

AFSC
PERSPECTIVES
ON
NONVIOLENCE

in relation to groups
struggling for social justice

● *Approved by the Board of Directors
of the American Friends Service Committee
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The American Friends Service Committee commitment to work for social justice and to aid victims of oppression is based upon deep religious conviction. The prophet Micah enjoined persons of faith to "do justice" and "love mercy." Christ asked for service to "the least of these my brethren." In this spirit we endeavor to alleviate suffering and to bring constructive change in the troubled circumstances of our contemporary world.

AFSC programs are most effective when our staff are engaged in on-site associations and activities. We need first-hand assessment and participation by our field representatives in situations to which AFSC funds, policies, and programs are applied. Yet no one, least of all dedicated staff working for basic change in the structures of oppression, can stand aloof from the dilemmas imposed by the use of violence in the quest for justice.

Our most basic pledge is to forswear violence and to affirm the power of love in all settings. Our faith in a loving God as the supreme reality in the universe leads us to believe that loving action is the most potent and effective way to struggle for justice and peace. Though we may fail to express love in all its fullness, we are persuaded that ultimately love will overcome and establish justice.

Violence inevitably accompanies injustice, however, and the peace for which we strive will not reign while patterns of inequity and oppression continue. In each area of struggle there are indigenous people and groups who work for the same broad goals that we seek, but few sustain a principled refusal to use violence to advance their cause. How should the AFSC and its representatives relate to such persons and organizations?

Several points should be understood about the context for such relationships. The maintenance of prolonged injustice and exploitation is marked by massive use of official violence in defense of a flawed status quo. While this violence may be clothed in seeming legitimacy, it tends to become increasingly brutal and lethal when challenged. Popular resistance to unjust rule initially and consistently takes peaceful forms through public protest and non-cooperation. When some among the oppressed resort to violence, they usually do so out of protracted distress, victimization, and despair at bringing change any other way.

Although we see the frequently gross disparity between violence of the powerful as against violence of those seeking to end their own oppression--although we yearn for and work for an end to galling exploitation--we cannot endorse the use of violence. The AFSC stands firm on its Quaker heritage in denying the legitimacy of violence however extreme the provocation. We have not and will not formulate a theory of "acceptable" revolutionary violence. As George Fox said long ago:

The Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil, and again to move us to it; and we certainly know...that the Spirit of Christ...will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons.

We are humbled by the steadfast witness and non-violent advocacy shown by AFSC staff and many with whom they work under extraordinary stress and threat. Their courage and long-suffering perseverance are deeply moving. We do not mean to preach at a distance nor to judge persons acting under duress when we advocate nonviolence and disapprove recourse to violence. We intend only that AFSC should speak clearly when we undertake programs and work determinedly in ways that are consistent with our own fundamental values.

Those who labor under structures of injustice and violence will set their own course for breaking free from oppression. We will not support the choice of violence, but where basic human rights and social equity are at issue, Quakers and the AFSC need to be engaged in common cause to the limit of our beliefs, resources and program capacity. In crises and protracted struggles we should be open to working with individuals, groups, and governments while always making clear our alignment with the demand for justice and our nonviolent principles. We should share widely our experience and insights about nonviolent strategies for change. The AFSC often plays a valuable and distinctive role because its moral stance is known and accepted by parties to a conflict who may themselves take up violent means.

When AFSC staff form personal and programmatic associations with groups struggling toward social justice, these relationships should not be terminated solely because acts of violence have been carried out in the name of such organizations, any more than AFSC should break off from dealing in love with the forces in power who turn to violence in the same setting. We should always try to speak truth to both oppressor and oppressed and have compassion for persons in every faction. But respect for the humanity of the oppressor cannot still the insistence upon movement toward social justice. Our priority upon empowering the disadvantaged requires a sense of timing and discretion in relating to persons in the power structure. We deal with persons in the power structure not merely from a pro forma sense of evenhandedness but we do so especially when such contacts have a prospect of removing the burden of oppression from both the oppressor and the oppressed.

In extreme situations our presence may endanger local advocates for change by marking them for reprisal when we lack means to extend protection. Staff must (and do) exercise careful judgment about their own and others' safety, yet the risks remain. So, too, do the

bonds of common efforts to build a humane future. The AFSC will not easily forsake those with whom we have worked nor abandon the cause of the oppressed. We will do our utmost to assure the continuity of our service, advocacy, and shared struggle.

Not only should AFSC stand by its friends and associates; we must also do more to support our own staff who serve overseas and at home in lonely, exposed and stressful circumstances. The demands upon staff are extraordinary. They deserve our best planning effort to enhance their continued well-being and effectiveness.

Far-reaching issues relating to the legitimacy or corruptibility of power and the distribution of the world's wealth and resources lie at the heart of specific campaigns to achieve social, political, and economic equity. We have no master plan to advance in addressing these issues. Rather, we acknowledge our limits in clarity of analysis and in direct participation to redress flagrant abuse and injustice. We take up action, advocacy, and the pursuit of nonviolent strategies in the United States as essential elements in achieving constructive change at home and abroad. Our work must keep a focus on the American role in maintaining systems of oppression or promoting equity in other countries.

By affirming our identity, the fullness of our spiritual roots, and the application of our values to current issues, we turn with renewed vigor to strive for justice in the settings of our varied individual lives as well as in our collective role as the AFSC Board of Directors. Violence has all too real a human impact. Suffering and brutality are common in many parts of the world. In the face of such massive anguish only the strength of shared religious faith bears up our resolute devotion to truth and compassion, our practical endeavor to do justice, to show mercy, and to demonstrate the power of love.



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