

Bringing Peace with a Pledge:

An interview with Ann S. Kelly,
Founding Director of the Hands & Words
Are Not for Hurting Project®

by Katie Cook

Editor's note: The Hands & Words Are Not for Hurting Project®, a nonprofit education organization based in Salem, OR, has worked for 21 years to reduce abuse and violence in homes, schools and communities across the US and around the world. The group has made positive changes in all 50 US states and 15 foreign countries. Its founding director, Ann S. Kelly, regularly speaks to groups around the US, at events like the Harvard University School of Public Health "Children at Risk" National Symposium and a gathering at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing.

A founding member and past chair of the Domestic Violence Education & Prevention Coalition of Salem, Ann organized four national family violence conferences in that city. She served on the Oregon Attorney General's "Safe Schools Safe Communities" Task Force. We have had several conversations with Ann about the project and about how she came to be involved with this effort. Below are some of our questions and some of her responses.

Peacemaker: What was your inspiration for starting this project?

Kelly: The inspiration for writing the Purple Hand Pledge and creating the Purple Hand/Red Heart logo comes from a lifetime of varied experiences. I am a martial artist with a 3rd-degree black belt. I taught classes in self-protection for more than 25 years, and I began to see that abuse, violence and suicide was escalating, particularly in children. I realized that this is an ongoing public health crisis, stretching around the world.

My husband, Bob, was an Emergency Physician, working routinely with victims and survivors of violence. Together, we wanted to do more in the area of abuse and violence prevention. We believe that education is the light in the darkness and the voice that breaks the silence.

Peacemaker: What is the central mission of the Hands & Words Are Not for Hurting Project®?

Kelly: Our mission statement is "To educate every person in every community about their moral and legal right to live free of abuse

and violence." Our foundation is a simple 14-word pledge: "I will not use my hands or my words for hurting myself or others."® These 14 words, recited daily, publicly or privately, help people to pay attention to what we say and do to ourselves and to others, that causes pain. The Purple Hand Pledge encourages dialogue about all forms of abuse and violence—from negative self talk, like "I'm stupid, I'm ugly," to name-calling, belittling, put-downs, shoving, or hitting. These are actions that can and do lead to suicide or murder. Taking the Purple Hands Pledge together is a positive action that teaches empathy, self-control, respect for self and others, and accountability for our words and actions.

Peacemaker: Do you primarily target schools or groups of children to teach them about the Pledge?

Kelly: No; we have had a great deal of success with schools who have committed to ask their students and staff to take the Purple Hands Pledge every day, but this Pledge is for people of all ages. It reinforces values and principals most of us were taught as children, values that we must teach our children: "Love one another"... "Love your neighbor as yourself"... "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

How do we love one another? We do it by not intentionally hurting anyone—including ourselves—with words or actions. When we hurt ourselves or hurt others, we hurt the ones we love and those who love us. The most loving thing we can do is to aspire to live by these simple yet powerful 14 words, every day, in every relationship—from age 3 to 103!

Peacemaker: What happens once a person or group takes the Pledge?

Kelly: To symbolize our promise when taking the Purple Hands Pledge, each participant is asked to trace his or her own hand on purple paper, to sign his or her name and age and post the Purple Hand in his or her home, school, workplace



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or place of worship—wherever people live, work, play and pray together—to serve as a visual reminder of our personal commitments to stop and think before we say or do anything hurtful to ourselves or others.

These Purple Hands serve as a symbol of unity as we reinforce and recognize the power and value of every individual's choice to use our words and actions to help, and not hurt. We teach that anger is a feeling everyone experiences, but to let it turn into abuse and violence is always a choice.

I want to say passionately that now, more than ever, we need our Purple Hand pledges everywhere. It is unbelievable how much hate is being spewed across our nation and the world.

Peacemaker: You have a very distinct logo. What does it represent?

Kelly: Our logo is a purple hand with a red heart imbedded in the palm. It represents all people as one people. It is blind to skin color, age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion or nationality. Purple is the color used across the US (and perhaps other places) to honor and remember victims and survivors of abuse and violence. It is the color chosen for Domestic Violence Awareness/Prevention Month in October. Also, the Purple Heart is a historic and highly respected medal of honor awarded in the US to men and women in the armed forces who are seriously wounded or killed in combat.

The red heart in the palm of the hand represents how we are all alike when we talk about our emotions. When someone hurts us, with words or actions, it hurts deep inside. It hurts your heart, it hurts your spirit. The red heart represents those feelings. We all

know how it feels when someone calls us a name. Young children will tell you it makes them feel sad, mad, scared or depressed. Now, more than ever in our world, with all its divisions, teaching empathy is vital.

Around the world, an open hand extended in front of you means "STOP." The Purple Hand/Red Heart logo means "Stop and think before you say or do anything hurtful." Taking the Purple Hands Pledge is taking an oath. It is done with an open raised hand, just as in a court of law. When people take the Pledge, we ask them to take it to heart; to mean it with all their heart.

