

Introduction to Christian Non-Violent Direct Action (NVDA)

What is Christian Non-Violent Direct Action?

'Direct action' for advocacy is a public act done as an attempt to influence public attitudes and policy and to challenge unjust social and political values. Direct action can take many different forms and might include actions such as marching in a demonstration, a public prayer vigil or risking arrest by breaking a civil law.

Christian 'Non-Violent Direct Action' (NVDA) is a unique form of direct action that rejects the use of physical and emotional violence to fight injustice. Christians who perform acts of non-violent resistance recognise that the seeds of violence must be addressed within the hearts of all people, including themselves. This stems from a belief that violence cannot be overcome with violence.

It is an approach to advocacy that is deeply rooted in the spirit of truth, love and forgiveness found in the teachings of Jesus Christ. It seeks not to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win their friendship and understanding. Christian Non-Violent activists point to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5 as a biblical basis for non-violence.

Christian NVDA as a way of life:

Christian Non-Violence is more than an action; it is a way of life. This lifelong commitment to non-violence is described in Pax Christi's 'Vow of Non-Violence':

"I vow to carry out in my life the love and example of Jesus... by accepting suffering rather than inflicting it; by refusing to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence; by persevering in nonviolence of tongue and heart; by living conscientiously and simply so that I do not deprive others of the means to live; by actively resisting evil and working non-violently to abolish war and the causes of war from my own heart and from the face of the earth."¹

Martin Luther King Jr. is a famous example of an individual who was committed to this life of Christian nonviolence. This underpinned his leadership of the successful 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott, a social protest to end racial segregation in the city's public transport system. While he actively opposed the injustice of racism, King remained committed to non-violent tactics of protest. He believed that "a boycott is never an end within itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption."²

What does Christian NVDA look like?

Christian NVDA does not always look like a protest or an act of civil disobedience, although these actions play an important part. NVDA can also be fun and creative responses to social challenges such as flash mobs or humorous displays of public art. In fact, humour is an important component of non-violent resistance because it can disarm

anger and defuse hostile reactions. Humour can be an energizing and inclusive method of reframing a situation because it can point out contradictions and absurdity in a non-threatening way. It is important to remember that the use of humour should not humiliate another but should aim to speak truth to power.

What does Christian NVDA involve?

To find examples of Christian non-violent direct action we can turn to the original source; Jesus Christ. We can find many examples of non-violent direct action in the words and actions of Jesus. According to Dr. Walter Wink, the parables and teachings of Jesus found in the Bible include the following aspects of non-violence:

- Finding a creative alternative to violence
- Asserting your own humanity and dignity as a person
- Meeting force with humour
- Breaking the cycle of humiliation
- Refusing to submit or to accept the inferior position
- Exposing the injustice of the system
- Shaming the oppressor into repentance
- Being willing to submit rather than retaliate
- Depriving the oppressor of a situation where a show of force is effective
- Being willing to undergo the penalty for breaking unjust laws.

How can Christian NVDA affect change?

Christian NVDA may affect a number of different audiences in different ways. To the government it provides a profound critique that is difficult to ignore. To the public it speaks of an alternative vision of a society where public policies support the common good. To other activists it demonstrates the relevance of the Christian faith and an alternative to resisting through domination and violence. And finally to the church Christian NVDA provides an active and participatory spirituality.³

Christian NVDA in Australia

A number of Christian activists in the Australian peace movement have used Christian non-violent direct action in order to resist Australia's involvement in war. One example of this was The Samuel Hill 5; a group of five Christian people dedicated to non-violence who entered a military training area at Samuel Hill in Shoalwater Bay, near Rockhampton. At the time the site was hosting the Talisman Sabre games involving 20,000 American and 10,000 Australian troops training through participating in war games.

The Christian activists aimed to disrupt these military exercises and draw attention to the destruction and injustice of waging war in Iraq. The tactics they used were in keeping with the non-violent approach. As soldiers approached them, the group of activists assured them

they were unarmed and peaceful and invited them to play Frisbee as a peaceful alternative to the military's violent games. The group then asked to see the generals to deliver letters to them. The soldiers called their commanding officer who shut down the base and invited the group inside for coffee and lunch. The Samuel Hill 5 spent an hour and a half talking with Australian and US soldiers about the war in Iraq and issues of violence before they were arrested. ⁴

The group released the following statement to explain their action:

“We plan to enter the base to disrupt these military exercises with our presence. We do so openly and honestly without deception and while actively seeking out military personnel with whom to dialogue. We do not take these actions lightly but with an awareness that the gravity of our actions pales in comparison to the crimes of Australian and US militaries this week. The destruction of pristine wilderness with unique and endangered wildlife is unacceptable as is the increased reliance on violent methods of conflict resolution. We take these actions because all other legal attempts to stop the exercise have failed. People are likely to say that we have no respect for the law: not so. Rather we say with Martin Luther King Jr. and in accordance with the principles of nonviolence, ‘I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law.’ We believe that practising for war only means more war. That is why we must imagine peace, embody peace, practise peace. Another world is possible – that is why we act (Moyle, Powell et al 2007).”

Training Resource:

From Violence To Wholeness

Author: Ken Butigan, Published by Pace E Bene Franciscan Nonviolence

From Violence To Wholeness is a ten-part study and action program that explores non-violence as a creative, powerful and effective process for addressing and resolving the conflicts in our lives and in the life of the world. Drawing on the vision of Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day, this program offers your church, community, or group resources to deepen your journey from fear to freedom, from despair to hope, from violence to wholeness. Visit <http://paceebene.org.au/>

Notes:

- 1 Cordaro, T (2010), ‘Non-Violent Direct Action for Personal & Social Transformation’, Christian Peace Maker Teams. Available at: <http://www.cpt.org/resources/writings/cordaro>
- 2 King (1957), ‘The Power of Non-Violence’.
- 3 Whelan, J (2008), ‘Christian Nonviolent Direct Action as Public Theology’, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture.
- 4 i bid.