“Sowing the Seeds of God’s Peace”
By Jim McGinnis, Institute for Peace & Justice

In a time of terrorism and war, it is especially challenging and urgent to find effective ways of sowing the seeds of peace. And the Spirit of God is helping us see, embrace, and plant these seeds. In response to the terrorist bombing in Oklahoma City in April 1995, the Spirit inspired the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City to erect a statue of Jesus weeping across from the bomb site. Jesus’ words in Luke 19: 41-44, as he wept over his beloved city of peace, Jerusalem - "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, if only today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes. The time will come when your enemies will build walls around you and attack you from every side. They will smash you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another within you because you failed to recognize that God had come to save you" were being address to us - "America, America, if only today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes..."

To remind us of what are the "things that make for peace," God’s Spirit provided another image in the midst of the horrible terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. A photographer happened to catch a church cross in the foreground of the exploding building. The cross of Jesus, sacrificial love, is the peace-generating kernel of every seed of peace. As we look upon the cross, we say - "Behold, the lamb of God, the seed of peace." Pray over the following list of biblical seeds of peace and allow the Spirit of God to plant them more deeply in your heart (1).
“If a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it yields a rich harvest” (John 12: 24)

“Love one another as I have loved you... No greater love than to lay down your life” (John 15: 12-13)

“By the blood of Christ we have been brought close together. He is the peace between us, breaking down barriers that used to keep us apart,... restoring peace through the cross.” (Ephesians 2: 13-16)

“Those who lose their lives for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel will find life” (Mark 8:35)

“Love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you” (Luke 6: 27,35; Matt 5: 44)

“Pray for those who persecute you; ask God to bless those who insult you” (Matt 5: 44; Luke 6:28)

“Seek first the Kingdom of God and then all these other things will be given you (Matt 6: 33)

“Forgive others and God will forgive you” (Luke 6: 37)

“An eye for an eye? No, don’t try to get even with those who have hurt you” (Matt 5: 38-39)

“Don’t judge others and God won’t judge you” (Luke 6: 37)

“Take the log out of your own eye...” (Luke 6: 42)

“Turn the other cheek; walk the extra mile” (Luke 6: 29; Matt 5: 40-42)

“Give to everyone who asks and don’t ask people to return what they have taken from you... Lend without expecting to be paid back” (Luke 6: 30, 35)

“Blessed are the poor, the meek, the gentle...” (Matt 5: 3-4, 7) “but woe to you rich and well-fed” (Luke 6: 20-21, 24-25)

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice” (Matt 5: 6)

“Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matt 5: 9)

“Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right” (Matt 5: 10)

“Integrity will bring peace; justice give lasting security” (Isaiah 32: 17)
The message of the Scriptures is the same message I received as I prayed for insight as to how I should respond to the bombing of Iraq on that ironic day in January 1991, the day we celebrated the birthday of Martin Luther King - “in the face of escalating violence, escalate love.” And the Peace Prayer of St. Francis became even more appropriate: “Lord, make me a means of your peace. Where there’s hatred grown, let me sow your love. Where there’s injury, Lord, let forgiveness be my sword. Lord, make me a means of your peace.”

How do we concretely do the “things that make for peace” and “escalate love”?

The Pledge of Nonviolence – for children, youth, families, parishes, workplaces, colleges, prisons (3) – offers us a wonderful tool for doing the things that make for peace and escalating love “24/7/365.” As the list of biblical passages linked with each component of the Pledge indicates, these components are core to understanding and practicing the peacemaking ministry of Jesus. They offer us and our students concrete ways of producing abundant peace by deeds of sacrificial love – consenting to fall into the ground and die like Jesus’ abundantly fruitful seed of peace.

Several components of the Pledge clearly call for sacrificing ourselves for others. When we truly listen to others, we set aside our own agendas and focus on them and their needs. When we forgive, we set aside our own hurts and give others a love that goes far beyond the demands of justice. When we stand up courageously for others who are treated unjustly, we risk being treated that way ourselves. When we speak out boldly for public policies that truly promote God’s peace, we risk criticism and rejection, sometimes within our own families.