Peacemaker: How do you think this project will affect our society today?

Kelly: We believe that this is a path to peace, a way to accept and celebrate our differences. We encourage our participants to practice nonviolent solutions to resolve conflicts in every relationship. We encourage honest discussions about our differences that bring about understanding. We encourage people to talk (age appropriately) about things in life that cause human suffering. This opens the door to shine a light in the darkness, to know we are not alone, that we can get the help we need.

The Purple Hands Pledge is now in homes, all grade levels of schools, daycare facilities, birthing centers, hospital emergency rooms, substance abuse programs, parenting classes, government agencies, homeless shelters, battered women's shelters, businesses, youth centers, workplaces and places of worship. Our Purple Hands represent a place where we are all safe and everyone is treated with respect and dignity that we all need and deserve in order to thrive.

Please see "Hands & Words" on page 18.

Right: 6th-12th grade students training for Public Safety careers in San Bernardino, CA, take the Purple Hand Pledge. Children and adults around the world have taken the pledge since Ann S. Kelly founded the project 21 years ago. Photo courtesy of the Hands & Words Are Not for Hurting Project.®



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alternatives to the excesses of today's society. We do well to emulate the current journey of First Peoples to healing and reconciliation, move from hesitations and soul-searching to earth care and loving kindness.

—Paul R. Dekar is also a longtime member and former board member for BPFNA ~ *Bautistas por la Paz*. He is a retired seminary professor. Having lived in Memphis, TN, where he taught at the Memphis Theological Seminary for many years, he now lives in his native Ontario, where he writes and continues to work for justice. Among the numerous books he has written are a history of the BPFNA (before it became *Bautistas por la Paz*) and of the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Endnotes

1. Ann Charters, ed., *The Portable Sixties Reader* (New York 2002), including excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Denise Levertov and others who profoundly influenced me.
2. See my "Ishi: Messenger of Hope," in *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope in Honor of His Centenary* (2015), ed. Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo (Louisville 2014) pp 232-4. I first read of Ishi during the summer of 1966 at Lassen. I worked at Yosemite (1962) also through A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, now an independent body.
3. Norman C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (Cleveland, 2000); *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's Soul* (Sydney 1999); "Australian Baptists Apologize to Aboriginal People," *Baptist Peacemaker* (Spring 1998) p. 14; Adelaide Declaration on Religion and the Environment, 1997. See also www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/theology/ctsc/projects/earthbible/ for information about the Earth Bible.
4. See *Baptist Peacemaker* (Spring 2000) p. 8 for the coverage of the conference. On March 13, 1998, Australian Baptists apologized to Aboriginal Australians (*Baptist Peacemaker* Spring 1998, p. 14). On February 13, 2008, then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an "Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples;" see my "Australia Apologizes to the Stolen Generation," *Baptist Peacemaker* (May-June 2008) pp. 16-17. Also, *Rabbit Proof Fence* is an excellent film on the Stolen Generation.
5. *Baptist Peacemaker* issues from 1991 to 1992 focus on "The Quincentenary: 500 Years and Counting." Paul C. Hayes and I survey the history of friendship tours in "An Extra Mile for Peace," *Baptist Peacemaker* (July-September 2009) pp. 4-7.
6. Jess Housty, "You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind," <https://jesshousty.com/2016/08/04/youre-not-the-indian-i-had-in-mind/>

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We estimate that more than one million children and adults have taken the Purple Hands Pledge. Communities have embraced the program as they've watched it create dramatic positive changes where it has been implemented and sustained. Teachers hear children at recess say, "Hands and words are not for hurting," to end confrontations. Teens have aborted suicide plans as they've recalled the words, "not for hurting myself." Adults have repeated the Pledge following horrific arguments and report that it helped resolve

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differences. It has proven to be an effective tool in abuse- and violence-prevention education.

Peacemaker: Is there anything you'd like to add to what you've said?

Kelly: I want to say passionately that now, more than ever, we need our Purple Hands Pledges everywhere. It is unbelievable how much hate is being spewed across our nation and the world. The unspeakable tragedies of innocent worshippers and school children being gunned down are examples spotlighting the pain and fear that hateful words and actions are causing.

This widespread violence inspires me to reach out to your readers to ask for help. Parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, social workers, mental health professionals—anyone who works with children and families can join this movement. It is simple to implement, inexpensive, effective and sustainable. It only requires the verbal and visual repetition of the Purple Hands Pledge. You can be the voice for those who have none. You can be the voice for valuable, irreplaceable lives lost. You can be the voice for those who are suffering in silence, afraid to ask for help, silenced by fear.

—Katie Cook is the editor of *Baptist Peacemaker*. For more information, call 888-443-6299, email info@handsproject.org, go to www.handsproject.org, or write to PO Box 2644, Salem, OR 97308.