

THE DECADE CHALLENGE

A City Resolves to Build a Culture of Peace

by Janet Chisholm

What is our vision for future peace and justice movements in this country? Will they be successful if they remain as small as they are today? In his acclaimed new book, *Doing Democracy*, Bill Moyer warns that social movements will be “self-destructive to the extent that they are defined as rebellious, on the fringes of society, and in opposition to the society’s cherished core social values, symbols, rituals, beliefs, and principles.” He offers advice based on 40 years of analyses, organizing, consulting and participation in social movements. The central task of all social movements, he writes, is “...to win the hearts, minds and support of the majority of the populace. Because it is the people who ultimately hold the power, they will either preserve the status quo or create change.” Building a majority movement, according to Moyer, means from the beginning we must empower people to exercise their collective power. And we must ally with activists who play different, yet critical, roles if a social movement is to progress through all developmental stages successfully.

Judith Stoutland and other citizens of Northfield, Minnesota, are helping to lay the groundwork for a nonviolent people’s movement in their own community. Their focus is on increasing awareness and understanding of active nonviolence, starting with constructive nonviolence, or the building of a culture of peace. On May 20, 2002, their organizing of various local groups and individuals led to a City Council resolution supporting the Nobel Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence for the Children of the World. The city resolved “...to make it a priority to teach and practice nonviolence, making use of resources from the community and organizations associated with observing the Decade.” Now there is an identified core group that can collaborate and there are agreed guidelines for affirming and fostering local initiatives when the inevitable controversies, conflicts and struggles for justice arise.

Recently Judith described for me how the resolution came about and her hopes for the future.

JC: What inspired you to get involved with the Decade movement to build a culture of nonviolence?

JS: My interest in nonviolent resolution of conflict and my concern for the increasing violence and destruction in the world which is devastating to children goes back many years. The Nobel Laureates’ Appeal for a culture of peace and nonviolence was a catalyst for action worldwide--and also for me personally. It spoke to my concerns. As a Lutheran, I benefited from ELCA’s (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) official support for the Decade, which brought both materials and encouragement, and, of course, from the leadership of the Lutheran Peace Fellowship and FOR.

JC: You told me that Candace Lutt, an FOR National Council member who lives in Northfield, was helpful in organizing support. She is the one who arranged for me to talk with a wide variety of Northfield groups and individuals about the Decade and active nonviolence. She wrote many letters of invitation and posted notices all over the town. In early April she coordinated my meetings with parents, teachers, social service workers, college students, peace groups, and members of faith communities. By the last day of my stay, I met with you and representatives from many of these groups to discuss action that would support the Decade.

JS: Yes, I think this kind of organizing developed a broader base for the initial effort, increased interest in nonviolence, and gave encouragement to those who felt they had been working alone in their corners of the community.

JC: What led you to work on a resolution for city council?

JS: The City of Northfield signed onto the U.N. Manifesto for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence in 2000. After your visit, in late April of this year, I became aware that the Manifesto related to only the one year of preparation prior to the Decade, and support for it did mean automatic carryover to the Decade itself. Candace alerted me that the Manifesto was no longer mentioned on our city web page. Feeling we were already behind (this is Year 2 of the Decade), we wanted to move as quickly as possible to get things going. Also, annual planning sessions for many groups in the city were coming up soon, so we wanted to get on their agenda. I was eager to have as many people as possible involved, so I called the list of persons who attended your last Saturday session in April, Janet, and got good responses. I also called others who are active in peace and justice work for suggestions of other groups that should be asked and included. Rebecca Bazan who chairs the Northfield Human Rights Commission was able to help in the mobilization of individuals and groups in the broader Northfield community.

JC: What groups signed on?

JS: We contacted everyone who was suggested and had an overwhelming response--with signatures of support representing 26 groups and 70 individuals. I was especially pleased that the Superintendent of Schools signed on, that the regional Girl Scout Council and the Boy Scout Council joined (I encouraged the rep to send this on to BSA--the national council--also), and also a 4-H group. These groups work so directly with young people over long periods of time, so I think the youth will be involved in many ways. Other supporters included the League of Women Voters, St. Olaf College, the Family Education Center, the Special Olympics, the Domestic Abuse Prevention Program and several faith communities.

JC: Was there newspaper coverage of the resolution's passing?

JS: The Resolution got no coverage in the news for a week; all the space allotted to City Council activity was taken up with other issues. Finally, the paper published a letter I sent in to thank the Council and to alert the community to the Resolution. We will get the Resolution published and put it and the Decade logo up on the city's web page.

JC: What do you think will change in Northfield as a result of passing the Resolution?

JS: We are spreading the message in a yeast kind of way. We feel many appropriate, constructive nonviolent actions are already in motion and support the Decade; therefore, our intent is to encourage this work and to keep up with what is going on. The Health Community Initiative focuses on how we care for our children. The Brownies are gathering donations for the food shelf. Our middle school organizes group exercise for an American child fund. Wings is a group of women investing in a foundation for local projects. And there are many more examples. We will encourage groups that endorse the Decade resolution to highlight it on their web pages and to use the logo on stationery and newsletters. There will be lots of stickers, pens and pencils with slogans like "Peace is in Our Hands." I am preparing a binder full of reference materials for our town library. And we hope to establish an email network where people can explore possible actions and activities and see what others are doing. We will have a presence at the Youth Activities Fair the end of August with materials especially designed to raise awareness and items for them to take home as reminders. My own church, St. John's Lutheran, will continue to develop its Decade work through parish education planning, a web site, peace and justice committee, and special brochure. It will be important for us to keep in touch with those who signed the petition for the Resolution to see what they are planning and to coordinate with them. I hope we have begun to create a group (however loosely organized) that will hold steady and firm, working together in the future. We will be developing other ways to keep the Decade 'visible' and increase the understanding and commitment to nonviolent action. July 2002

Let us know if your city passes a Decade resolution, too. More information on the Decade is available on these web sites: www.ci.northfield.mn.us, www.unesco.org/cp, www.nobelweb.org and www.forusa.org