

**Karen Brandow, EdD  
32 Water St. Apt B  
Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts USA 01370  
413-625-8115 (phone and fax)  
kbrandow2@aol.com**

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Karen Brandow EdD spent eight years in Guatemala doing human rights work, and is a musician and a Spanish translator and interpreter for peace and justice groups. She completed the Lev Shomea training program and offers spiritual direction and retreats for activists involved in many issues. Her spiritual background includes the study and practice of Judaism, Buddhism and Catholicism. kbrandow2@aol.com

### **GIVING BACK: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR NONVIOLENT ACTIVISTS OF FAITH By Karen Brandow, EdD**

*“Living a life where values manifest in daily actions – actions that promote the basic health and welfare of all we can possibly imagine – is within reach for each of us. It is not something that will rest only in the hands of a few master teachers, enlightened beings, or revered clergy. It is our birthright and our responsibility. Spiritual activists move more freely between the inner quest for peace and the outer quest for justice, and we feel some comfort knowing it is a permeable membrane that joins our struggles, our commitments, and our transformations.”* Claudia Horwitz, *The Spiritual Activist*<sup>1</sup>

### **My Story**

In 1985 I completed a doctoral dissertation entitled, “Nonviolent Action for Social Change: Its Effects on Activists.” I embarked on that study convinced that it would serve to enhance the attractiveness of my community’s lifestyle and commitments, thereby serving my supposedly covert agenda of drawing more of the world of academia out of their ivory towers and onto the streets. What I found in the course of my research, to my surprise and dismay, was that while it was true that many nonviolent activists experienced positive effects from their involvement, there was an equally long list of what I termed “negative effects.” These included despair, repressed rage, intragroup fighting, increased estrangement from society, and a loss of meaning.

In 1994 I returned to the United States after eight years of doing human rights work in Central America, manifesting many of these “negative effects” and a host of others I hadn’t uncovered in my research. Then, another layer of difficulties arose as I attempted to re-adapt to United States society and culture. I immediately jumped into a 60 hour a week job at a national office working on solidarity with Guatemala, I moved to a city where I knew few people and I had no place to live. I turned to the Maryknoll community for guidance because of their experience as a religious order doing international humanitarian work. They were the only people I found who were dealing with the impact of reentry after years of overseas service. I discovered that my feelings and experiences were not unique, but common to those who engaged in human rights and humanitarian work.

Over the ensuing decade I sought help addressing the physical, emotional and spiritual toll of living and working in a country at war. I could trace some of my difficulties to not only the environment in which I had been living, but also *the way in which I carried out the work*. For most of that time I lived and worked alone, I had no organized support system in the U.S. or in Central America, I accepted the cultural taboo on emotional expression, I rarely allowed myself opportunities for rest or self-nurturance, and I had no spiritual foundation or regular spiritual practice. I had allowed no time and space for transitioning back to the United States after eight years away. I recognized that with any number of these elements in place, I might have engaged in human rights work at less of a cost to my body, heart and soul.

In 2003 I entered into spiritual direction, and subsequently enrolled in Lev Shomea, the spiritual director training program at the Elat Chayyim Center for Jewish Spirituality. My intention remains to bring the practice of spiritual direction to the broad community of nonviolent activists, motivated by the desire to prevent others from repeating my errors,

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<sup>1</sup> C. Horwitz, *The Spiritual Activist*, Penguin, 2002, p. xii.

and to accompany others who are wrestling with the challenging effects of nonviolent action on their own bodies, hearts and souls. I have been doing that work for the past year and a half, particularly with people who have gone to prison for civil disobedience actions and with those who have gone overseas to serve on peace teams in countries at war. This article is an examination of some of what I have begun to learn.

### **Defining Nonviolent Activists**

An essential aspect of democracy in this country and worldwide relies on people who devote themselves to nonviolent organizing and activism in the pursuit of justice and peace. For some this is a full-time commitment that is reflected in the way they live as well as the work they do. Often they swim against the current, and at times they voluntarily place themselves in situations of danger or risk, in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Mohandas Gandhi and many other nonviolent activists who have brought about important social and economic changes. As nonviolent activists they may live in countries at war, spend time in prison for civil disobedience actions, live in voluntary poverty and serve victims of violence and oppression in this country.

