

# Teaching Social Justice through the Lives of Peacemakers

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## ABSTRACT:

From Alexander the Great to Napoleon, the world celebrates history's war makers. By contrast, religious educators have the duty to popularize and promote the work of peacemakers and agents of social change. Through this work, their students can be inspired to become peacemakers themselves, and to deepen their own spiritual development in the process. In this paper, the best practices and projects of several practitioners in Catholic high school and university settings are surveyed, including peacemaker research assignments, and a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate module. Additionally, coursework designed to transform young people into prophets and instruments of peace are presented.

In *I'd Rather Teach Peace*, writer and peace educator Colman McCarthy recounts how he routinely begins courses and conferences with a six question quiz. He holds up a one hundred dollar bill and offers it to whoever can identify all of the following six people: Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Norman Schwarzkopf, Jeannette Rankin, Dorothy Day, and Jody Williams. The first three—all generals—pose no problem for his audiences. Rarely, however, has anyone heard of the last three: the peacemakers. McCarthy writes, "I've done this one-hundred-dollar-bill quiz hundreds of times, before students in classrooms, before students in large assemblies, and before large audiences of educators. No one's ever won the one hundred dollars. It's safe money" (15). By peacemakers, McCarthy means individuals who have worked to nonviolently seek resolution to conflicts. These individuals embody the highest values of most major religions and provide exemplars that religious educators can use to teach social justice. McCarthy's technique vividly illustrates a wide gap in knowledge of social justice and its agents among American students and educators. This ignorance might be termed social justice illiteracy

In addition to the problem of students' lack of familiarity with peacemakers, the complexity and enormity of social issues can lead students to despair of ever effecting change themselves. Through studying peacemakers, students are exposed to agents of change as models for overcoming conflict and systems of oppression. These individuals are a human exemplification of social movements. This paper explores ways that religious educators can raise awareness of social justice through examining the lives of peacemakers.

Research for this paper came from surveying and interviewing religious educators with a focus on best practices. Interviewees were Catholic high school, university, and seminary educators in Kentucky, Indiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Georgia, and their responses are woven throughout this paper. Most of the educators stressed the importance of peacemakers in their curriculum. One high school teacher wrote, "Young men and women *need* living examples of those who work for peace and justice" (Berghausen survey), while another teacher said that it is essential to include "witnesses" in a Catholic Social Teaching course, because they are "the

living embodiment of Catholic Social Teaching” (*ibid*). Milburn Thompson, a professor at Bellarmine University, who has written and taught extensively about peace education and social justice, writes, “When I integrate the biographies of justice seekers and peacemakers into my courses, I have been surprised again and again by the power of the story to transform lives” (2).

Focusing on the stories of the individual lives of peacemakers could be seen as a form of narrative theology, or perhaps “biographical theology”—a way to illustrate religious concepts through storytelling. As theologian Ched Myers put it, “the vision of social justice is best articulated through stories that have the marginalized as their subject and that present hard questions to those at the center of power — stories like the ones Jesus of Nazareth told” (45). Jesus is a potent model of storyteller-peacemaker. He spun parables of seemingly ordinary events that concluded with radical reversals that upset the expectations of listeners. His life, set against Jewish messianic expectations of a conquer-king, ended with a similarly stunning reversal. Thompson sees such stories as an antidote to overly systematizing theology: “[Jesus] didn’t present doctrines or creeds—he was a story and he told a story. Since then we’ve done the opposite. We need to get back to that [telling and being of a narrative]” (Welp 11).

Thompson himself puts this recommendation to teach through narrative into practice through a seminar called “Peacemakers and Justice Seekers” that takes a purely biographical approach to social justice. Each student is required to research and deliver a formal presentation about a peacemaker. Often, the study of the lives of past and present peacemakers has a profoundly transformative effect on students. Thompson recounted how one young man, who had been studying the life of St. Francis of Assisi, developed a friendship with a homeless man at a coffee shop. The student learned that the man’s backpack had fallen apart, so, unprompted, he got his friend a new one and filled it with things that he might need. The student credited his relationship and act of charity to studying about St. Francis. The student reflected that if he had completely gotten into the Franciscan spirit, he would and should have given him his car!

The author has also experimented with teaching peacemaking over the past decade and has found it to be a powerful pedagogical tool. One result has been a long unit on peace and war in a Social Justice course that culminates in a peacemaker research project. This project introduces students to the life and struggles of an individual peacemaker, focusing on their contributions and context. Class activities include discussion of what makes a peacemaker and what criteria should be used in defining their attributes. Students choose a person to research, and evaluate him or her against the criteria. This process can clarify why certain people, celebrity activists, for example, may not meet the definition of peacemakers. The thesis of the student research papers then argues for or against a person being a peacemaker.

A key to this the success of this research assignment is carefully choosing peacemakers for students to explore. This author has developed a list of 200 peacemakers appropriate for research projects. Such a substantial list allows students to pick a person whose work on a social issue matches their interests and also allows each student to research a *different* peacemaker, even across multiple teaching sections. Because many peacemakers may be relatively unknown or unrecognized—some like China’s “Tank Man,” may even be nameless—it is crucial to identify and acquire appropriate resources for students to use. Thompson, for example, indicates on his sign-up sheets whether an individual has a biography or autobiography in English written about them.

