

The Olympia Fellowship of Reconciliation's History and Niche in the Local Community

November 12, 2008

This paper seeks to provide background, information and context for the Olympia FOR's Long-Range Strategic Planning efforts.

Olympia FOR's Earliest History

When we started the Olympia chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation in May and June of 1976, people asked, "Why are you starting a peace group now? The war is over."

Actually, while the US's war in Vietnam and SE Asia had ended the year before, the peace movement wanted the nation to address the issues that had spun out from the war (e.g., amnesty for persons who resisted the draft or went AWOL for reasons of conscience, cutting the military budget and shifting federal priorities toward funding neglected human needs).

Also, a great many issues had gotten worse while the peace movement was preoccupied with Vietnam, and these issues desperately needed work. These included nuclear weapons (including the Trident nuclear submarine which was to be based just 60 miles from Olympia), several other gigantic weapons systems, several geographical crises (e.g., the US/USSR Cold War, Zimbabwe <called Rhodesia at that time>, South Africa with its brutal apartheid, China, Israel/Palestine, strengthening international law, and so forth. Also, a number of domestic issues needed attention, including justice for blacks and American Indians, persistent poverty, community empowerment, and others.

The Olympia FOR worked on many of these in various ways. Just a few months after our founding we organized and staffed a peace information booth at the Thurston County Fair. Our county fair booth was our first big opportunity to reach out to the public and introduce the FOR to the local community. Our booth emphasized the need to abolish nuclear weapons and slash military spending. We held our first Holiday Peace Vigil on the Saturday before Christmas, 1976, at the NW corner of Sylvester Park, where our Wednesday noon-hour vigils occur now. We

have continued the Holiday Peace Vigils every year since, and moved the location to Percival Landing when it was built.

In 1976 the Olympia FOR was the only peace group in Thurston County's general community, but there was a student group at The Evergreen State College (the Evergreen Political Information Center), so we collaborated with EPIC on a few activities. Some other local folks began organizing opposition to the Trident nuclear submarine, so we worked with them over a number of years. The Olympia FOR kept reaching out to people, encouraging people who were interested in various issues, and connecting people with each other.

We started with just a few FOR members in 1976, but we kept reaching out in many ways and kept meeting new people. In 1977, 1978, and beyond, we collaborated with some other local organizations and a few faith communities to hold all-day multi-issue workshops. We began the Olympia FOR's long tradition of networking people across issues, across age groups, and across religions. We consciously built cooperative working relationships and a strong local multi-issue movement for peace, social justice and nonviolence. More and more local groups formed from autonomous roots, and we helped them as we could, through networking, through our newsletter, and in other ways. We became a resource for connections, information, referrals, and skills.

The Olympia FOR has grown in numbers, prominence, reputation, and activities. Since about 1980 the national FOR has recognized the Olympia chapter as one of the most active in the nation.

Olympia FOR's Milestones

We published Issue #1 of our newsletter in 1977 or 1978. The issues were numbered and dated because there was no regular schedule. Eventually we began publishing on a monthly schedule. In 1996 we changed to a bi-monthly schedule. Initially we mimeographed the newsletters at a local church, then the church gave us a mimeograph machine so we published in Glen Anderson's kitchen. Beginning with Issue #145 in February 1996 we began having our newsletters printed commercially on nicer paper with a better looking appearance. We will publish Issue #219 on about December 1, 2008.

In early 1980 several of our members suggested vigiling for peace downtown, so on March 5, 1980, we started the Wednesday Noon-Hour Peace Vigil in the NW corner of Sylvester Park. After 28 ½ years, it still persists, rain or shine, and we continue to meet new people and connect then with other persons and organizations who are working for peace, nonviolence, and social justice.

In November 1998, we began vigiling on Friday late afternoons on W. 4th Ave near Percival Landing to oppose the eco-

conomic sanctions on Iraq. After September 11, 2001, the theme of this vigil broadened out to other peace concerns.