Although nonviolent activists sometimes operate as individuals, it is more common that they are part of larger communities who are bonded by the “shared struggles, commitments and transformations” resulting from that inner quest for peace and outer quest for justice. For the purposes of this article I am limiting my scope to those who follow nonviolence as a way of life, excluding those who utilize it only as a tactic towards a specific end.

*“An activist...is someone who is involved in...social change who is committed to political/social/economic change as a priority in her/his life for a period of time. Activists are willing to put themselves at some personal risk or danger for their goals of ending oppression or militarism.*

*Nonviolent action is a means of social struggle that goes beyond the usual institutionalized political methods such as voting, lobbying, or signing petitions. It can include such actions as vigils, marches, pickets, boycotts, sit-ins,*

*draft or tax-resistance, or civil disobedience...It excludes the options of neutrality, retaliation, flight or physical violence.”<sup>2</sup>*

## **Spiritual Foundations**

For centuries in the United States and abroad, activists of various faiths have embraced nonviolence as a way of life, transforming themselves and the societies in which they live. The principles of nonviolence have emerged from the spiritual tenets of several religions, and activists often rely on their faith foundations to motivate and sustain their work. Buddhism offers the Noble Eightfold Path, the Four Bramaviharas, and Zen precepts that outline ethical behavior. Christianity offers the Works of Mercy and the example of Jesus as a teacher of nonviolence through the parables of the Gospel. The greatest theoretician and practitioner of nonviolence in the last century, Mahatma Gandhi, brings us wisdom from the teachings of Hinduism. He also says, “Believe in some principle and clothe it with life – say it is your God and you believe in it – I should think it is enough.”<sup>3</sup> The Koran states, “What army shall help you apart from the Beneficent? Those without faith are only deluded (Surah Mulk, 20).” After five years of warfare, the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, turned to more peaceful methods and finally conquered Mecca through a nonviolent campaign. Muslim followers of Gandhi formed a red-shirted nonviolent army numbering more than a hundred thousand, and were instrumental in helping Gandhi win Indian independence. Many Jewish sacred texts such as the Torah and the Talmud provide inspiration for nonviolent action, including the mandate to free other oppressed peoples because Jews were freed from Egyptian slavery, the notion of Tikkun Olam by which Jews are partners with God in the healing of the world, and the saying “*tzedik, tzedik, tirdof - Justice, justice thou shalt pursue.*” Quaker principles have brought its practitioners to the forefront of movements

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<sup>2</sup> K. Brandow, *Nonviolent Action for Social Change: It's Effects on Activists*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1985, pp.12-13.

to end slavery and to resist war. It is helpful for spiritual directors to become familiar with these faith-based foundations of nonviolent action in working with directees.

### **Issues in Spiritual Direction**

While some of the issues nonviolent activists bring to spiritual direction are similar to those anyone might bring, it is within the context of their activism that a director might choose to respond.

### **Sabbath**

*“The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation with violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys her own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.” Thomas Merton<sup>4</sup>*

Many social issues call out to us with urgency, from the destruction of the planet to the starvation suffered by a lone child. Nonviolent activists can be swept up in that urgency and come to see opportunities for rest, self-care and retreat as luxuries that they, and the world, cannot afford. Some may look at their counterparts in other regions of the world and adopt a perspective that until such time for rest is available to all, it would be somehow immoral or selfish to engage in it. Within some social movements this attitude is reinforced, and activists are encouraged to repeatedly engage in civil disobedience actions that might land them back in jail, to return to countries at war, to organize the next meeting or protest, without time for reflection and processing of what they have just done. I have found that one of the most important roles I can play as a spiritual companion is to validate the need for, and the appropriateness of taking time for

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 90.

