

A narrative history of Nonviolent Peaceforce

From the time he shook hands with Martin Luther King, Jr. at age 15, David Hartsough had been committed to creating a better world through nonviolent means. The Quaker activist participated in lunch counter sit-ins in the 1960s to protest racial segregation, demonstrated against the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation, and trained civilians in Kosovo in nonviolent strategies during the 1990s. He had been spreading the vision of a large-scale 'nonviolent peace force' for almost a decade when he met the man with whom he was to co-found the organization.

Mel Duncan's vision for Nonviolent Peaceforce began as early as 1984 when he went to Nicaragua as part of the coffee and cotton brigades. Though the Contra war was raging, Mel noted that villages were not attacked when foreigners were present. In the late 1990s, as Mel neared the end of a fellowship to study the connections between grassroots organizing and spirituality, a Buddhist monk told him, "We've moved beyond our time in history of taking sides." On Mel's bus ride home, the concept of nonviolent peacekeeping coalesced into an article and a determination to bring the concept to reality.

A meeting of minds and hearts

In 1999, the Hague Appeal for Peace was convened with the stated goal of "identify[ing] the remaining steps necessary for the de-legitimization of war." Both Mel and David attended the conference, each seeking to turn his vision into an organized entity.

"I had been focusing my energies on Kosovo, which was 'on fire' at that time," David recalls, "and I was leading a five-hour workshop each day at the Hague conference. But in addition, I was sharing with as many people as possible the vision and need for a much larger nonviolent peace force to give the world a viable alternative in situations like the crisis in Kosovo—something better than either looking the other way and doing nothing or going in with armed forces and bombing."

After making such an appeal at a large workshop filled with peacemakers from around the world, David says, "I was delighted when Mel came up to me afterward and said 'We have to talk.' I had never met this friendly-looking fellow and knew nothing about him, but could tell by the look in

his eyes and the way he grabbed my arm that he was seriously interested in the proposal I had made to the group."

The night before he met David, Mel recalls, he called his wife Georgia to complain that he could not organize at the Hague conference. "There were just too many people," he says. "She told me, "Be quiet and listen!" The next day I crammed against the back wall of a session to hear this guy present in the form of a question the very same vision of a nonviolent peace force. Afterward, I pushed through the crowd and grabbed him by the arm. 'If you are serious about what you just said, we have to go out in the hall and start organizing. We only have a few days left to this conference.' We disagree about what happened next. David claims he went with me willingly. I claim I didn't let go of his arm."

By that night, the two were pulling people together – particularly German and Dutch peaceworkers who also had previously shown interest and commitment to this vision -- to discuss the prospect of a large-scale unarmed civilian peace force. "I marveled at David's connections," Mel says. "He seemed to have worked with everyone. He was filled with ideas, questions and challenges. The following Sunday afternoon we sat in a park and talked for hours. His story and commitment were so compelling."

Make no little plans

"Before we left the conference, I asked Mel if he would draw up a first draft of a proposal for a global nonviolent peace force," David remembers. "To my great joy, Mel followed through, and within several weeks, I received his first draft."

The two began bringing other interested activists and organizers into the conversation, including experienced peacemakers David had met around the world. As their vision coalesced, it became clear to both men that they were bringing into reality a dream that had been held by many others.

The NP concept was often met with the shock of recognition. People would say, "I've dreamt about that my entire life," or "I wrote a paper on that at university," or "We did that in my village." Nonviolent peacekeeping has been a recurrent vision that in the previous century had flowed through Gandhi, Maude Roydon, Badshah Khan and so many others. A significant number of people were already focused on making this persistent vision a reality. What had

escaped the eyes of the large media entities, Mel and others affirmed, did not escape the consciousness of thousands whose input helped shape Nonviolent Peaceforce.

This realization that they were building on a larger dream fueled the shared determination of Mel and David—determination that proved indispensable as the first hurdles loomed.

Meeting challenges with steadfast commitment

"Money was always an obstacle," Mel recalls. "In the early months, David and I were financing everything on our credit cards. We were traveling in a car borrowed from David's daughter, coming back to Washington, D.C. from Eastern Mennonite University and stopped for gas. It was my turn to pay. I remember sheepishly returning to the car after my credit card had been declined."

Organizational support was also essential. Without it, NP could not begin raising funds or managing its growing communications needs. Both of the founders cite the early support of Peaceworkers USA as a vital part of (as David puts it) "midwifing NP into existence" by providing this structural support.

Then there was the concept itself. What would a global nonviolent peace force look like? "We had many varied and conflicting ideas about what a peace force would be," Mel says, "ranging from sending individuals into conflicts to wander around and make peace to fielding a highly disciplined peace army. Focusing on a common vision that was inclusive but still had integrity was a real challenge."

Mel rattles off a long list of early supporters who lent their expertise and energy to the cause. "Michael Nagler and Phil Ritter of Peaceworkers USA, Cora Weiss, Tim Wallis of Peace Brigades International...N Radhakrishnan in India, Phil McManus and Servicio para la Paz y Justicia in Latin America...Elise Boulding, Chris Coleman at the UN, Tinka Kurth, Donna Howard, Mary Lou Ott...John Paul Lederach of Eastern Mennonite University, Rachel Findley and Chris Moore-Backmann in San Francisco, Hizkias Assifa of Ethiopia and David Grant of International Fellowship of Reconciliation...Rolf Carriere at UNICEF..."

The full list includes representatives of six continents and a dozen different spiritual traditions. Right from the start, NP was an organization with a global vision.

Past dream, present reality, future hope

By 2002, the groundwork was in place to officially create the world's first global unarmed civilian peacekeeping force, and peacemakers from 49 countries met in Surajkund, India for the Convening Event. By the following fall, Nonviolent Peaceforce had its first team on the ground in Sri Lanka.

In 2007, a second field project launched in the Philippines, as well as a rapid deployment providing protective accompaniment in Guatemala. The same year, David Hartsough retired from NP. Two years later, Mel Duncan announced his intention to step down as executive director to take a different role. NP Programme Director Tim Wallis was hired as NP's second Executive Director in October 2009. The following month, NP's new violence prevention project began in South Sudan.

Asked to imagine NP ten years from now, David and Mel articulate similar visions. Both hope that NP will have found the financial support and developed the organizational capability to support thousands of nonviolent peacemakers and peacekeepers working in conflict areas around the world, and that the UN and national governments will see NP as a viable alternative to armed intervention or armed peacekeeping.

"My hope is that the world will increasingly see the futility of war and violence as a way of resolving conflict and will have found effective means of resolving conflicts other than war," says David. "My hope is that the world will increasingly see the power of nonviolent movements to challenge injustice and oppression, and that people, organizations and friendly governments will respond to and support these nonviolent movements working for peaceful change."

"I hope that we truly will learn a more effective and less violent way of dealing with our conflicts," Mel adds, "so that our grandchildren can look back incredulously and say 'Remember when they used to try to solve violent conflicts by bringing in more guns?' They will marvel that we would have *ever* conceived of such an approach, and take for granted that one resolves conflicts with active nonviolence."