be “Representative in Europe” — much too vast a field, but I said that I would be the “eyes” and when necessary, the negotiator, with diplomats at the UN in Geneva.

The first action of PBI — which has always remained my model of what the organization should have been — was to put a team of people from California who had already trained together and who knew how to use shortwave material on the Nicaraguan side of the frontier with Honduras to prevent a possible invasion of Nicaragua by US troops who were then doing military exercises with the Honduran army. The presence and aim of the team had been negotiated with diplomats of Honduras and Nicaragua at the UN in Geneva and New York.

Ultimately, there was no US Army intervention, most likely not because of the PBI team but rather because the US government decided to use “Contras” rather than US troops. I was investigating the possibility of having a PBI team as a permanent line on the frontier. At the time, the Nicaraguan Ambassador to the UN in Geneva had been my student, and his brother, who had also been a student, was the legal advisor to the Sandinista President Daniel Ortega so the planning for an unarmed line of interposition went fairly far. The Nicaraguan Ambassador hoped, unrealistically, that I had some influence on Latin American policy in Washington so I was well informed as to Nicaraguan aims.

In any case, PBI was unable to develop the “Brigade” aspect of its work, and the focus of the work turned to accompaniment of local NGO human rights workers primarily in Guatemala. As Liam Mahoney and Luis Eguren write in their history of PBI’s work “Victims of human rights abuse are frequently those attempting to organize social change movements that question their society’s powerful elites. An international presence can be a source of hope to these activists. It assures them that they are not alone, that their work is important. And that their suffering will not go unnoticed by the outside world. The volunteer’s presence not only protects but also encourages.” (1)

The PBI shorthand term for this type of accompaniment was “Making Space for Peace” and the term became a way to explain to the public what PBI was doing. The concept of “making space for peace” is used as the title of a moving collection of short essays, talks, letters and expressions of gratitude of Gene Stoltzfus, a founder of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) who died in March 2010. (2)

Christian Peacemaker Teams was founded officially in 1988 with Gene Stoltzfus as Director until 2004. As he said “We realized that our primary task was to carry forward the kind of presence that pointed to truth and opened spaces for the surprise of peacemaking. We know that the struggle to break through the barriers created by violence would require listening, perseverance, critical reflection and imaginative, symbolic thinking...And we had to learn to sing and celebrate, to pray together and to cheer each other on.”

Gene Stoltzfus believed that the world desperately needs peacemakers who engage non-violently from a confident spiritual core and informed by critical thinking. He wrote “The

incredible power of active, non-violent peacemaking is a premier sign of our time. People of faith have witnessed the effectiveness of non-violence to push back violence and killing, often with amazingly small doses of organized action.” In practice, Christian Peacemaker Teams follows very closely the PBI accompaniment model based on working whenever possible with local groups having a social change through non-violent action basis. (3)

In some cases, there are no local groups devoted to non-violence, and the CPT has to work as independent individuals. Such independence provides a flexibility of action, but also increases dangers as no one really knows the local culture or the current state of play. Thus a small group of CPT members were working in Iraq after the US intervention, basically investigating where Iraqis arrested were being held and under what charges. They were also trying to find where “the disappeared” might be. In 2005, four of the Team were kidnapped — it was never clear by whom. They were held for 118 days. One was killed, the other three were released. (4)

While much of the early leadership of PBI came from the Quakers, and the first two headquarter locations of PBI were Quaker centers that had spare space, PBI had no specific religious base. Christian Peacemaker Teams under Gene Stoltzfus’ leadership had a specifically Christian character with Jesus as the role model. “His style incorporated symbolic actions, words of confrontation, and poetic or parabolic teachings which awakened the deeper recesses of the minds and souls of his audience.” For Gene, the most important elements of a team are “prayer, discipline, continuity within the group and a broad diversity of talents and perspectives.”

Gene Stoltzfus came from seven generations of Mennonite pastors whose ancestors had gone to America in search of religious liberty. He attended Mennonite colleges and Biblical seminaries and worked for Mennonite service bodies both in the USA and in the Philippines. Thus, the core of the CPT drew on the “Historic Peace Churches “ — Mennonite-Midwest Quakers — all of whom already had their own service-peace-oriented bodies. The problem that CPT has faced is to widen the circle of those recruited for service and also the financial base. CPT is also active in Canada where there is a strong Mennonite community and Mennonite colleges with peace study programs.

However, both in the USA and in Canada, the “Historic Peace Churches” are largely White and Middle Class. As Gene wrote non-violent activists “never come without imperfections because we are human...We grow one step at a time, acting, reflecting, learning, stumbling, practicing, training, then moving forward again.”

Can the circle of non-violent activists be made wider? The need for more people and more money is evident. There are always new challenges. Gene tells the story of going to the Pakistan/Afghanistan frontier to talk with a local conflict resolution group. When the Pakistani leader of the group was told that there were two American peacemakers to see him, he greeted Gene saying “Where have you been all these years?” One of Gene’s last actions before his death was a protest vigil at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada from where unmanned Predator Drones are sent to Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was arrested there and taken to the detention center in Las Vegas.

Creating space for peace is always creating space for the unexpected. Such space can set the stage for the universal imagination to manifest itself.

- 1) Liam Mahoney and Luis Eguren *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights* (West Hartford, CT: Kumerian Press, 1997, 289pp.)
- 2) Dorothy Friessen and Marilen Abesamis *Create Space for Peace* (Deerfield Beach, FL: TriMark Press, 2010, 255pp)
- 3) For an account of Christian Peacemakers' work see: Tricia Gates Brown (Ed) *Getting in the Way* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005, 160pp.) and Kathleen Kern *In Harm's Way. A History of Christian Peacemaker Teams* (Cascade, 2008, 565pp.)
- 4) See Tricia Gates Brown (Ed.). *118 Days: Christian Peacemaker Teams Held Hostage in Iraq* (Chicago, IL: Christian Peacemaker Teams, 2008, 227pp.)



Drawing: Lona Towsley