One of our dreams in the Baptist Peace Fellowship is that, one day, every Baptist congregation in North America will have some small group dedicated to educating and mobilizing the congregation on justice and peace issues. These small units are the critical building blocks of an effective, broad-based movement to revive the ministry of reconciliation—to help our people rediscover their calling as peacemakers.

There are two key reasons for focusing attention on such groups. First, small groups are the best way for engaging in strategic peacemaking ministry. It’s an effective way to take very concrete action on any number of peace and justice related issues. Second, these groups can be a place for spiritual discernment and nourishment. We strongly encourage each group to undertake common spiritual disciplines. Shalom cannot be neatly separated into “personal” and “public” dimensions. Few things are more urgently needed than the development of a spirituality of justice.

There is no secret formula for starting and maintaining a group, no easy “one-two-three steps.”Blueprints are for building efficient houses, not effective peacemaking initiatives. There are many variables, some of them unique to your own situation. Use the suggestions below as a checklist to guide your thinking and planning. Many resources are available on our website: bpfna.org.

1. Peacemaker groups almost always originate from three basic ingredients: a dream or vision of shalom, clarified and focused into a specific project initiated by one or two people. Jesus’ parable about the mustard seed is a relevant image to this process.

2. Responsibility for leading the group should be assumed by a layperson. A pastor may be instrumental in stating the dream or helping clarify the project. (And, by all means, he or she should be consulted early in the process of forming the group.) But there is an important kind of “ownership” for the project when directed by lay people. Lay people have more freedom to focus and are not shackled by the restraints that sometimes come with receiving a salary from the church.

3. Clarify and limit your project. Major problems are solved by breaking them down into small pieces. Your group probably won’t halt the arms race, but you could get involved in exploring how military spending impacts your community, for instance. You might not end poverty but you could see to it that members of your congregation are aware of opportunities for

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When you say [something] is impossible, you ought to say, “relative to my present state of ignorance it’s impossible.” — Mortimer Adler

Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s Theory of Relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second law of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. — Martin Luther King Jr.

If you want something really important to be done you must not merely satisfy the reason. You must move the heart also. — Mohandas Gandhi

We know too much, but are convinced of too little. — T.S. Elliot

I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand. — anonymous

Nothing is real until it is local. — G.K. Chesterton

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might. — Ecclesiastes 9:10a

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ministry in your area. Just because you can’t do everything doesn’t mean you can’t do something.

(4) Seek out a community of conviction. Share your dream and plans with others you think might have common concerns. Talk to selected individuals; write up a brief description of what you have in mind and have it published in the church newsletter; or ask permission to have five minutes at the close of a Sunday morning worship service to state your plans, asking those interested in pursuing the matter to meet you around the piano after the benediction. Have a sheet of paper ready for folks to write their names, addresses and phone numbers for further contact. Assure people they’re making no commitments as yet.

(5) Don’t be anxious to get a crowd. One or two other folks besides yourself will do just fine.

(6) Set a date and time for your first meeting as soon as possible. Maybe have a tentative time in mind before you begin signing folks up. Otherwise, plan to spend some time on the phone.

(7) Prepare carefully for that first meeting. Consider both your meeting space and the agenda. Ppare enough comfortable chairs in a circle; make sure everyone has clear range of time for discussion.

(9) Decide on the next step. Your initial meeting may or may not produce a clear consensus, but at the very least don’t close without some agreement as to the next step, even if it’s only to meet again.

(10) Share responsibilities. As soon as you’ve found your working group, start identifying working group, start identifying making sure everyone has clear range of time for discussion.

2. Beware of compassion fatigue. The old-fashioned word is burnout. It comes from working too hard for too long with too little rest. It’s important to keep in mind that compassion fatigue doesn’t happen overnight. It builds over a long period, and it usually has at least two advance symptoms. The first is a loss of a sense of humor. If you find it hard to laugh, to play and to relax, you may be headed for a breakdown. A volunteer in a Third World country got this warning from her colleague: “We are suspicious of those who have no sense of humor,” her co-worker said. “If you cannot take time to laugh, even in the midst of all this misery, then we doubt that you have the patience to stay here very long.”

A second advance symptom of compassion fatigue is a growing sense of resentment. If you find yourself frequently complaining that other people aren’t doing their part, that you’re the only one that really cares, then watch out!

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7. Be bold about the demands of the Gospel, but patient with people. Most of us find it difficult to live with the chasm separating the expectations we have of ourselves and the recurring experiences we have of not living up to those expectations. Ours is truly a high calling; but also a low success rate. We’re tempted to give up on the calling or on the results. That is, we begin to tune down the Bible’s radical challenge to our ways of living, adjusting it to prevailing cultural standards, to more manageable expectations. Or, on the other hand, we become so alienated from any standard of living that people live overfellowship with accusation, judgment and intimidation—that we lack the courage to engage people in genuine dialogue.

