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Ambassadors of reconciliation

John Dear | Sep. 22, 2009 On the Road to Peace

Ched Myers and Elaine Enns have just published a two volume work, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation* (Orbis Books), a great new resource for peacemakers and justice-workers interested in the latest insights for our struggle. Volume One provides an excellent overview of restorative justice and its connection to Gospel peacemaking. Volume Two profiles nine extraordinary, contemporary Christians from across the spectrum who practice restorative justice and peacemaking full-time, and make a huge difference in the lives of many. Together, these scholarly and readable books offer a new, ground-breaking theology and practice for Christians seeking to understand and live Jesus? way of nonviolence and its application for today.

Ched is known for his breakthrough scripture study, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark?s Story of Jesus*, the best biblical commentary I have ever read. (If you have not read it, get it, study it, and keep it handy. A new 20th anniversary edition from Orbis Books was recently published with an insightful new foreword.) Elaine has spent 20 years in the field of restorative justice and conflict transformation. Together, they work for Bartimaeus Ministries in Oak View, Calif. Friends and heroes of mine, they live what they teach, and inspire many of us.

Ched and Elaine define ?restorative justice and peacemaking? as ?1.) reducing or halting the presenting violence in order that 2.) victims and offenders (as well as their communities and other stakeholders) can collectively identify harms, needs and responsibilities so that 3.) they can determine how to make things as right as possible, which can include covenants of accountability, restitution, reparations, and (ideally) reconciliation.?

In Volume One, Ched and Elaine show how Paul?s admonition to be ?ambassadors of reconciliation? came at a time as violent and divided as our own, and that message needs to be heard in all its urgency again (2 Corinthians 5-6). Then they examine Mark?s account of Jesus? early ministry through the lens of public nonviolent action to show ?why peacemaking must first be peace disturbing.? They use the critical text of Matthew 18 as the church?s process for adjudicating interpersonal violation. Finally, they explore Ephesians? announcement of cosmic reconciliation and the peacemaking power of Christ?s cross as the guiding vision for our work. Martin Luther King?s story and theology weave through these reflections text to show us how these texts might be lived today. This is a book I will return to for years to come.

Volume Two begins with a review of Dom Helder Camara?s ?spiral of violence? as a way to understand the ?epidemic of violence that plagues our world.? They discuss the lack of communication and collaboration between various branches of the peace community and propose a model of ?full-spectrum peacemaking,? noting the crucial need to be ever-attentive to issues of race, gender, class difference and power.

The heart of Volume Two, and the culmination of their work, is the testimony they have gathered from nine North American Christians who represent diverse expressions of restorative justice and peacemaking. ?These ordinary people doing extraordinary work,? they write, ?come from different denominational backgrounds, diverse geographical and generational contexts, and represent distinct modes of nonviolent engagement for justice and peace.?

Harley Eagle, a restorative justice practitioner from the Wapaha Ska Dakota First Nations Reserve co-coordinates Indigenous work for the Mennonite Central Committee of Canada. His story illustrates the need to understand the various levels of violence, the full spectrum of peacemaking possibilities, and the different factors of social power that subtly influence our work.

Joe Avila works with the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program, one of the key programs in contemporary restorative justice work. VORP brings victims, offenders, their families and support people together in face-to-face meetings, in order to provide an opportunity for accountability, restitution, healing and even forgiveness. Joe was sentenced to twelve years in prison after he killed Amy Wall, a high school girl, in a drunk-driving accident. Since his release, he has given hundreds of talks to prisoners, church people, and youth at risk, and is retained by the traffic division of the Fresno Police to tell his story to help stop the senseless deaths caused by drunk driving. His journey toward healing and reconciliation with the Wall family demonstrates the possibilities of reconciliation.

Marietta Jaeger Lane tells the heart-breaking story of the kidnapping and death of her little girl during a family vacation in Montana, and her ongoing work to abolish the death penalty. Through her talks and projects with Murder Victims? Families for Reconciliation, Marietta has become one of the most inspiring people in the nation. I have known Marietta for more than 20 years. Her story still breaks my heart and her faith and commitment still inspires my own. Her testimony alone is reason to get this book.

