



## THE FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION: An Introduction

*AS WORLD WAR I WAS EXPLODING IN AUGUST 1914, HENRY HODGKIN (AN ENGLISH PACIFIST AND A QUAKER) MET FRIEDRICH SIEGMUND-SCHULTZE (A GERMAN PACIFIST AND A LUTHERAN) AT A CONFERENCE IN GERMANY OF CHRISTIAN PACIFISTS. THEY COMMITTED TO RESIST THE WAR THAT WOULD SOON ENGULF EUROPE AND THE REST OF THE WORLD. THE FOLLOWING YEAR, HODGKIN GATHERED CHRISTIANS FROM MANY DENOMINATIONS AT A CONFERENCE IN CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND. TOGETHER, THIS GROUP FOUNDED THE FELLOWSHIP OF RECONCILIATION.*

Later in 1915, another group of pacifists gathered in the United States and founded the U.S. Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR-USA). With more than 80 affiliate groups across the United States today, FOR-USA is the oldest interfaith peace organization in the country. Though it was initially founded as a Christian movement, it dedicated itself in the early 20th century to work for peace and nonviolence with people from all faith traditions, as well as those who claim no religious faith. Along with partners in more than 40 other countries around the world, FOR-USA is part of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) network.

At the time of its founding in 1915, FOR-USA (usually referred to within the U.S. as just FOR) was primarily focused on opposing U.S. entry into World War I and on supporting the rights of conscience in resistance to military conscription. Conscientious objectors faced harsh treatment and severe federal prison sentences. As part of this work, FOR joined with other groups to organize the National Civil Liberties Bureau in 1917. It became the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in 1920. In the 1920s and '30s, FOR expanded its work

beyond pacifist anti-war convictions to economic issues (particularly with the growing labor union movement) and racial justice. Rev. Howard Thurman, a renowned Black theologian and educator whose writings profoundly influenced Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was a key FOR board member. He helped to push the organization to embrace an intersectional approach of ending war, racism, and poverty.

The creation of the NCLB/ACLU was not the last time that FOR played a central role in the founding of an organization that would seek to point U.S. society in the direction of peace and justice. In 1942, James Farmer, a young Black man who had just finished graduate school at Howard University, was FOR's secretary of race relations, based in Chicago. Like Thurman, Farmer was inspired by the movement led by Mahatma Gandhi against British colonial rule in India. He

proposed an initiative grounded in Gandhian nonviolent direct action to challenge racial inequality in the United States. The result was the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), launched by Farmer with an interracial group of young people, many of whom were also members of FOR. One was Pauli Murray, a dynamic young Black woman



James Farmer, photographed in 1964  
(Photo credit: Marion Trikosko, U.S. News & World Report Magazine Photograph Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688125/>)

who became a groundbreaking lawyer and Episcopal priest. Another was Bayard Rustin, a preeminent movement strategist who worked closely with CORE and eventually held important leadership roles in both CORE and FOR.

Early CORE members pioneered the use of sit-ins as a nonviolent strategy for confronting segregation, starting at the Jack Spratt Coffee House in Chicago in May 1942. CORE and FOR also collaborated to organize the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, which is remembered as the “first Freedom Ride.” Rustin, CORE co-founder George Houser (who was white), and an interracial group of 14 other activists tested enforcement of a 1946 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation on interstate travel was unconstitutional. Over the course of the two-week Journey, the protesters challenged Jim Crow laws in multiple Southern states, faced mob violence, and were arrested on a dozen occasions. Throughout the civil rights movement, CORE remained a key actor. Starting in the late 1960s, it centered its work in a Black Power framework of political self-determination and economic self-sufficiency.



*Glenn Smiley & Dr. King seated side by side on the first integrated bus in Montgomery, 1956*  
(Photo credit: Harold Valentine/AP, via Waging Nonviolence <https://wagingnonviolence.org/2013/11/glenn-smiley-smiling/>)

In the 1950s, former and current FOR staff were trusted advisors to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Bayard Rustin, by then executive secretary of the War Resisters League, and FOR national field secretary Glenn Smiley both played a major role in deepening Dr. King’s understanding of nonviolence as a philosophy and as a strategy for confronting oppression. Smiley sat with Dr. King on the first integrated bus ride in Montgomery when the boycott ended in December 1956. A few years later, FOR staffer James Lawson would provide crucial

training and support for the Nashville student-led sit-ins of 1960 and the young radical activists who founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Through the 1960s, FOR continued its work supporting the struggle for racial equality in the United States, but by the end of the decade its core organizing campaigns focused on opposing the U.S. war in Vietnam and supporting conscientious objectors and military draft resisters. FOR began collaborating with Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh in the early ‘60s. In partnership with his community of “Third Way” nonviolence practitioners, it formed a coalition of 10,000 clergy in 40 countries to oppose the war. It also raised money for medical aid for both North and South Vietnamese people. In the 1970s and 1980s, FOR organized major campaigns against the Cold War nuclear arms race and the death penalty. Overseas, it provided nonviolence training support to protesters in the Philippines prior to their nonviolent overthrow of that country’s dictator in 1986. Its projects in the 1990s included campaigns to oppose the first U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent economic sanctions that led to hundreds of thousands of deaths in that country. FOR also carried out important Latin American solidarity initiatives, as well as an interfaith project that helped hundreds of Bosnian students escape their war-torn homeland to pursue educational studies in the U.S.

In the 21st century, FOR has continued to work to challenge the violence of racial, social, and economic inequality, as well as the violence of war. FOR has led multinational programs that have sent civilian peace delegations to Iran, provided accompaniment to a threatened peace community in Colombia resisting that country’s civil war and its aftermath, and worked to support grassroots peace initiatives in Palestine/Israel. At the urging of FOR’s international partners, it has re-centered its social justice focus on issues in the United States, in order to challenge “the root causes of violence at home.” In the past decade, this has led FOR to provide nonviolent direct action training to frontline movements for racial justice and police accountability, launch a national coalition working for reparations for peoples of African descent, and advocate for sanctuary and asylum for people fleeing war, persecution, economic exploitation and poverty, and environmental devastation, among other initiatives.