



Contributed by Gene Knudsen Hoffman
as Chapter 2 of *Turning Toward Life*

If we are truly committed to the work of peacemaking, eventually we come up against a hard truth -- our goal is not immediately at hand. Part of this awakening comes when we see that working for peace is not separate from working for justice, or human rights, or protection of the earth. The deeper we delve into peacemaking, the greater is our task.

To be peacemakers, then, we must be “in for the long haul.” We must learn how to sustain ourselves, so that our work can be fruitful over an extended period of time -- even a lifetime. One of the essential ingredients for such longevity is the support of other people.

We need a place where we can get emotional and spiritual support for the personal struggles which arise in our peace and justice work. We need mutual consultants, who help to create compelling visions and bring them into concrete form. We need allies with whom we have formed passionate bonds.

New social forms have recently emerged for this purpose. Sometimes they are called “support groups,” or “affinity groups.” They can exist over many years, or they maybe formed just for a specific project or action. They may meet only once a month, or even less frequently, or they may meet every week. Depending on the situation, they may even meet every day, or live together for a time.

In the liberation movements of Latin America, a particular type of ongoing support group has sprung up, known as “base community” (or in Spanish, *comunidad del base*). In these base communities there is a very strong focus on spiritual resources as a powerful foundation for extended commitment to political action. In the Latin American context, such communities have a Christian orientation, since this is the background of the people, and of their culture. This is true also in the Philippines, where base communities played an important role in the nonviolent revolution which ousted the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos.

Gene Knudsen-Hoffman, a longtime peacemaker and member of the Interhelp network, believes that base communities could also be a significant contribution to building peace communities in the United States. This booklet suggests one possible way to begin building a Spiritual Base community in your city or town.

What follows, then, is a suggested structure. Please take what you like, use it well, and leave the rest. Perhaps you will even create something different, something all your own. The important thing is that you find ways to strengthen the bonds which connect you to others, and to the deeper mystery and spirit of life. This booklet offers a valuable resource toward that goal.

Building community is the essence of peacemaking in our time. It means going beyond the culture of individualism and atomization. It means recovering the human connections we have lost with the rise of the nuclear family, social mobility and transiency, and the shopping mall/automobile society.

As we create and nurture community in small groups, right where we live and work, we will not only make our efforts for change more effective, but we will also start bringing into being the world for which we so dearly long.

Kevin McVeigh
National Coordinator
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Why Spiritual Base Communities?

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Some of us feel that our temporal resources are not enough to cope with the needs of today. We experience burnout, blocks to our creativity, and despair, if we rely solely on temporal resources.

Some of us believe we have found an energy, a healing force, in the universe and in ourselves, to which we can repair. It is referred to by many names: life-force, God, energy, the light, the holy spirit, an informing presence. Some of us find that we can open ourselves to this power, if we choose, and when we do, new visions, new answers, and new solutions come to us. We, in turn, are energized and encouraged by others who share this view and affirm our new perceptions. We find that we need this exchange and support from one another to keep our sanity.

In Latin America and in the Philippines, people have gathered together in Christian base communities for these very purposes. These communities have been fountains of hope, inspiration and energy; creative ground for new experiments in transformation; and the hub and the wheel of nonviolent revolution.

Many of us yearn for such connectedness here in the U.S.A., where we, too, are faced with the need for profound transformation of ourselves and our society. Therefore, this outline for possible processes, in harmony with our variety of faiths, or with no traditional faith, is offered here.

A Way To Begin

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If we are seekers for such a community, one way to find others is to express our need to people to whom we feel drawn, to learn whether they share this need. The next step is to take the initiative to gather together those interested and test the possibility of creating such a community. This could be with anywhere from six to twelve people; it is recommended they be no more than twelve. The next step is to come to know one another. One way to get this knowledge is through sharing parts of our histories and hopes.

Below are suggested outlines for seven “Getting to know one another” sessions. (They are simply that, suggested outlines. Other questions may be more appropriate for your group. However, the process is *highly recommended*.) The process is sometimes called “Creative Listening,” though it goes by other names as well. In it, each

person speaks as she/he feels moved to. There can be a time limit for each speaker. No one speaks twice until everyone has been heard. There is no cross-talk; nobody asks any speaker questions during the session or comments on what has been said. Each person speaks *to the question*. The rest listen with full attention.

The convenor (this role rotates in the group) should answer the first question to set a tone for other answers. In addition, a time-keeper may be needed.