Other components clearly are ways of loving our neighbors as ourselves, putting the feelings and needs of others on a par with our own - giving others the same respect as we ask for ourselves, refusing to disrespect anyone or allow anyone to disrespect ourselves. When we use helpful words (e.g., “I messages”) to express our anger, we show respect to others while challenging their hurtful acts or words to us. We can play for mutual fun and not for winning. And when we do play competitively, we can show good sportsmanship. When we care for nature by using only what we need and preserving the earth’s resources we best we can, we make it possible for future generations to enjoy the gifts of God’s creation. Dr. King’s analysis of his “giant triplets of racism, militarism, and extreme materialism” makes it clear that the levels of consumption in “the American way of life” is a primary reason for expanding US military action around the world, a real challenge to God’s peace (4).

How do we sow these seeds of peace in the soil (soul) of those we teach? Peacefully!

Invitationally. In order for our sowing to be done peacefully, reflecting the nature of the seeds themselves, our teaching must be inviting rather than imposing. This means several things. We must offer these seeds humbly, acknowledging that our understanding of what Jesus wants of us is not the whole truth, that others may and do disagree with our interpretation of Jesus’ words and deeds. But we must overcome our fear of being challenged by our students and/or their parents and offer these seeds and invite our students to reflect on them and put them into practice, sharing when appropriate how we are doing so ourselves. Finally, it is important to involve the whole
class in decisions about what we and they can do together to put the seeds (Pledge components) into practice.

By example. We must model the message, walk the walk, not just talk the talk. We can respect our students in many ways – seeing them as beautiful and affirming their efforts (“fanning their flickering flames” – Is 42: 3); learning and using their names with reverence; asking for their opinions. We can communicate better, by dealing with our own anger constructively, using “I-messages”; setting up class meetings to solve problems peacefully. We can work at listening more carefully, regularly using “active listening” (paraphrasing). We can become more willing to apologize when we make mistakes and to let go of our own grudges and forgive and pray with our students for the grace to be able to forgive those who have hurt us individually and have hurt our country. Our own willingness to reuse and recycle, to bring natural beauty into our classroom and provide opportunities to point out and savor the beauty around the school/parish/community encourage greater respect for nature in our students. Bringing playfulness and laughter into our classroom, playing games for fun rather than for winning, encouraging outdoor activities instead of computer play all help our students learn the seed of peaceful play. Telling students about our own efforts at to challenge violence and injustice, asking for their suggestions and inviting them to join us when appropriate help to encourage their own willingness to act. If and when our actions would involve challenging public policy, it is important to explain to our students our sense of patriotism – that working bring the policies of one's government closer to our national ideals and/or the message of Jesus, is an important way to love one’s country.

Creatively. The diversity of learning styles and the fact of multiple intelligences require us to use a wide range of methodologies for sowing these seeds effectively (5). Using visuals - e.g. photos and slides, student drawings, clips from videos - is critical. Songs that carry the message of the seeds appeal to all learners. Children especially love the catchy tunes of Red Grammer's TEACHING PEACE CD/cassette. Creative lesson plans on each of the seven Pledge components for K-12, plus ways of reflecting on biblical images of peace, are available in the Alternatives to Violence Kits of the Institute for Peace and Justice. The units in these Kits on “Images of Peace” and “Responding to the Violence of Terrorism and War” are also available separately under the titles THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE, for K-8 and for High Schools and Youth Groups. The most effective lesson plans for each Pledge component, generally involving some dramatic element and each adaptable to grades 3-12, are also available on IPJ's website - www.ipj-ppj.org. Reflecting and praying on each of the Pledge components deepens the experience. A CALL TO PEACE: 52 MEDITATIONS ON THE PLEDGE OF NONVIOLENCE can be used by individual teachers, whole staffs, and with the students.
How do we cultivate good soil in ourselves to be more receptive to these seeds of peace?

As Jesus tells us in the parable of sower, many of the seeds we sow are do not bear fruit, for several reasons. "The seeds that fall along the road are the people who hear the message but don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches the message from their hearts. The seeds that fall on rocky ground are the people who gladly hear the message and accept it right away. But they don't have deep roots, and they don't last very long. As soon as life gets hard or the message gets them in trouble, they give up. The seeds that fall among the thornbushes are also people who hear the message. But they start worrying about the needs of this life and are fooled by the desire to get rich. So the message gets choked out, and they never produce anything. The seeds that fall on good ground are the people who hear and understand the message. They produce as much as 100 or 60 or 30 times what was planted" (Matthew 13: 18-23).

