

The DC Peace Team ventured to Arlington National Cemetery on Nov. 12, 2012 to offer unarmed civilian peacekeeping. The Westboro Baptist Church came to protest the official acceptance of homosexuals in the U.S. Military and more broadly in the U.S. Their concern is that this contrasts with their interpretation of the Judeo-Christian scriptures and God's intention. There were about 6 members of this group including one teenager. Also gathered were about 25-30 people disturbed by Westboro's presence. Most of them were military members or supporters, although there were about 4-5 other people there with signs about "being kind" and "loving." There were also about 3-4 armed guards at the event and a few police cars nearby.

Our goals as peacekeepers were to ***defuse violence and cultivate empathy in all parties.*** By "violence" in this context we include both direct violence such as physical or emotional harm, as well as the cultural violence in the ideas, language, or bodily posture that makes direct violence more likely. The night before the event we practiced some peacemaking skills including active listening, I-messages, and role-playing possible scenarios that might arise. There were three of us, Meagan, Lindsey, and myself, who attended the event and we received our new DC Peace Team shirts just in time thanks to our generous printers.

When we got to the scene the Westboro group was gated in on the grass with bushes behind them. Thus, others gathered around the gates. Some were trying to block people walking/driving by from seeing Westboro's signs, such as "God hates Fags." Others engaged Westboro folks in "conversation" about their beliefs, which at times turned into name-calling, jokes, put downs, vulgarity, and other forms of hostility. In addition, many of the military folks would communicate with other forms of "threat power" such as breaking into group push-ups, repeatedly driving by on Harley's and revving their engines, replicating military training chants, etc. all while folks applauded. Meanwhile the armed police, whom represent our community, primarily stood by occasionally asking people to move off the sidewalk or to take their signs to the other side of the street. They made no obvious effort to defuse hostility beyond trying to limit potential physical altercations.

The DC Peace Team provided a defusing presence by spreading out along this gate and at times moving around. At times, folks would start to talk with us about what our shirts meant. At times, we would engage folks who simply seemed open to talking or those who were involved in the hostility. When we talked with folks who were part of a hostile group, they were less likely to join the group in similar future hostility. At times, we would simply be still with a positive facial expression and presence near the conversations that were flaring up. These are all elements of an "integrative power" approach, which is about acting in accord with our human dignity regardless of what others do such that all parties are ultimately drawn closer in relationship.

Our conversations were generally about trying to listen well to what others were thinking or going through often by reflecting back or naming feelings that we were hearing. We also tried to offer our experience and key questions for them to think about toward defusing the hostility and cultivating empathy for the "other." For example, I

recall speaking with a man around 19-23 years old who was wrestling with his familial and peer group support for the military along with his Christian values and faith. He mentioned how he told the Westboro folks that he would pray for them, so I spent some time inviting him to reflect about some of the common ground he might share with the Westboro group. I also spent some time inviting him to reflect about Jesus' teaching on peacemaking and the challenge this presents to military activity.

As one of the more over-reactive and hostile persons acted up, we would move closer to him and connect with our eyes. A few times, he would turn toward me and laugh or make a silly comment, but it functioned to distract his hostility in the short-term and thus defuse the intensity of his interactions.

A surprising element for me was when a Westboro person shouted that "God taught us not to kill, and yet you (military folks) continue to do so." Although this wasn't their primary message, it created a very intriguing dynamic. One of the challenges with Westboro is to personally recognize the dignity or even the part of the truth they have to offer. This statement about killing made that somewhat easier for me as a peacekeeper to consider their truth, and thus, increased our capacity to converse with others about recognizing the dignity of all people and seeking the element of truth in each person.

One of the strategic insights was that we probably could've enhanced the experience by speaking directly with some of the armed guards at some point both to introduce the DC Peace Team and to discuss both of our approaches. As we were leaving, one of the armed guards seemed curious about us and I probably should've taken that opportunity to engage.

The event ended without any physical altercations, but wounds were created by the hostility. We trust our presence helped toward healing some of those wounds and cultivate the habits of empathy and unarmed civilian peacekeeping for some in our community. We look forward to the next adventure!

*--Eli McCarthy*