I. Spiritual Histories

1. What was your religious background, if any? What sort of religious or spiritual activities, if any, took place in your home when you were a child? What meaning did they have for you?
2. Can you describe a personal emotional or spiritual experience which represented a turning point in your life?
3. How do you meet your religious/spiritual needs today?
4. What are your present resources in time of trouble?
5. Can you describe a time you had a mystical experience or felt “God” in your life?

Dialogue Time: The group may now seek to determine if they want to commit themselves to a spiritual practice (including kind, frequency, place).

II. Nonviolence

1. What is your definition of nonviolence?
2. Can you describe a nonviolent act (from your life or another’s) which appealed to you?
3. Can you give an example of someone caring for an adversary, even while being treated violently by her/him?

4. Can you describe a way *you* have invited the good and allowed it to unfold from a person who has, or might, harm you?
5. Describe a way you might express concern for the oppressor as you work for justice with (choose one) the Soviets, the people in Nicaragua, the people in the Pentagon war-room, or other.
6. Put yourself in a situation where violence is coming at you. How might you feel and respond? What would help you to remain nonviolent?

Dialogue Time: The group could share insights about nonviolence and how the group might use it.

III. Educational History

1. Describe your educational experience in or out of schools.
2. What were you educated to do? How do you feel about that?
3. What kind of further education would you like to have?

Dialogue Time: If you were to teach something to the group, what would it be?

IV. Political History

1. What kinds of political action have you participated in?
2. What do you feel was the most effective?
3. What do you feel was the least effective?
4. What kind of political action do you feel is suited to today?

Dialogue Time: Discuss possible political action for the group.

V. Work History

1. How did you earn your first dollar?
2. Describe kinds of work you have done?
3. What work do you feel most qualified for?
4. What are your secret wishes regarding work?
5. What particular skills and interests do you have?

Dialogue Time: Share perceptions of work you might do together, or for one another.

VI. Psychological History

1. Have there been periods of psychological disturbance in your life? Can you briefly describe them/it?
2. What did you do about them/it?
3. What kind of care, if any, do you feel most comfortable with (therapies, support groups, one-on-one counseling, other)?
4. Do you know of problem areas in your life? Can you describe them/it?
5. Do you have any guideline for dealing with your problem(s)?

Dialogue Time: Brainstorm on ways the group members could support one another psychologically.

Consider topics for possible ongoing meetings, to continue learning about yourself and one another. Take a topic at each meeting and describe how you cope with it. As in the 12-step programs (AA, Al-Anon, etc.), the most helpful thing you can do is share your “experience, strength and hope.”

Possible topics:

Loneliness	Distance	Fear
Jealousy	Anger	Resentment
Intimacy	Grief	Judgment

VII. Home Life History

1. Describe the home of your childhood: where **it** was, what **it** looked like, what **it** felt like, who lived there.
2. What habits were encouraged there (such as neatness, cleanliness, discussing one another, promptness, refraining from criticism, other)?
3. How do you feel about such early training? How have you changed?
4. What is important for you in your home now?

Dialogue Time: How can you integrate such varied backgrounds into your community? How can you meet its varied needs?

VIII. Fun History

1. What's fun for you?
2. What brings you pleasure?
3. What do you like to share?

Dialogue Time: Describe ways you need to have fun, relaxation, and recreation, and learn what you might be able to expect from the group.

At the end of the coming-to-know-one-another session, those who want to experiment in community can move on to deciding how often to meet; what needs can be served; how to inspire one another; and what creative action you might want to take.

Recommendations from the Past

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In 1947, the Quaker writer and teacher Douglas Steere wrote a little pamphlet called "Cells for Peace." He had suggestions for small groupings of concerned people, which seem to fit in here. They are worth repeating:

1. The groups should be made up of those committed to active nonviolence. Not all will be at the same level, but some commitment is necessary.
2. If possible, the groups should consist of a broad age range and, of course, should include both men and women.
3. Once-a-week meetings are highly recommended. Soon after the group is organized, a weekend retreat with all members is important. Thereafter, such a retreat could take place twice a year. Of course, the question comes up: Where is time to be found in our busy lives? If we really believe that peace must become our "way of life," there is no doubt that we can revise our priorities and make the time.
4. The groups offer a fine opportunity for reading and discussion of the best materials written on peace and nonviolence, but it shouldn't confine itself narrowly to peace literature or it will suffer malnutrition.
5. Since we're talking about Spiritual Base Communities, it is logical that there be some form of spiritual practice. This might take the form of silent meditation, sharing passages from books that have been meaningful, or whatever the group finds meets its unique needs. Helpful also is some daily spiritual observance for each member.
6. If the group does manual work together, they won't lose touch with the elemental roots of life. Some possibilities might be: creating a community vegetable garden, taking first-aid training or improving the neighborhood.
7. On the agenda should be the group's decision to engage in active nonviolence within its own community, as needs arise. It can be a vigilant guardian of the rights of the underprivileged and oppressed. Hopefully, it will be at its reconciling work before things turn desperate. And, of course, all action taken by the group is based on unity or consensus.