In your pastoral work be sure you don’t confuse the integrity of the Gospel with your own agenda. Obviously you will have strong convictions. But always leave room for slippage. Never be too quick to assume that if someone disagrees with you they’re disagreeing with the truth.

Sometimes people with relatively equal levels of commitment, intelligence and education can disagree on how to solve a given problem. In the end we are saved not by our merits but only by grace.

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Pastoral Principles for Prophetic People

Working for peace and justice isn’t easy. We live in a world predicated by greed and violence. Swimming against that stream is hard.

One of the most well-known people who have attempted to “win the world” only to have their own spirits wither, their vision blurred. Maybe not with such tragic drama—they maybe they’ve simply stopped speaking out. Something has come undone in their lives. Maybe it’s happened to you.

Even prophets need pastors.

How do we resist that withering of the spirit? And how do we effectively work with and develop a corps of justice and peace advocates? What follows are 10 pastoral principles for nurturing prophetic impulses in your congregation.

1. Decide where to start, not where to finish.

We sometimes forget that the first key to change is to identify where we want to go. Do we want to act? Do we think we can act? Do we want others to feel safe enough to act?

Most people grow into maturity one step at a time. Most children learn to crawl before they walk, and walk before they run. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself once said: “If you can’t fly, run; if you can’t run, walk; if you can’t walk, crawl.” But by all means keep moving forward.

People tend to start modestly, tend to make small steps and changes and choices and commitments. Don’t disparage such modesty. It is on the basis of such concrete involvements that deeper commitment and analysis can grow. There’s an old proverb that says: “I hear; and I forget; I see; and I remember; I do, and I understand.”

Well-educated people have a tendency, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to “replace simple action with complex thought.” It’s so much easier to take a position than to take action. Pay more attention to where you’re going to concretely invested and worry less about where you’ll eventually end up. The directional road signs come into focus only as you begin to move toward them.

2. Look for a community of conviction.

The most consistent problem we face is the sense of isolation felt by those committed to justice and peace issues. Being a part of a community of conviction functions like a “hothouse” does for plants, providing in much larger doses the kinds of elements necessary for growth in both our understanding and our commitment.

There is also a rhythm to our lives, not unlike the rhythm of seasons. There are times when we are at full operating capacity, running at peak performance. But there are other times when we’re not so fu-el efficient: times when we’re more tired, less enthusiastic, less focused. It’s at these points when a community of conviction can mean the difference between a slowdown and a breakdown.

3. Think globally, act locally.

Thinking globally gives us a fuller picture of cause-and-effect relations. Especially in an increasingly globalizing economy, what happens a long way off has an impact close to home. But global analysis serves little purpose without some corresponding local action. It’s more comfortable for some of us to think globally than it is to act locally.

G.K. Chesterton once said: “Nothing is real until it is local.” In saying that, he wasn’t blessing or justifying this tendency in human nature. He was simply pointing out that’s the way most of us do operate. We usually don’t react until something touches us personally.

Thinking globally actually gives us the permission to do “small” things. We don’t really have to tackle everything in the world, because we know there are lots of people out there doing their part, too. Acting locally keeps us grounded in reality, helps us “keep the rubber on the road.”

4. Learn to name the problem.

“Naming the problem” was the title of a sermon preached when a member opened a shelter in its facilities for homeless people. These guests are not just “street people,” the pastor said. They each have names and unique personal histories. He urged members to “name” each person individually.

Care for and presence with the poor may involve charity work but is more than that. It also means speaking out for justice, attempting to shift the basic power dynamics which keep the poor in their condition. But even beyond the work of charity and the demands of justice, there is yet another reason for our involvement.

We are to be with the poor to listen as well as to speak; to receive, as well as to give; to learn, as well as to teach. Those who suffer need resources and advocates; but they also need relationship and friendship, built on mutual respect—as do we.

5. Prepare for the long haul.

Violence, and the injustice on which it is built, will not go away as a brief outburst of activity and enthusiasm. We need to prepare for a lifetime of conviction—along with a commitment to rear and shape the lives and generations that follow behind us.

(11) Develop a written covenant, of whatever length you choose. It should include: a brief statement of your general concern, a description of your particular project and a list of commitments each member makes to the group.

(12) Agree on a specific length of commitment to the group. That comes naturally if your project is short-term (e.g. planning a special peace emphasis for your congregation). But even if your project is open-ended, encourage members to commit themselves for a specified amount of time (at least six months). At the end of that time you can “reconstitute” the group with a covenant renewal for those continuing and for new members.