Myrna Bethke lost her brother in the September 11th attacks. But instead of seeking vengeance, she joined ?September Eleventh Families for Peaceful Tomorrows,? and set out on a journey to Afghanistan to stand with the victims of U.S. terrorism. A Methodist minister in New Jersey, her journey toward reconciliation led her to work with the Shiite mosque in her local community.

Jim Loney was one of four members of the Christian Peacemaker Teams kidnapped in Baghdad in 2005. After four months, he and two others were released; Tom Fox, the fourth, was executed. Jim tells his compelling story of captivity, suffering, and faith, and in doing so, pushes us to a deeper, more engaged nonviolence.

Elizabeth McAlister of Jonah House dedicates her time to the abolition of war and nuclear weapons through regular acts of nonviolent resistance, including civil disobedience, often at the White House and the Pentagon. ?We all need to see ourselves as instruments of nonviolent resistance, to keep the spirit of disarmament alive,? she says. Her journey has inspired many of us to work for disarmament, and her testimony here shows how Gospel nonviolence can be lived in the face empire.

Murphy Davis co-founded the Open Door Community in Atlanta, with her husband, Eduard Loring, to serve the homeless poor and those on death row, and to advocate for justice and nonviolence. A powerful preacher, she has been fighting cancer for over fourteen years now. She is contemporary Dorothy Day. ?As disciples of the Jesus who dismantles every wall that divides, Liz McAlister and Murphy Davis embrace solidarity with those targeted by state violence, and nonviolently confront institutionalized death-dealing with the fierce love of Christ,? the authors write.

Lawrence Hart is a Cheyenne elder and Mennonite pastor in Oklahoma who has worked tirelessly to preserve Cheyenne culture, history and tradition. As ?a peace chief,? he has worked to rebury the remains of Native Americans in respectful, honored places, and in the process, taught us about our bloody history and opened up new paths to justice and reconciliation.

Nelson Johnson is the leader of the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation project, the first such effort in the United States. On Nov. 3, 1979, he and other labor organizers were preparing a legal rally through a working-class black neighborhood in Greensboro, N.C., when a caravan of nine cars carrying Ku Klux Klan and

American Nazi Party members drove toward them, pulled out weapons and opened fire, killing five people, and wounding 10 others, including Nelson. I was a college student in nearby Durham at the time, and remember the event vividly. Through his amazing journey and desire to serve the people of Greensboro, he launched a community reconciliation project in 2001. In 2006, a 529 page report with all its findings and recommendations was released. In his support for their work, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, ?Unless Truth and Reconciliation Commissions occur on a mass scale in the U.S., this wonderful nation is on the road to destruction, given its international conduct and behavior.?

?The church has to embody a new way of being that centers on compassion and human equality,? Nelson concludes. ?With creativity and imagination, the church must join with others in mobilizing to reclaim the non-dominating power that transforms society. ? I am convinced that only deep movements of faith and justice can hope to redirect this nation, which is so deeply divided over race, crippled by economic exploitation, far down the track of an awful war, and engaged in fierce self-delusion about its place in the world. The price we and the world pay for this hubris is so high. People of faith must rise to the task.?

These lively testimonies, the authors conclude, ?individually and together, make it difficult to dismiss the biblical vision as hopelessly idealistic.? Marietta, Liz, Murphy, and Jim Looney are all friends and heroes of mine, and I can testify that their lives point the way forward for all of us. Both volumes of Ambassadors of Reconciliation offer fresh wisdom and encouragement to rebuild and widen the many Christian movements for restorative justice and peacemaking. Read them and you will be reenergized to be a better ambassador of reconciliation.

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John Dear will speak on Sept. 29th at St. Louis University during that school's week-long activities to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the Jesuit martyrs of El Salvador. Dear's latest books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down the Sword*, along with Patricia Normile?s *John Dear On Peace* are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, see: www.johndear.org.

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