To help our new local FOR chapter begin in 1976 and grow during the next few years, we needed a little money for expenses, but we did not yet have enough local supporters to cover our costs, so the regional FOR body (currently called the Western Washington FOR), covered our expenses, and we submitted receipts for reimbursement. The Olympia FOR spent a little less than \$700 per year when we were a new chapter. We encouraged people who wanted to support our efforts could contribute to the regional FOR. After our first decade – in February 1987 – we created our own treasury and began our own fundraising, so people here could contribute directly to their local FOR chapter. The Olympia FOR began contributing to the Western Washington FOR in exchange for services we receive from WWFOR (e.g., their Pacific Call newsletter, which is published bi-monthly on the alternate months from the Olympia FOR's newsletter, and various efforts from the WWFOR's staff).

Carol Burns, one of our members, had worked hard for five years with other people to create Thurston Community Television (TCTV), so when it was ready to start broadcasting, she urged the Olympia FOR to join as an organizational member. We did, and we have been producing and airing programs since February 1987 – more than 21 years – which makes the Olympia FOR's program the longest-running series on TCTV.

Over the years the Olympia FOR has scheduled meetings from time to time so local folks could discuss topics or hear local speakers who were coming through town. For a number of years we held meetings at the same time and place each month, typically with speakers. Because so many local groups had arisen and were hosting speakers, it became hard to generate a good turnout, so we let that go.

For a few years we also showed videos at the same date and location each month, but videos came to be shown more often in more places, so turnout declined and we let this series go.

The Olympia FOR recognized needs and opportunities, and we start things. But we are also comfortable with letting things go when they have served their purposes.

During the mid-1990s a major project was the Bosnian Student Project. When the former Yugoslavia was breaking apart, Bosnian Muslims were among the most vulnerable to attack. The national FOR began a project of identifying academically talented Bosnians and bringing them to the US to complete their educations in safety. The Olympia FOR considered bringing one here, and we ended up with five fully involved and about five more peripherally involved – more than any other community in the US. Many volunteers contributed tremendous amounts of work, compassion, and financial support.

While the national FOR has opposed the death penalty for many decades, the Olympia FOR's members and supporters had mixed thoughts. Over time, however, opposition to the death penalty grew, so the Olympia FOR absorbed a local group that had been created to work for abolition, and that consisted largely of FOR members anyway. In 1996 it evolved into a specific committee, and it persists with active efforts, educational sharing, community outreach, and more.

In the 1970s and early we made decisions informally by connecting with a few key members or discussing things at meetings. With more activities we sensed the need for better organization and more accountability, so we created the Steering Committee. In 1996 we reorganized and adopted Guidelines that specify more structured ways of choosing Steering Committee members and making transitions.

Olympia FOR's Current Role in the Community

Over the years we organized many varied activities, including speakers, training workshops, rallies, special vigils, film showings, multi-issue gatherings, and more.

The Olympia FOR quickly became an organization that progressive individuals and organizations contacted when they were reaching out to build support for their emerging issues and organizations, and to co-sponsor and publicize their activities. We gladly networked and supported whenever possible.

Over the years our members have participated in a great number and diversity of local single-issue organizations and campaigns. Our newsletter and TV programs have supported many of these and led to many successes. We continue to support local efforts to organize on behalf of peace, nonviolence and social justice. We enjoy great working relationships with many groups.

Some years ago we became an affiliate member of Interfaith Works. We belong to the Thurston County Progressive Network (TC Pro-Net) and participate in the rich and vibrant life of the greater Olympia area's non-profit community. In 2001 the Thurston County Council on Cultural Diversity and Human Rights gave us a Unique Achievement Human Rights Award.

Individuals and organizations appreciate and respect the Olympia FOR for our principles, our commitment to nonviolence, our friendly and supportive working relationships, and our reliable and consistent presence and level of activity. We have had the same phone number since 1976 and the same office location and mailing address since 1981.

We feel delighted and gratified that so many new organizations and movements have started and grown in the greater Olympia area. These add energy, diversity, and challenges. We encourage our people to interact and support this great tapestry of activism, always bearing in mind our best values and our vision of a world of social justice, nonviolence and peace.

While not all of these grassroots efforts share the FOR's commitment to principled nonviolence, they do seek compatible goals of peace and social justice. This diversity of methods creates opportunities for those of us who see nonviolence as not only the goal for the new society, but also the means to move us there. Olympia FOR members can interact with local folks – as we have done over the years – to collaborate whenever we can, to seek common ground and productive working relationships, and to apply creative and principled nonviolence to the issues that face our community, our nation, and our world.