How good is the soil of our own soul? Have the seeds of peace taken deep root in us or have we backed off at times, especially when life got hard or the message of peace got us into trouble? Have the seeds of peace in our souls been choked by our worries about what we have or need? Have we backed off from the message of peace, from a life of sacrificial love, because we have been fooled by the desire to get rich? If so, how can we cultivate more receptive soil in our soul?

Steeping ourselves in the Word of God, especially the Gospels and the Hebrew prophets, is a start. Opening ourselves up to this Word in prayerful silence each day, as well as reflecting on this Word with colleagues and others in our faith families, make for deeper roots. The biblical passages, prayers and reflection questions with the 52 meditations on the Pledge in A CALL TO PEACE are especially helpful.

Opening ourselves up to the courageous witness of others, both those who are the victims of violence and injustice and those who are challenging these evils, helps us with our own fears. Attending talks by such people, reading their biographies, and viewing videos of their lives are effective steps we can build into our faith journeys, especially during Lent. Spending time with people who have been victimized by racism, economic exploitation, violence and war, sexism and homophobia, and listening to their painful and courageous stories can put our own pains and fears into better perspective and inspire us to act in solidarity with them. The more we do this, the more we turn our "hearts of stone into hearts for You alone," as one hymn puts it.

A sense of community is also essential for cultivating good soil. Knowing that others are with us in the struggle or race helps us run with perseverance, whether it's a spouse, some dear colleagues or friends, a prayer group, our local faith community, networks near and far that we feel connected to, as well as that "great cloud of witnesses" that has run the race before us (Hebrews 12: 1).

While Jesus' parable did not identify worn out soil, there are definitely times when our soil feels just that - worn out. Just as God intends a sabbatical for the soil every seven years, teachers also need time for rest, retooling, rejuvenation, and rekindling of our vision. 1 Kings 19: 4-8 recounts how God nourished the tired prophet Elijah. Jesus feeds us the "bread of life" in the Eucharist to nourish us for the long-haul (John 6: 41-51). For teachers, there are some inspiring video models to help us here - the math teacher for E. Los Angeles Latino students in STAND AND DELIVER, the music teacher in MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS, and the violin teacher in MUSIC OF THE HEART.
How do we cultivate good soil in the souls of our students?

Many of the suggestions for us adults can be adapted for our students. We can bring Jesus alive not only through the Scriptures themselves but also through popular interpretations such as the JOSHUA books for grades 7-12. Sharing the stories of peace-filled saints, especially in drama and video, enlivens the peacemaking message of Jesus. The life of Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker in ENTERTAINING ANGELS, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador in ROMERO, Mahatma Gandhi in GANDHI, video clips of Dr. King, Francis of Assisi in BROTHER SUN, SISTER MOON (6). THE STORY OF RUBY BRIDGES by Robert Coles is a dramatic account of Christian courage and forgiveness by this 6-year-old African American girl who integrated the New Orleans public schools in 1960. Prayer services for peace that include the Pledge of Nonviolence are available in IPJ resources on the Pledge and on the IPJ website.

Loving and believing in our students in all the ways noted earlier in the Pledge and in many other ways are very important. It's much more effective to encourage our students to take next steps when we notice and affirm the steps they have already taken. Taking an interest in their interests generally has to come before we ask them to open themselves to our interests. If our students are convinced of our love, it is more difficult for them to write off some of the more challenging things we might say or do.

Helping our students name and resist the "desire to get rich" that Jesus identified as a major obstacle to good soil is especially challenging. We and they need to see that the relatively affluent life-style of most Americans is not the way it is for most of the world. Perhaps the most effective way to help students recognize their privileges, especially if they are Caucasian, is to encounter people who live quite differently. Service experiences in our inner-cities, in many rural areas like Appalachia, on Native American reservations, across the US-Mexican border, and in other parts of the world can open our students' eyes in ways that words and even videos can't do. And then to meet people victimized by poverty and racism struggling against these evils is even more inspiring, asking them how we can be their allies in these struggles.

To cultivate courage for those times in our students' lives when "life gets hard or the message gets us in trouble," there are several helpful strategies. Drawing on the experience of Gandhian schools in India committed to developing students as change agents in their society - by daily assemblies where students engage in various dimension of public performance - we can offer our students a variety of leadership opportunities and encourage speech and drama and other forms of public expression and performance. Doing service projects in pairs or small groups helps to reduce student fears. Opening them up to new experiences - from learning a new language to visiting new places - also helps.