An alternative to the biographical approach is a Nobel Peace Prize approach. The author has created a course on the Nobel Peace Prize with a focus on the process of awarding the prize and upon the laureates. This method of teaching peacemaking has several advantages. It employs the most recognizable and respected international award, given “to those who...have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind” (in the language of Alfred Nobel’s will). Laureates include a grand mix: titans of peacemaking and many worthies who might have otherwise been unremembered; controversial choices and stunning omissions like Gandhi and Eleanor Roosevelt. The prize itself is also not tied to a religious tradition, which can make it both more accessible and universal to students.

In this course, in addition to learning about peacemaking through the lives of laureates, students study the process of nomination, selection, and awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize. They then replicate this cycle by nominating a modern-day peacemaker for the prize. They pattern their nomination letters on examples of nominations for past laureates. Students present their nominees to the class and the class, following the model of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, selects a class prize recipient

This course is designed to be taught in the fall so that after students’ decide on a class Nobel laureate, they can watch the announcement of the winner of that year’s Nobel Peace Prize on the second Friday in October. On the day of the announcement, the class watches the live broadcast (if possible in an organized class watch party) to see who the Norwegian Nobel Committee has selected for the year. This cycle builds excitement, speculation, and engagement in the award process. The module could also include the laureate’s Nobel lecture on December 10<sup>th</sup>.

It is also possible to teach peacemaking *without* dedicating a large portion of a course to peacemakers’ biographies. Instead, peacemakers’ stories can illustrate religious concepts throughout religious courses. High school teacher Dustin Hungerford wrote, “I attempt to weave the lives and teachings of specific peacemakers and justice seekers around the more doctrinal elements of my curriculum, specifically concerning life issues” (Berghausen survey). Other educators reported teaching extensively about issues of social justice including discrimination, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism/poverty, life issues and environmental justice, all of which are strongly influenced by the work of peacemakers. One survey participant said, “I give real-life examples of people that have worked for that issue area. Specifically, I teach about Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, Matthew Shepherd (and the movements sparked by his death), Sr. Helen Prejean, Oscar Romero, Cesar Chavez, Pier Giorgio Frassati, Pope John Paul II, and Kateri Tekawitha” (*ibid*). Many on this list were frequently cited by Catholic educators. Other popular choices included Maximilian Kolbe, Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, and St. Francis of Assisi.

Sr. Helen Prejean was a particularly popular choice for the purpose of exemplifying a social justice concern. Her story, told through the film and book *Dead Man Walking*, illustrate Catholic concepts of Human Dignity, the Sacredness of Life, and the Seamless White Garment. Several educators surveyed for this paper reported that her story had a powerful effect on students. One wrote, “When we watch *Dead Man Walking*, the students often find they have never tried to imagine a criminal as a true human who may be seeking forgiveness and who may

have the capacity to repent and change their ways. I've had many students change their position on the death penalty because of Sr. Helen Prejean's story" (Berghausen survey).

As a more multidisciplinary approach to peacemaking, some schools have taken the stage version of Sr. Prejean's story and performed it as a part of the Dead Man Walking School Theatre Project. This project is intended as a whole-school program integrating peacemaking across the curriculum, not simply as an extracurricular performance. Assumption High School in Louisville, KY implemented this project, and it developed into an annual social justice theater program called BLOOM, an acronym for Bring Life Onstage/Offstage for Ministry. The kind of storytelling that goes into a play can touch a chord with participants and the audience. Jonathan Anderson, a high school student in Claremont, California described his experience of performing in Dead Man Walking this way, "It really gave me a feel for what these inmates, spiritual counselors, and really any prison staff go through with these kinds of situations... Playing the role of Chaplain Farley made me feel Matt [the victim of capital punishment]'s pain in a very personal sense" (DMW).

Teaching peacemaking can also be used to teach about morality, forgiveness, and grace. Kari Sims, who teaches a high school course on Sacraments, emphasizes the role of forgiveness when she teaches about the sacrament of Reconciliation. She shares with students the story of Simon Wiesenthal from his book *The Sunflower* in which he, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, is asked for forgiveness by a SS member who has murdered a Jewish family. She also uses *As We Forgive*, a documentary and book about the Rwandan reconciliation effort following the genocide. She writes, "I use these people to teach stories of forgiveness and true, unconditional love of neighbor. When I teach about Rwanda the students are amazed at how people can come to a sense of true peace through forgiveness (on both sides)" (Berghausen).

In a class on Hebrew Scriptures, the lives of the prophets can be another powerful tool for teaching peace. The author of this paper has had students research the lives of prophets and the methods that they used. Many of these stories still have the power to shock and fascinate: Ezekiel's street theater (eating bread cooked over dung, lying bedridden, cutting off and burning his hair), Nathan speaking truth to the powerful King David in a poignant parable, Hosea's marriage to a prostitute, and Moses' speech defect. Additionally, learning about the prophetic ability of women (Deborah and Miriam) and children (Samuel) counters the notion of religion being exclusively in the hands of the male and aged.