DIFFERENCES CONFLICT CAREFRONTING

RESOLUTION RECONCILIATION

After working in the peace movement for over thirty-five years, I believe the chief obstacle to creating such a community is conflict which never becomes resolved.

There appears to be a deep fear of exposing differences, and admitting to conflict. The admission of differences and conflict shakes our comfortable assumptions. How often do we stay with the hurtful familiar instead of daring the unfamiliar which feels more threatening? A common response to feeling hurt, rejected or ignored is continuing in an uncomfortable denial, doggedly proceeding without resolution, stuffing feelings, seeking to make things right by being "nice." Or again, we might pursue confrontation and truth without being aware of the other's response or condition. Allaying anxiety by quick forgiveness, and denying the unresolved issues, is far from unusual.

I have come to wonder if this behavior relates to terrorists. It seems people become terrorists when they feel they will never be heard; their grievances will never be addressed. Desire to punish and harm when grievances are denied, when we do not receive respectful attention is a natural response. Often we peace people are so disturbed by our anger that we refuse to acknowledge it in ourselves and instead try to appease. It doesn't work.

While our first responsibility is to patiently seek to change ourselves, and to deepen our understanding of our experience, processes for prevention are essential. Methods for listening, coming to resolution, and seeking reconciliation are desperately needed. What might these be?

When we have those first intimations of differences, discontent, dissension, or resentment, we must honor them. We must not discard them as mean, petty, or shameful. These are messages telling us something is awry, and we must look at it.

If we cannot resolve the difficulty alone, and if it keeps troubling us, then it is time to share it with a trusted other, to try to clarify our perceptions. This means we want to look at an unpleasant, possibly unwelcome perception; we do not want to act on it. (Everyone in a group has the potential for becoming such an “other,” a non-judgmental person.)

After the difficulty is thus seasoned, and if we feel it is necessary to carry it to the person or persons with whom we have it, this should be done with “carefronting,” respecting both the giver and the receiver. Usually it is helpful to have a third person present when an unwelcome truth is communicated, enabling the conflicting parties to listen deeply to one another.

If the conflict cannot be resolved by these means, the next step can be to have the mediator meet separately with the conflicting parties, interpreting each to the other. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen master and peacemaker, offers us this prescription:

“Reconciliation is to understand both sides, to go to one side and describe the suffering being endured by the other side, and then to the other side, and describe the suffering being endured by the first side.”

Ultimately, it is to be hoped, the two parties can acknowledge their contributions to the conflict, resolve their differences, and emerge more loving and bonded than before. If this does not happen, then they probably must separate and work individually to forgive and understand the other and themselves.

Conflict resolution, reconciliation, may be the most important focus of our fledgling communities, and the most difficult one. But we, who would be part of this remarkable enterprise — peace — are essentially risk-takers and know that if we share openly with one another and recognize that change and flexibility are our strengths, not our weaknesses, we will move on to new and more compassionate ways of being.

To trust and be trusted, to learn and deepen, to be weak and be renewed, to err and be corrected — this is the stuff of bonding and love. To feel connected, encouraged, of value, with meaning — these are the gifts we can give one another. This is a way to keep our sanity, our hope, and our vision, a way to keep aware of life and beauty in a world which seems to deny it. It may be, perhaps, a way to make peace.

About the Author (1988)

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GENE KNUDSEN-HOFFMAN, from Santa Barbara, California, has been involved in Interhelp for many years. She founded the Santa Barbara Peace and Resource Center, and has also worked with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, where she created the US-USSR Reconciliation Program.

Her earlier years were devoted to theater, and raising seven children. In addition to this, she earned a Masters degree in Pastoral Counseling. Today Gene continues to be an active Quaker, writer, teacher and counselor.

About Interhelp (1988)

INTERHELP is a global network of people who strive to integrate political, emotional and spiritual dimensions in our work for a peaceful and just world. Our programs and projects provide people with an opportunity to share their deepest responses to the dangers which threaten our planet—be they dangers of nuclear holocaust, environmental degeneration, or human oppression.

We aim to enable people to know the power that comes from their interconnectedness with all life and to move beyond powerlessness and numbness, into action. In addition to workshops, trainings, community gatherings, and other programs, Interhelp also provides support and resources for those wishing to organize and facilitate such programs, and for others whose projects share an affinity with our goals and purposes.

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