To cultivate vision and inspire courage, there are other powerful models of sacrificial love to offer our students. The movie PAY IT FORWARD is the fictional account of a 7th grade youth who creates a project to change the world. He does three sacrificial things for others who, instead of paying him back, "pay it forward" by doing helpful deeds to three others, and so on. The story climaxes when the hero finds the courage to do the one sacrificial deed that he had been afraid of, revealing the ultimate power of sacrificial love.
The story of SADAKO AND THE THOUSAND CRANES is also one of sacrificial love, a story I shared often with students during the war on Iraq (7). Sadako Sasaki was two years old when the atomic bomb was dropped on her city of Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. She wasn’t killed, but more than 100,000 others were. By the time Sadako was in the 6th grade, she was the fastest child in her class. One day after a race, she collapsed. At the hospital, they discovered that Sadako had contracted leukemia from the radiation from the atomic bomb. Her friend Chizuco told her about the Japanese legend of the thousand paper cranes, how your best wish will come true if you make 1000. Sadako made her wish (to get well so she could run again) and started making the cranes. After several hundred, she started to improve, but by the time she had made 600, she was clearly getting worse. After making crane #643, Sadako realized that she was dying and would never run again. But in that moment of despair, she found the love and courage to make a second wish and give her last ounces of energy to sharing that wish with the world. She made one more crane and wrote that wish on the wings of her crane – “PEACE” – and prayed that her crane would fly over the whole world and proclaim: “This is our cry, this is our prayer: peace for the world.”

Concluding Songs, Prayers, and Symbols

The Peace Prayer of St. Francis shows us how to become instruments of God’s peace through sacrificial love. “Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved, as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

“Rainbow People” is the theme song from Susan Stark’s wonderful cassette tape RAINBOW PEOPLE (8). This chant articulates a vision of peacemaking from a Native American perspective, with images fully compatible with our Christian tradition - “We are a rainbow people. We are beams of golden light. We are the bridge to the dawning of a new day.” God’s vision of SHALOM is one of the whole human community (“rainbow people”) living in harmony with all of creation. Jesus is the “golden light” and, as beams of his golden light, we are truly called to be light for the world. We are the bridge by which our students connect with the wider community, breaking down barriers that keep peoples apart, as Jesus did on the Cross, advancing the dawning of God’s new day, the fullness of life.

“Wonderful World” is a more playful expression of peace for grades K-8 from the same RAINBOW PEOPLE cassette (8), reflecting Dr. King’s vision of the “Beloved Community” - “If we consider each other a sister, a friend, or a brother; it would be a wonderful, wonderful world; a wonderful, wonderful world, ah-ha; a wonderful, wonderful world.”

There are several symbols of peace through sacrificial love that could be given to students and teachers - a cross to wear as a lapel pin or chain around the neck; a paper crane inscribed with “peace” in its wing; a “seed of hope/peace” from El Salvador; or a pebble to symbolize the tiny deeds of sacrificial love we can do every day to challenge the boulders of violence.
Teaching Suggestions, Resources, and Other Notes

1. Either alone or in a group setting, as an alternative to reading these passages silently or aloud, play the “Sunset” selection of John Michael Talbot on either his THE QUIET or QUIET REFLECTIONS cassettes where he recites Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” (6: 17-31, 35). Play it twice, asking listeners to open themselves up to one of the “seeds of peace” that especially touched their mind and heart. As a further step, ask them to pray over the passage and then share some of their reflection with a person (sitting) close to them. Teachers might cut up these biblical seeds of peace and roll each one up in the shape of a seed, then sow (spread) them around the classroom, asking each person to reflect on the seed they picked up.

2. For a resource filled with biblical seeds of peace for children, see PEACE PAPERS, a collection of weekly children’s activities linked to the lectionary readings for all three liturgical cycles. Each master page can be duplicated for use in religious education classes for 6 to 10-year-olds, with a “parents page” for home use as well.

3. Other versions of the Pledge of Nonviolence (for families, pre-schools, college campuses, parishes and congregations, workplaces and prisons), plus translations of the Family Pledge in 13 languages, are available on the Institute for Peace and Justice’s website – www.ipj-ppj.org.