Through these unusual stories, Students learn that "God's mouthpieces" (the literal meaning of prophet) are unlikely choices for the job, reluctant to do it, and often ignored or persecuted for their message. Prophets demand rulers and the powerful act with justice and they are still at work in the world today. The project culminates in an assignment where students either educate the community about pressing human rights issues or form a social action campaign of some kind. This unit challenges students to see *themselves* as contemporary prophets by answering the call to justice.

Teaching about the lives of peacemakers can pose several challenges. Students frequently distance themselves from justice seekers. As one surveyed teacher put it, "Students have two reactions [to peacemakers]: either 'I wish I could be like that' or 'No one can be that way in the 'real world.' It is tough to overcome these two positions" (Berghausen survey). Often, the most

recognizable peacemakers have become idolized and/or sanitized. For example, Dr. King is remembered solely for civil rights. It is difficult to educate students about the other two planks of his movement (an end to poverty and the war in Vietnam) or to imagine how dangerous King was considered during his time. Mark Kurlansky noted the tendency to ‘purify’ peacemakers after their deaths, writing “a rebel can be defanged and co-opted by making him a saint after he is dead” (183). Many students also prefer to have a simplistic understanding of King that presents little challenge to their way of life, similar to the idealized version of his legacy that they learned in primary school.

One corrective to the problem of students’ lack of identification with well-known or accomplished peacemakers can be focusing more on ordinary examples of peacemaking and conflict resolution, rather than on epic nonviolent action on a national or international scale. For example, high school social justice teacher Angela Lincoln wrote, “I use stories daily to illustrate the practices of peace and justice. Often we reference historical figures like MLK or Gandhi, but more frequently, the stories are from everyday living... I use a lot of stories from my own life...[including] what it was like to adopt a child who suffered abuse for years or to take care of a parent with Alzheimer’s Disease” (Berghausen survey). These stories of the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary, often reach students through their accessibility. The witness of religious educators who live their own message, as Lincoln does, is also potent.

As another alternative to teaching peacemaking through the lives of well-known peacemakers, Thompson teaches a class called Christian Peacemaking in which students learn about strategies of nonviolent conflict resolution from the book *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution* by Mark Juergensmeyer. These techniques can be used on an interpersonal level as effectively as on a large scale. For one assignment, Thompson asks to students to apply these methods to an ongoing conflict in their own life. He has gotten several interesting responses. One student lived with four roommates, one of whom was excessively messy and slovenly. Another lived in an apartment with an unbearable smell that made the place unlivable. The landlord denied that there was any problem. The student used nonviolent methods to get the landlord to acknowledge the smell and they eventually won him over. Students told Thompson that they were more impressed by the practical application of peacemaking than with its theoretical implementation.

Integration of guest speakers, field trips, and service learning can also have a profound effect on peace education. Guest speakers often capture students’ attention in a way that the normal instructor might not. One teacher reported bringing in Igal Roodenko, the one-time War Resisters League president, to speak. According to the teacher, “He had an impact on students because of who he was. He walked the talk. He had gotten arrested in 1947 for trying to integrate the buses in the South and served a year of hard labor as punishment.... They still remember Igal at St. X [high school]. They still haven’t gotten over him.”

Peacemaking can also be enacted through the actions and choices of citizens in the local community through witnessing and participating in service learning. Lincoln takes her students to Just Creations, a fair trade store that describes itself as providing “marketing assistance to low-income craftspeople in the developing world.” While there, students see how fair wages transform people’s lives. Lincoln also takes them to the St. Vincent DePaul center for the homeless to “witness the ways their residents are lifted out of the violence of poverty.” In

Louisville, Service Learning Coordinator Rick Blackwell takes students to the Muhammad Ali Center, an organization established to further Ali's humanitarian mission, and to teach students about advocacy and nonviolent resistance. Through witnessing local centers where peacemaking happens on a daily basis, students connect with the real-world application of peace. Service learning compliments peace education, in effect becoming the laboratory of a social justice course. It allows students to meet both local peacemakers and victims of oppression, and ultimately, to become peacemakers themselves. Thompson said, "Service and stories of peacemakers reinforce one another. Both have magical effects on students. They seem to transform students' lives. They see what social justice and peacemaking means in action—somebody who's actually put it into practice."

In the face of many challenges to social justice education, including unfamiliarity with basic concepts, despair over the scope of justice issues, and reflexive resorts to violence, teaching the lives of peacemakers provides an excellent opportunity for transformative learning. The techniques of teaching through the lives of peacemakers are quite varied, from a full biographical approach to more integrative and multidisciplinary methods. Educators teach stories of the ordinary and the heroic, of dramatic international conflict resolution and small-scale interpersonal mediation. These best practices from religious educators fit a variety of courses and development levels. Their commonality is their focus upon the prism of individuals' lives, a method which can have a profound impact on the lives of students, shaping them into peacemakers and seekers of justice themselves.

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