Sabbath. There are models for this exploration in various faiths. The weekly Sabbath tradition is central to the theology and practice of Judaism. Christians reading the Gospels find that it was a common practice for Jesus to leave his disciples and go off by himself to meditate, pray and reflect. Ancient and modern Buddhist teachers go on regular spiritual retreats. The Islamic Sabbath is Friday, and is a day of public worship. What's important is to reframe or transform the sense of such behavior as "selfish", to engaging in a Sabbath for the purpose of renewal and reflection, thereby strengthening one's ability to continue and improve the quality of the work. A central element of Gandhi's nonviolent movement was called the "constructive program," whereby activists would not only engage in protest and resistance, but also would envision and implement a just society of their own creation. Such a society would surely allow Sabbath time for all people, and thus activists can model the new society for others by taking deserved time for rest and renewal.

### ***Discernment***

Decisions to undertake nonviolent actions that may result in imprisonment or injury are not to be made lightly. Activists must continually engage in a process of discernment regarding their calling, whether it be about engaging in special one-time political actions (i.e. a civil disobedience protest that could involve an arrest) or ongoing commitments like living in a country at war or refusing to pay war taxes. Other factors such as personal guilt or pressure by others in the movement can be at play, and these must be separated out in order to determine if God is calling the activist to this work.

In his essay, "*Berur: How Do You Know If It's God?*" Avruhm Addison suggests some questions a directee can consider in the process of discernment.

1. Is my heart pure, untainted by self-serving motives?

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<sup>4</sup> Pax Christi, *Peacemaking day by Day*, Pax Christi, 1985, p. 140.

2. Will this action be pleasing to God? Will it lead to greater justice, kindness and humility?
3. Am I being led to a greater sense of awe, love and wholeheartedness?
4. Have I reached my choice through a process of gradual discernment rather than as a snap decision?
5. Have I noticed changes in my affect that help me know I have chosen wisely?<sup>5</sup>

With regards to the latter question, it is common for activists to refer to a “strange calm” they experience immediately before especially risky actions, and sometimes afterwards. One of my directees, who was arrested at a civil disobedience action at a military training school in Georgia, stated,

*“I will say that after I was arrested, sitting on the red dirt on the base with my hands pinned behind my back in those plastic strip handcuffs while they booked me, and later when my hands and feet were in shackles on the bus going to the county jail, I felt this incredible sense of peace. It was as if some shred of my dignity had been restored and some imbalance righted.”*

That kind of feedback helps people discern that they are more likely on a path to which they have been called.

Civil rights leader Bayard Rustin offers other questions for discernment, particularly with regards to political action.

1. Am I trying to break the law, or to adhere to a higher principle in the hope that the law will change and a new one will emerge based on the higher principle?
2. Have I removed my ego as much as possible to do this? Am I sure I’m not doing it to get my picture in the paper, because I’m mad at society, because my mother doesn’t want me to?
3. Am I prepared to cheerfully accept the consequences of my acts?
4. Would the world be a better place if everyone did this?

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<sup>5</sup> H. A. Addison, *Jewish Spiritual Direction*, Jewish Lights, 2006, pp. 101-106.

I would add a corollary question from activist Wally Nelson: Would I be doing this even if no one else in the world were? <sup>6</sup>

A spiritual director can assist in this process of discernment, and can help activists be at peace with whatever decisions they reach. Another aspect of this discernment process involves differentiating personal anger and righteousness from what is called “prophetic anger” or “holy righteousness”. God can inspire an anger in us that calls us to action to fight injustice. This is not the same as the kind of personal anger we might feel in response to stress in our lives.

### ***Hopelessness and Doubt: Where is God in this Suffering?***

In the course of their work, activists can be faced with fundamental questions concerning the suffering they encounter, similar to questions one might face in response to a personal life situation, but catalyzed by larger events. How can God allow this to happen? Where is God in this situation? How can I maintain my faith in the face of this violence, this oppression, this planetary destruction? How can I maintain any hope when things continually seem to be getting worse? It is around these questions that spiritual direction can be particularly important.

There is a famous passage from Elie Wiesel’s *“Night”*, in which concentration camp prisoners are made to witness the tortuous hanging of a young boy. A voice from the crowd cries out *“Where is God now?”* Wiesel says, *“And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is - He is hanging here on this gallows.’* While some authors claim that this moment signified a turning point in Wiesel’s consciousness towards a belief that God was dead, it is possible to interpret this moment as one in which Wiesel recognizes that *God suffers when we suffer*. The Jewish text of the

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<sup>6</sup> K. Brandow, op. cit. pp. 75-76

prophets states, "In all their troubles, God was troubled" (Isa 63:9), and Rabbi Isaac Luria suggests that God suffers from human actions.

