

## **Small Group Ministry Session Lesson Plan**

### **Nonviolence**

**(by Sharon Welch and Jim Nelson)**

#### **IMPORTANT NOTE:**

These SGM topics are a bit different from the ones with which you are most familiar. Right away you'll notice that they are more educational, and contain more material (to be read in advance) than most SGM topics. We included this material as a matter of accessibility --- to provide everyone with a common language base regardless of their background, knowledge base, or access to libraries.

The questions these topics ask may also require more than one SGM meeting to complete. This may not be new to many of you (we've heard about the "Mothers" topic taking six sessions!) We encourage you to take your time and not to rush the material or the topics.

#### **Chalice/Candle Lighting**

##### **Opening words:**

“As the new century begins, no question is more important than whether the world has now embarked on a similar cycle of violence, condemning the twenty-first century to repeat, or even outdo, the bloodshed of the twentieth. . . I contend that, notwithstanding the shock of September 11 and the need to take forceful measures to meet the threat of global terrorism, [that another] path has opened up, and remains open. For in twentieth-century history another, complementary lesson . . . has been emerging. It is that forms of nonviolent action can serve effectively in the place of violence at every level of political affairs. This is the promise of Mohandas K. Gandhi’s resistance to the British Empire in India, of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s civil-rights movement in the United States, of the nonviolent movements in Eastern Europe and in Russia that brought down the Soviet Union, and of the global success of democracy in its long contest with the totalitarian challenge..” Jonathan Schell, The Unconquerable World: Power, Nonviolence and the Will of the People, Metropolitan Books, 2003, pp. 8-9.

#### **Check-in/Sharing**

#### **Discussion**

Jonathan Schell charts the history of nonviolence in the West, and notes both the range of activities encompassed in the term, as well as the intrinsically misleading nature of the word itself.

“‘Nonviolence’ is a word of negative construction, as if the most important thing that could be said about nonviolent action was that it was not something else. . . It’s as if we were obliged to refer to action as ‘non-inaction,’ to hope as ‘none-hopelessness,’ or to faith as ‘non-unbelief.’” (350)

As a solution, Schell proposes “the plain phrase ‘cooperative power,’ as distinct from ‘coercive power,’ and describes the range of activities encompassed by nonviolent action.

### **Questions:**

1. Have you participated in nonviolent movements? Have you studied or witnessed nonviolent movements for social change? Compare the range of activities encompassed within those movements with the list provided by Schell in the following citations. Are there other activities you would include?

“The agenda of a program to build a cooperative world would be to choose and foster cooperative means at every level of political life. At the street level, this would mean choosing *satyagraha* over violent insurrection – the sit-down or general strike or ‘social work’ over the suicide bombing or the attack on the local broadcast station. At the level of the state it would mean choosing democracy over authoritarianism or totalitarianism.....; at the level of international affairs, it would mean choosing negotiation, treaties, and other agreements and institutions over war and, in general, choosing a cooperative, multilateral international system over an imperial one; at the level of biological survival, it would mean choosing nuclear disarmament over the balance of nuclear terror and proliferation. . .The choice at each level is never merely the rejection of violence; it is always at the same time the embrace of its cooperative equivalent.” 351

2. As you consider nonviolent movements that you have known, what were the specific goals of the campaigns? What means were achieved to attain these goals?

3. Compare the goals and means of those nonviolent campaigns with the goals and means as developed by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. What would you add to these?

The goal of nonviolent action/cooperative power is ending injustice by:

- a) enlisting support of others
- b) perpetrators lose moral authority and support
- c) perpetrators see cost of structural and direct violence and choose to change institutions and behaviors.

### **Means**

a) Constant vigilance: In challenging and resisting injustice, do not become that which you resist: “The only devils in the world are those running around in our own hearts. That is where the battle should be fought.” (Gandhi)

Always remember the humanity of the opponent. Avoid violence in thought, word and deed.

b) Expose hidden or denied forms of injustice through active noncooperation with structural violence and direct violence. This requires strategic creativity and innovation, specific strategies geared to bring to light particular forms of violence, i.e. Salt March, sit-ins at lunch counters.

c) Courage – willing to die, but not to kill. Fearlessness and calm under fire.

d) Discipline – take anger and transform it into persistent action. Campaigns often take years and successful actions are usually preceded by intensive training in remaining clear and peaceful when verbally and physically attacked.

4. What is required to sustain participation in a nonviolent campaign? What spiritual practices? What networks of support (i.e. the affinity groups within the Catholic Worker Movement)? What practices of collective mourning and lament? What practices of solidarity and celebration?

### **Concluding words**

”Peace has to be created, in order to be maintained. It is the product of Faith, Strength, Energy, Will, Sympathy, Justice, Imagination, and the triumph of principle. It will never be achieved by passivity and quietism.” Dorothy Thompson