

A Pebble Thrown Into the Pond

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Glenn Smiley

As every good member knows, the FOR began in Great Britain in 1914, and the American branch came into being in 1915, but, as was true of the Protestant movement from which it sprang, it remained without an identifiable methodology for more than two decades. Then a tiny pebble in the form of a book was thrown into the pond and the resulting ripples and waves have not, even to this day, reached the distant shores of our planet. Surely you jest, one may say, but in my opinion, aside from the actual founding of the organization, the most significant event in the history of the American FOR, and for that matter, the International FOR, at that time, was the publication of a doctoral dissertation, written by Krishnalal Shidharani at Columbia University in the late '30s, entitled *War Without Violence*. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi in India, Shidharani told the fascinating story of *satyagraha*, the power of truth or soul force as practiced by the Mahatma, describing in minute detail the tactical methods of the independence movement in India.

Upon reading the book in 1939, a small number of people in New York City, including A.J. Muste, A. Philip Randolph and John Haynes Holmes met to discuss the book and its possible application to the racial conditions in the United States. Within a year or two of this discussion, the staff of the AFOR (now called FOR-US) had established the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), only one of its many spin-offs. Beginning in Chicago, George Houser, Bayard Rustin and James Farmer, all national staff of FOR, lectured, held workshops and wrote booklets and pamphlets on the Gandhian methods of social change. Groups were soon formed in Denver, St. Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco and elsewhere. Interracial camps were held in the south and on the west coast. Discrimination in theaters, restaurants and swimming pools was challenged, and in spite of sometimes violent resistance, substantial gains were made. I personally par-

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ticipated in the challenge to discrimination in the 350-seat Bullocks downtown Los Angeles tea rooms, where after three and a half months of sit-ins, a complete victory was achieved. There was tumultuous applause in the packed dining room when it happened.

In the meantime, the FOR had produced or accumulated a substantial inventory of books on the subject of non-violence, including the doctoral dissertation, *War Without Violence, Conquest of Violence*, by Joan Bondurant, *The Power of Nonviolence*, by Richard Gregg,



The January 1957 Fellowship cover shows Glenn Smiley (right) sitting with Martin Luther King on the first desegregated bus to roll in Montgomery. Ralph D. Abernathy is at left.

another *Conquest of Violence* by Bart de Ligt, and a scriptural underpinning title, *The New Testament Basis of Pacifism* by Garth McGregor, as well as booklets and pamphlets. Thousands of copies of these were sold at scores of staff workshops, held by the constantly traveling staff.

In this manner, a thin but sturdy line of support was developing across the country, with increasingly more skilled cadres of leaders. Projects involving nonviolent actions speckled the nation, even in the upper south and middle Atlantic, around Washington, D.C. and in the deep south. Suddenly, in June of 1955, a great conflict arose like an explosion over schools in Orangeburg,

South Carolina.

In response to an NAACP boycott of segregated schools, the White Citizens Council declared a boycott of NAACP leaders and everyone who had signed a public petition of support. The NAACP then declared a counter boycott of white merchants who were boycotting the black leaders and their supporters. At the depth of this crisis, the FOR was given the chance to put nonviolence into the ongoing program. When I arrived on the scene, the black boycott had proved so effective that the local Dodge dealer, for one, was almost out of business. Rev. Matthew McCollum, the dedicated leader of the boycott and the NAACP, was to write afterwards: "I do not know what would have happened if FOR had not come to us, but this much I know: Orangeburg would have been a bloody battlefield and I would have been dead."

The first Freedom Ride had passed, jointly planned and executed by FOR with CORE and War Resisters League. The KKK continued to burn its crosses and mutilate the civil rights, and, even more, the bodies of men and women who wanted nothing more than to enjoy the freedom to vote, go to better schools and live in peace and dignity. Then it happened. Rosa Parks, who had been to Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, refused to give up her seat on a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and was arrested and fined. E.D. Nixon and other black leaders met to discuss the arrest. Within a few days the young pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King, Jr., was chosen to lead a bus protest in that city. The boycott of buses by blacks lasted 381 days, ending December 21, 1956.

The FOR was called in by Dr. King, and staff was provided at FOR expense to 1) teach Dr. King Gandhian nonviolence, with which he was not familiar, 2) teach nonviolence to the many black churches of Montgomery, 3) seek help and support among whites of Montgomery, and 4) build a support movement throughout the nation, but primarily in the south. Dr. King, with help from FOR and others, became world renowned as a leader in the nonviolence movement and was called the American Gandhi.

The FOR distributed thousands of copies of books and pamphlets throughout the south, mostly free. It produced a documentary film, *Walk to Freedom*, with the actor Don Murray doing the narration, but its most surprising literary contribution was in response to a request for a popular item to "reach the masses." Alfred Hassler, the editor of *Fellowship* magazine, said: "Do you mean something like a comic book?" whereupon Al Capp produced one for FOR on Martin Luther King and the Montgomery bus boycott to show how nonviolence works. It was rapidly distributed to the general public, but became even more popular in colleges and universities where it was often used in sociology classes as, in the words of a University of Minnesota professor, "the most effective example of a social weapon in existence." Even some newsstands handled it. After Dr. King's assassination it was translated into Spanish in Buenos Aires and, with FOR permission, became a useful tool for JAPLA (*Justica, Action y Paz in Latino America*) an unauthorized spinoff made by me.

The revolutionary successes of Dr. King made him a Latin American hero who was in large part responsible for successful nonviolent projects in Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Argentina, and Brazil, aided by the FOR's Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr, and a most significant convert of the Goss-Mayrs, Dom Helder Camara, Bishop of Northeast Brazil, along with Heberto Sein of Mexico City. The Goss-Mayrs and I held large workshops in Colombia and Mexico, attended by clergy, religious and laypersons, some of them in the lower echelons of government.

Subsequent ocean-leaping movements have involved FOR staff, notably in the Philippines, where Richard Deats, long a professor at Union Theological Seminary near Manila, first organized four week-long nonviolence workshops in 1970, in central Luzon, Mindinas Cavite and Manila, asking me to join him in these efforts. Later Deats, Hildegard Goss-Mayr and others carried on the work that helped to create the bloodless revolution and sustain the early efforts of Cory Aquino when she became president. The task there has just begun.

The FOR has been a presence in Korea, South Africa, the Middle East, Central America and elsewhere. Where will the ripples stop? Only history can tell, and we can only hope that they will go out forever. □