(13) Ask each person to commit themselves to some spiritual discipline(s), e.g. Bible study, daily prayer, journaling, etc. Like with physical exercise, it’s best to begin modestly. Find a way for people to be accountable to each other, but don’t create a legalistic atmosphere.

(14) Find ways to encourage and call forth the particular gifts and talents of each member. No one person should be thrust into (or allowed to assume) the position of “running the show.” Also, giving people limits to their responsibility will prevent fatigue. Sharing tasks among the group will assure people’s regular participation and sense of belonging. Establish some future rotation point where roles and tasks can be shuffled and exchanged.

(15) Find a structured way to be accountable to the congregation. Report on some regular basis to your social concerns committee, church council, missions committee—whatever is appropriate.

(16) Along those same lines, be conscious of the way your project might implicate the congregation as a whole. Sometimes you may need to spend time interpreting what you want to do. Just because the church might not have to officially vote approval of your work doesn’t mean they have no right to ask questions. Don’t begrudge or be impatient with this process. Accountability is a two-way street. You want the congregation to be accountable to you as well, not simply ignore or “put up” with you.

(17) Once you get actively involved in your work, don’t hesitate to modify your plans if needed. You may discover that your analysis of a particular need was incorrect, or that what you thought was a reasonable enough goal is actually more than the group can handle.

(18) Enlist the efforts of non-group members. Don’t become the church’s “designated peacekeepers.” Whenever possible, employ the gifts, talents and energy of others for specified tasks.

(19) Publicize your work, both within the church and in secular media. Don’t hide your light under a bushel! Use every available means to let folks know what you’re doing. Publicity can be an effective means of enlisting new members.

(20) Don’t forget to party together. There’s nothing more deadly than humorless work! Remember, “recreation” and “creative” come from the same common root word.

Ken Seiletz is founding director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. Artwork by Kenn Compton.
He elderly church member grasped my hand as I stood at the church door after the Sunday morning service: “You know preacher, every time you preach about peace it sure does cause trouble.”

It is sad but true that the preaching of the gospel of peace causes trouble, sits up controversy. What is even sadder: at the mention of peace, many people shut their hearing off and their defenses up. So how can we preach with integrity, evoke a hearing and, perhaps I should add, not get run out of town? Here are some suggestions I have found from my own experience that might enable us to better preach on peace.

Preach biblically

When all else had failed, the king asked Jeremiah, “Is there any word from the Lord?” (Jer. 37:17).

People do not come to worship seeking a summary of the latest legislative agenda. People do not come to worship seeking a political scientist. They can go to the newspaper for that. They can go to the Democratic or Republican Party platform. When all else had failed, the minister said in a lecture. “But who deterred people from going to church to be involved for peace? But let me tell you how the church can be influenced and changed. Our preaching will be different because we will have a new vision of what God’s Peaceable Kingdom is all about.

Preach pastorally

Brueggemann says, “It seems clear to me that at the same time we must be very bold about the claims of the gospel upon the church and very patient with one another as we hassle about change and the refusal to change.”

When dealing with a controversial subject people need a pastor who is preachers who are as single-minded about preaching for them as well as to them, who is with them over a cup of coffee as well as sees them from across the top of the pulpit. Indeed, most any preacher knows that, of any harvest reaped in a sermon, the seeds were planted in someone’s kitchen or sitting room. In other words, do not shock everyone some Sunday morning by preaching on sexual orientation or the local school board’s racism policies without warning. Beforehand, talk with your people about what you are about to say. This takes time, patience and a lot of individual attention.

Secondly, and more fundamentally, we not one-issue people. Know who are preachers who are as single-minded about “getting my people to be peacemakers” as about “getting my people saved.” Both kinds usually run off more people than they ever convince. People need to know we are not there trying to convince them of something but we are there because we care for them. We love them for who they are and not for what we can make them into.

Preach with specific suggestions for action

One concluding word of caution: Preaching does not exist in order to get people to do or feel something. Preaching is not a pep rally for peace but is about the rational, methodical context for preaching helps us approach a simplistic functionalism in our preaching.

The sermon does not have to carry the weight of the world. The great hymns of the faith, the prayers, the silence, the Lord’s Supper and baptism all serve to help the community of faith have an alternative vision of reality. The church exists to give the world an alternative vision. The world says violence is legitimate, and peace is only secured by greater armaments. The church says the peace of God, says peace is the way — we do not live by violence but by trust.

Of course, the world scoffs at the church’s vision. So, in order to stand to preach, remember William Willimon’s words, “The first job of the preacher is to give them a vision so true, so concrete, so clear, so demanding, so glorious, so alluring that it evokes their most courageous response.”