

Working for Justice and Peace



When we talk of working for justice and peace, what comes to most minds are the everyday symbolic trappings of professional justice and peace activism: the well-known statue of the blindfolded Lady Justice in flowing robes, holding aloft a pair of scales in one hand and a sword in the other, and the Christian dove of peace with olive branch in its beak, or the anti-military up-side-down semaphore logo of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or the rainbow flag of the International Congress of World Co-operatives.



This is because we tend to associate the word 'justice' with courts of law. With judges and juries, lawyers and prosecutors, police officers and prisons. We then associate the word 'peace' with the absence of war. With the absence of images of conflict on our television screens and in our newspapers. With United Nations peacekeeping troops. With diplomatic initiatives and negotiated agreements.

In the common mind's eye, therefore, to work for justice and peace means seeking and securing employment in the vast bureaucracies that extend from every justice-seeking solicitor and flag-waving peace activist through to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague and the United Nations (UN) in New York.



No, it does not cross many minds that the real work for justice and peace is done in the hearts and minds, words and deeds of every one of us. That working for justice and peace is a solitary task that, strangely, results in collective good.

Working for justice and peace is like living in a democratic society: we will defend, to the death if need be, the just and moral rights of our fellow citizens to hold opinions and views that are different from our own. For the surest way of securing justice for ones' self is to give justice to others. The surest way of living in peace is to let others live in peace.

The idea that justice and peace for ones' self can only be secured through ensuring justice and peace for others was given powerful moral impact by Pastor Martin Niemöller, one of the most respected Protestant leaders in Germany. And yet his early life was as ordinary as any at the time.

Niemöller was a commander of a German U-boat in World War I, a role for which he was decorated. A seminal incident in his moral outlook, as he related in many public speeches later in his life, occurred when he commanded his submarine crew not to rescue the sailors of a boat he torpedoed, but let them drown instead.

Niemöller began studying theology in Münster in the 1920s. At this time, and at least until the mid-1930s, Niemöller was a typical Christian anti-Semite who openly professed his belief that the Jews had been punished through the ages because they had "brought the Christ of God to the cross."

In 1931 Niemöller became a pastor in a wealthy Berlin suburb. As a German nationalist he initially supported Hitler, but as the Nazis began to interfere in church affairs, he began to oppose them. In 1934 Niemöller founded first the Pastors' Emergency League, then the Confessing Church, a branch of the German Protestant (Lutheran) Church.



In 1937 he was arrested because of his outspoken sermons. There were then a few honest judges still functioning in Germany, and when the court let him go with a slap on the wrist Hitler personally ordered his incarceration. Niemoeller was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. In 1941 he was moved to Dachau, where his incarceration included long periods of solitary confinement. He stayed until the end of the war.

Shortly after the end of the war Niemöller became convinced that the German people had a collective responsibility (he often used the word *Schuld*, guilt) for the Nazi atrocities. In October 1945 Niemöller was the prime mover behind the German Protestant Church's "Confession of Guilt". It was clearly in this context that Niemöller's most quoted saying began to evolve. Since then, it has carried powerful moral impact:



First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a communist;
Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a socialist;
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a trade unionist;
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out –
because I was not a Jew;
Then they came for me –
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

After the war, active in international church affairs, Niemöller made preaching trips across the United States. He thus helped to rebuild the reputation of the German Protestant Church, and was one of its leading officials until well into the 1960s. His uncompromising stance allowed him to remain a figurehead of the German peace movement into the 1980s. He died in 1984.

This now famous quotation is the key to how you and I can work for justice and peace. Like Niemöller we have to actively carry the message of concern for others, often driving the point home with a confession of our own blindness when the 'Nazi regimes' of today round up the 'communists', 'socialists', 'trade unionists', and 'Jews' of our times.



We work for justice and peace when we stand up for others
against injustice and war.

Michael