Christians who traveled to Central America in the 1980's in solidarity with the poor

*"met people they would never forget and encountered the human face of God in the dignity of the poor, the marginalized, the ones whose suffering was so often the other side of the coin from their own comfort and wealth....Scripture stories came alive, took on contemporary form and meaning. Jesus Christ was incarnate in the villages of Central America, in the refugee camps, in prisons, in hiding places where frightened people clung with passionate determination to the hope that had come to shape their faith."*<sup>7</sup>

Contact with other people whose faith grew stronger in the face of tremendous adversity was a source of inspiration for many activists engaged in solidarity work.

However, other activists are tossed into the "dark night of the soul" based on their experiences. Spiritual directors can accompany directees through this time and help them see that theirs is a normal response to an abnormal situation.

### ***Emotional Expression***

Exposure to violence, trauma and intense suffering take an emotional toll on activists. It is important for spiritual directors to be familiar with the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and to refer directees for psychological counseling when appropriate. Other activists may end up with a condition commonly referred to as burnout, but more accurately termed compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is a state of emotional exhaustion that can result from constant giving, care taking or political activism without an adequate balance of self-care, spiritual and community support. Spiritual directors can address these issues by encouraging directees to rest (see Sabbath section above), to develop a regular spiritual practice (see section below) and to open up to the emotions that may have built up in response to what they have seen and heard.

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<sup>7</sup> M. Swedish and M. Dennis, *Like Grains of Wheat: A Spirituality of Solidarity*, Orbis, 2004, pp. 26 and 49

Activists may have been in prison or living overseas in cultures where emotional expression is not valued, there may not be adequate space and time in their lives for such expression to take place, and in some cases, efforts to take the nonviolent philosophy to heart may be counter-productive. In the 1960's, Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a psychiatrist treating civil rights workers says,

*"I remember treating Negro workers after they had been beaten viciously by white toughs or policemen while conducting civil rights demonstrations. I would frequently comment, 'You must feel pretty angry getting beaten up like that by those bigots.' Often I received a reply such as, 'No, I don't hate those white men, I love them because they must really be suffering with all that hatred in their souls. Dr. King says the only way we can win our freedom is through love. Anger and hatred has never solved anything.' I used to sit there and wonder, 'Now, what do they really do with their rage?'"<sup>8</sup>*

Simply having activists tell their stories can be important, and the spiritual director must be emotionally prepared to listen to things that are difficult to hear. If the director finds s/he is experiencing strong emotions in response to what the activist is sharing, this is an excellent issue to bring to supervision.

### ***Family Responses to Activism***

I had been living in Guatemala for 7 years, and my family was not happy with my path. My mother sent a teary tape saying "it is time for someone else's daughter to go and for you to come home", and my brother had made it clear that he was disturbed that I was missing out on the early years of my niece and nephew's lives. This is a common experience for nonviolent activists who voluntarily place themselves in potentially dangerous situations, or who make choices that take them away from their families for extended periods of time.

I was hosting a delegation of people from a Presbyterian church in Albany, New York, USA, taking them around Guatemala to better understand what was going on. Because

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<sup>8</sup> K. Brandow, op. cit., p. 66.

they knew that I was Jewish, the Bible story they chose as the theme for the week was the Book of Ruth. On our last day together we each pulled a short text from Ruth out of a hat, and read the passages out loud to each other. My reading was Ruth's response to Naomi's urging her to turn back and return to her people. *"Do not urge me to leave you, or to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and be buried."* (Ruth 1:16-17) I was moved to tears by the synchronicity of having chosen that reading and the reality of my having broadened my sense of family to include the Guatemalan people with whom I had spent years living and working. This was of no comfort to my relatives, however, and family tensions are real and must be addressed.

