

Creatively handling conflict

by Elaine Enns

In 1989, after graduating from Canadian Mennonite Bible College, I went to Fresno, Calif. on a Mennonite Voluntary Service assignment to work with a restorative justice program. For the past 23 years, I have continued this work. I've met extraordinary people, victims, offenders, their communities, and practitioners, who are committed to the work of healing, forgiveness, justice, and making peace. I am grateful to them for pushing the edges of their discipleship, which has challenged me to go deeper into my own.

Myrna Bethke is one of these exemplars. I interviewed her for

"The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows."

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

my 2009 book with Ched Myers, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation: Diverse Christian Practices of Restorative Justice and Peacemaking*.

The world witnessed the killing of thousands of people in the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Towers. One of those victims was Myrna Bethke's youngest brother Bill. Though his remains have still not been found, a computer card swipe confirmed he was in his office in the direct path of the first plane. While that attack was used as a call to war by the leaders of our nation, some of the family members of those killed, including Bethke, made poignant pleas that violence not be done in the names of their loved ones, and instead turned their grief into actions for peace.

Before 9/11, Bethke, who was pastor of Freehold United Methodist Church just outside New York City, would not have described herself as a peace activist. After the attack, her church opened its doors for all who wanted to come pray. In our interview she explained:

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towards redemption and restoration. I was fairly certain at that point that we were going to bomb Afghanistan and I was asking myself, 'What can I personally do to stop this?' On October 7th the bombing began. It was my brother Bill's birthday and that year it also happened to be Worldwide Communion Sunday. The reality that the bombing would lead to civilian death was deeply troubling to many of us. We had experienced this trauma first hand, as we searched for our loved ones through the rubble of the World Trade Center.

Because the war was being waged in their names, some 9/11 families organized themselves into a nonprofit group called "September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows." The group represents more than 100 family members of 9/11 victims, and has subsequently been nominated for the Nobel Peace prize.

In his 2003 collection, *Stories of Peaceful Tomorrows*, David Potorti writes, "They united in a determination that the death of their loved ones should not be a cause for more killing, and they committed to seeking alternatives to war and working to end the cycle of violence."

In June of 2002, Bethke was invited to go to Afghanistan as part of an interfaith clergy group. The delegation focused on identifying ways in which the faith community could support humanitarian projects in Kabul, including the rebuilding of schools, clinics, and mosques destroyed during the US-led bombing campaign.

"One of the most powerful moments in Afghanistan," Bethke told us, "was spending time with a beautiful little girl named Amina." She continued:

We spent the day together playing and drawing pictures. Then I learned her story. One morning Amina had gotten up to make tea for her family. She was in the back of the house getting water when a bomb hit the front half of the house. Amina lost her entire family in that instant; she was the only survivor. When she spoke to our group she stood and listed the names of all of her family members who had been killed. I found myself thinking, "No eight-



Bethke (left) with Arifa, who lost her husband and children when a US bomb landed on their home in Kabul.

Courtesy photo

year-old child should have to do this!"

As I was listening to Amina, a memory came flooding back. About two weeks after 9/11, I was talking with my father on the phone when we were interrupted. "The State Police just arrived," he said, "and they want me to give a DNA sample." I felt so horrible that my father had to do that in order to identify his son.

In Afghanistan, these two events powerfully came together. It became clear to me that we are all called to build a world in which parents and children do not have to name their dead in this way.

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After Bethke returned from Afghanistan, she was invited to speak at a Shiite mosque in her community. She explained:

The Shias have a long history of lament tradition. After I spoke, a woman of the mosque came up to me crying, saying, "We thought only the poetry of Arabic could express our lament. Today you taught us that you could lament in English as well." I am very grateful for my ongoing relationship with people at this mosque, and consider it one of the blessings that came out of the tragedy of 9/11.

After the attacks of Sept 11th, Methodist layman George Bush modeled the classic response of retribution: personalizing the evil in Osama bin Laden and launching massive retaliatory strikes against a country simply because bin Laden was resident there. On the other hand, Methodist pastor Myrna Bethke modeled a creative restorative response, taking personal responsibility by choosing to stand in solidarity with victims of war on the "other side." ❏

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by Lorraine Stutzma

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