

The Challenge of the Decade

Civic Groups, Campuses and Congregations - Organizing Around the Decade in Texas *By Brenda Hardt*

A memory almost 50 years old surfaced March 26, 2002 as I participated in the Launching of the *2001-2010 Decade of Building a Culture of Peace & Nonviolence for the Children of the World* in Brenham, Texas, population 13,000. Before me stood 4 small children under the age of 5 singing “Teaching Peace” to the assembled crowd. These little ones then instructed us (words plus hand signs) in the Pledge of Nonviolence.* They had been in another room during the keynote address doing peace activities and learning songs and signs. I thought back when I was their age being taught in preschool the words “Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.” This is my first known memory of a vision of peace brought to me through music about children like me -- yet not like me--, but all given special gifts and graces that make them of infinite worth and to be gently cared for. That song laid down the first layer in the peace-soil of my heart that has nurtured a lifetime of yearning for a world that renounces violence.

My wish for the little ones who sang so boldly that night about peace is for the seed of peace that was planted in them to be just as boldly nurtured by their community—their homes, their schools, the media channels that reach their minds. When one looks in the smiling faces of these little ones, it is truly a profound and reasonable proposal that Herman Will makes when he calls for the removal of all children from a country before war can be declared on that country. What is even more profound and reasonable is for mothers the world over to give birth to children who will ask “What was war?”

You may be wondering how this global Decade of Nonviolence initiative reached the small town of Brenham, Texas, better known for its world famous ice cream than for peace activism.

Well, in February 2001, the Texas Conference of Churches (TCC) held its annual meeting in Austin, and a Presbyterian group introduced a resolution to the TCC assembly asking that all the Christian denominations represented there endorse the Decade and become active promoters of nonviolence. It passed unanimously. I wrote a similar resolution which was unanimously passed by the Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church on May 29, 2001. Funds from the Peace With Justice offering, taken each year in the United Methodist Church, allow for the distribution of promotional and educational materials about the principles of peace and nonviolence. These caught the attention of Blinn College math teacher and Baha’I Club sponsor, Karen Anglin, and knowledge of the UN Decade was quickly spread to other campus clubs and local leaders. A group of peace advocates in the Houston area has also picked up the UN Decade as a tool for nonviolence education and has formed a “promotion team” called “Decade of Nonviolence-Houston” complete with a Leadership Council of local leaders including Houston’s Mayor Lee Brown. Their website is www.decadeofnonviolence-houston.org.

In both cities, individuals and organizations are being challenged to prioritize social, emotional, and ethical learning, to respond to the UN Decade priority: peace through peace education. Violence (behavior that dominates, diminishes, or destroys ourselves or others) must be defeated. The message must be “Peace is Possible.” Specific outcomes of promoting the Decade in Houston include “Peace Facilitator Workshops” held for educators that demonstrate respect, better communication, cooperative problem solving and empathy building. Diann & Jim Rockwood (peaceonthemove@attbi.com) facilitated these ASAP2 (All Schools At Peace As Soon As Possible) workshops held in March. The elementary school where artist and PTA member, Shelly Shanks, sends her children has endorsed the UN Decade and added an after-school art for peace project. Five diverse high school-based peace groups that did not know of the existence of each other came together for some exploratory dialogue about increasing effectiveness by waging peace together. A study circle on nonviolence is starting up. (www.wagepeace.org). Displays on the Decade and the “Wall of Hope/Nonviolence throughout history” display are now being exhibited on several college campuses.

The Decade initiative is proving to be an effective way to replace some of the emphasis on violence with an emphasis on peace. With 75,000,000 hearts world-wide (see www.nobelweb.org) ready to discover ways each of us can wage peace, there is great hope. There are songs of peace for us to sing; there are true stories of peacemaking heroes (such as the Nobel Peace Laureates) for us to teach to children; there are magazines of inspiration and cultural awareness such as “Teaching Tolerance” for us to place in doctor office waiting rooms. We can all find a child to offer to pull away from the TV which might as well be an acronym for “Transmits Violence”.

By encouraging every citizen and organization to respond to the *UN Decade for Building A Culture of Peace and Nonviolence*, we are again spreading the message of my hero, Eleanor Roosevelt, who said: “For it is not enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it is not enough to believe in it. One must work at it”. Are you ready? The precious children are waiting for you to plant the seeds of peace in their hearts.

- The Pledge of Nonviolence is available in 13 languages at www.ipj-ppj.org)

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