One directee I met with was struggling with the fact that after her release from 4 months in prison for a civil disobedience action, her son, who was in his 20's, told her he needed to cut off contact with her. Sustaining nonviolent activism can be especially challenging for people who have young children. One successful model is that offered by a former priest and nun who fell in love and left that vocation to get married, Phil Berrigan and Liz McAlister. Together they had three children and they also were co-founders of the Plowshares civil disobedience actions, based on the words from the prophet Isaiah 2:4 – *And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.* In Plowshares actions, people often interpret that mandate literally and take hammers to nuclear warheads, for which they serve long prison sentences. Liz and Phil had an agreement that only one of them could be in jail at any given time so that the other could be with their children, and much of the time the family lived in a faith-based community with others at Jonah House in Baltimore, Maryland, USA. Everyone who knows them senses that their children have turned out remarkably happy, well adjusted, and all three

are activists in their own right. Other children of activists have not fared so well, and numerous families have broken up over one partner's commitment to nonviolent activism. In this context, it may be appropriate for a spiritual director to assess if psychological counseling would be helpful for the family, and to develop a referral list of people who would be willing to see low income activists.

### ***A Note on Re-Entry***

It is important to note that a particularly vulnerable time for activists is when they are transitioning from overseas work or out of prison back to their former lives. There are many issues that may arise during the time of transition that are beyond the scope of this article, including a sense of loss of purpose or meaning, the difficulties of leaving behind people who may still be in danger, reconnecting with loved ones after an extended time away, reverse culture shock, and having lived through an extraordinary experience not shared by most other people. Spiritual directors can be sensitive to these transition issues and encourage directees to take their time in dealing with them.

### ***Spiritual Practice***

*"We have to remember that work is not prayer. It is at best an extension of prayer. We fool ourselves if we argue that we don't have to pray because we work so hard or our work is so good. Those who work without prayer – no matter how good the work, no matter how sincere the minister – soon dry up inside. They have nothing left to give. Or, the work fails and they have no faith to sustain them, no perspective to encourage them. More important, real prayer makes us more effective people because real prayer changes us. Prayer delivers us from our own internal oppressions, the burdens we put on ourselves, the bitterness we carry, because it enables the inbreaking of God into our lives."*  
Joan Chittister<sup>9</sup>

Claudia Horwitz outlines three basic purposes of a spiritual practice.

1. It connects us to the presence of the sacred or something that has great meaning in our lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Pax Christi, op. cit., p. 152.

2. It is something we do regularly (hopefully daily) without interruption.
3. It grounds us in the present moment, bringing us into awareness of what is happening right now.<sup>10</sup>

In some cases nonviolent activists will already have a well-developed spiritual practice and may continue to engage in those practices while in prison, working overseas or involved in a specific campaign. In other cases, a spiritual director can help activists develop, deepen or sustain their practice, and to develop a spiritual support community. Like time for rest, some activists may see spiritual practice as a luxury for which there is little time. However, many activists have commented on the varied gifts of such a practice and community, including the healing power of music, a place to take their anger and frustration, seeking guidance on their calling, the exemplary life of some of the religious martyrs (both ancient and recent), and a foundational set of moral guidelines. A spiritual practice can help activists sustain their activism over the long haul, and to deal with the challenges of a peacemaking ministry. A spiritual direction relationship can be central to that end.

## **Conclusions**

Doing spiritual direction with nonviolent activists is a relatively new endeavor. It can be difficult for activists to find an appropriate director, in part because many live on extremely low incomes and cannot afford it, and because it may be challenging for some directors to be comfortable with the fact that people could be called to engage in actions that might land them in prison, in countries at war, or even to martyrdom. The potential benefits for directees, directors and the planet as a whole are significant. The common threads of nonviolent activism across various faiths open up rich opportunities for interfaith sharing. Nonviolent activists offer all of us a call to conscience, and historically

they have led nations to a higher moral ground. Those who travel overseas in order to work with oppressed peoples can learn to,

*“live as if each person really were created in God's image. The human community could be entering into a period of unending, increasingly horrible conflict, or it could use the opportunities presented to underscore the need for a different kind of world, an honest world, a world willing to cope with crisis in a new spirit of common humanity. We are all members of the global community. [Activists] of faith...see the troubles of the world from a unique, clarifying and powerful vantage point. They have something to say that just might help save us.”<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup> C. Horwitz, op. cit, p. 6

<sup>11</sup> M. Swedish and M. Dennis, op. cit., p. xxvi.

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## **SOME ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES**

### **Jewish**

The American Jewish World Service provides humanitarian assistance and emergency relief around the world, and places volunteers for short-term work. [www.ajws.org](http://www.ajws.org)

The Compassionate Listening Project is dedicated to Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation and Jewish-German reconciliation. [www.compassionatelistening.org](http://www.compassionatelistening.org)

The Jewish Peace Fellowship addresses war, peace, nonviolence and capital punishment. [www.jewishpeacefellowship.org](http://www.jewishpeacefellowship.org)

MAZON offers a Jewish response to world hunger. [www.mazon.org](http://www.mazon.org)

The Shalom Center offers writings, Torah commentary and actions related to peace, justice, earth-healing and interfaith work. Founded by Rabbi Arthur Waskow. [www.shalomctr.org](http://www.shalomctr.org)

Stone Circles helps individuals and organizations integrate faith, spiritual practice and reflection on the work of social transformation and social change. [www.stonecircles.org](http://www.stonecircles.org)

## **Christian**

The Catholic Worker Movement is an international network of hospitality houses and nonviolent activists inspired by the Works of Mercy and following in the path of founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. [www.catholicworker.com](http://www.catholicworker.com)

Initiated by Mennonites, Brethren and Quakers with broad ecumenical participation, Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) arose from a call in 1984 for Christians to devote the same discipline and self-sacrifice to nonviolent peacemaking that armies devote to war. CPT places violence-reduction teams in crisis situations and militarized areas around the world. CPT embraces the vision of unarmed intervention waged by committed peacemakers ready to risk injury and death in bold attempts to transform lethal conflict through the nonviolent power of God's truth and love. [www.cpt.org](http://www.cpt.org)

Pax Christi USA strives to create a world that reflects the Peace of Christ by exploring, articulating, and witnessing to the call of Christian nonviolence. [www.paxchristiusa.org](http://www.paxchristiusa.org)

Maryknoll Lay Missioners is a Catholic organization inspired by the mission of Jesus to live and work with poor communities in Africa, Asia, and the Americas, responding to basic needs and helping to create a more just and compassionate world. <http://laymissioners.maryknoll.org/>

Holy Land Trust (HLT) is a Palestinian not-for-profit organization established in Bethlehem in 1998 to promote and support the Palestinian community in its struggle on two fronts: firstly, to achieve political independence by supporting the Palestinian community in developing nonviolent approaches to resistance with a view to ending the Occupation; and secondly, to assist in building an independent Palestine that is founded on the principles of nonviolence, democracy, respect for human rights and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

## **Muslim**

The Muslim Peace Fellowship (MPF) was founded to permit isolated Muslims with a deep personal commitment to nonviolence and harmony to locate each other and exchange views, to search out Muslim individuals and groups already involved in peace and justice work and make their efforts more visible in the larger community and the media, and to provide training in nonviolent conflict resolution. <http://www.mpfweb.org>

## **Buddhist**

The mission of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), founded in 1978, is to serve as a catalyst for socially engaged Buddhism. BPF's programs, publications, and practice groups link Buddhist teachings of wisdom and compassion with progressive social change. <http://www.bpf.org/html/home.html>

Zen Peacemakers are individuals, groups and organizations dedicated to realizing and actualizing the interconnectedness of life. The effects of Zen practice unfolds in the

meditation halls, at work, within families and within community.  
[www.zenpeacemakers.org](http://www.zenpeacemakers.org)

### **Quaker**

The American Friends Service Committee carries out service, development, social justice, and peace programs throughout the world. Founded by Quakers in 1917 to provide conscientious objectors with an opportunity to aid civilian war victims, AFSC's work is based on the Quaker belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice. [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org)

For a more complete listing of religious peace organizations, see the following page on the Fellowship of Reconciliation website: <http://www.forusa.org/rpf/default.html>