4. See Dr. King’s "Beyond Vietnam" (also entitled "When Silence is Betrayal" speech of April 4, 1967 (included in THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE, from IPJ). For a current biblical and political reflection on it and the relationship between materialism and militarism, see Fr. Bryan Massingale’s speech to the Roundtable Symposium of Catholic Peace and Justice leaders on February 8, 2003.

5. The visuals of the statue of Jesus weeping and the cross at the World Trade Center are available on the IPJ website: www.ipj-ppj.org. For popular videos on each of the components of the Pledge of Nonviolence, see A CALL TO PEACE: 52 MEDITATIONS ON THE PLEDGE OF NONVIOLENCE (from IPJ), where each meditation lists a popular video reflecting that theme. Popular songs and religious hymns, plus a children’s book, are also listed with each meditation. In addition to the whole program for parishes, elementary schools and religious education K-8, and Catholic high schools and youth groups, the units on “Images of Peacemaking” and on “Responding to the Violence of Terrorism And War” are available separately in attractive binders entitled THE THINGS THAT MAKE FOR PEACE for grades K-8 and 9-12.

6. The life and peacemaking message of Francis of Assisi is dramatically and engagingly presented by James McGinnis in his persona as “Francis the Clown.” For K-8, “Francis” introduces the seven components of the Pledge of Nonviolence in memorable ways. For youth and young adults, McGinnis has a 60-minute dramatization of “The Life of Francis of Assisi” that he performs in schools, parishes, and retreat settings.

7. For a fuller version of this story, see “I Want LOVE to Win” – an article in the Spring-Summer of the Circles of Peace, Circles of Justice Newsletter of the Institute for Peace and Justice (www.ipj-ppj.org/). For the complete story, see Eleanor Coeur’s SADAKO AND THE THOUSAND PAPER CRANES (Fellowship of Reconciliation, Nyack, NY: www.forusa.org)

8. The RAINBOW PEOPLE cassette tape is available from the Institute for Peace and Justice.
Other Seeds of Peace in the Pledge of Nonviolence

RESPECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS
"I praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps 139:14)
"Just like the clay in the Potter's hand, so are you in My hand" (Jer 18: 6)
"A bruised reed he will not break, nor quench a flickering flame" (Is 42: 3)
"Let the little children come to me" (Luke 18: 16)
"In the one Spirit we were all baptized, Jews and Greeks, slaves and free..." (1 Cor 12: 13)
"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (John 4: 9)

COMMUNICATE BETTER - Find safe ways to express anger & work at solving problems peacefully
"Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger" (James 1: 19)
"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4: 26)
"Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit" (Ps 34: 13)
"First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matt 7:5; Luke 6: 42)
"Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together" (Eph 4: 3)

LISTEN CAREFULLY
"The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning after morning God wakens my ear to listen" (Is 50: 4)
"I will now lure you into the wilderness where I will speak tenderly to your heart" (Hosea 2: 14)
"The greatest must become like the youngest; the leader like one who serves" (Luke 22: 26)

FORGIVE
"Be kind to one another, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4: 32)
Parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32)
"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge" (Leviticus 19: 18)
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23: 34)

RESPECT NATURE
"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matt 5: 5)
"The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the earth proclaims God's handiwork" (Ps 19: 1)
"The earth belongs to God and all that is in it" (Ps 24: 1)
"God put the human in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (Gen 2: 15)

PLAY CREATIVELY - RECREATE NONVIOLENTLY
"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones" (Proverbs 17:22)
"Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy" (Ps 126: 2)

BE COURAGEOUS in the face of violence and injustice
"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12: 9-10)
"God gives power to the faint... they shall run and not be weary" (Is 40: 29, 31)
"Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12: 1)
"Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me" (Matt 25: 40)
"If you want to be my disciples, take up your cross and follow me" (Mark 8: 34)
"If a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it yields a rich harvest" (John 12: 24)

"Love one another as I have loved you... No greater love than to lay down your life" (John 15: 12-13)

"By the blood of Christ we have been brought close together. He is the peace between us, breaking down barriers that used to keep us apart,... restoring peace through the cross." (Ephesians 2: 13-16)

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"Love your enemies; do good to those who persecute you" (Luke 6: 27,35; Matt 5: 44)

"Pray for those who persecute you: ask God to bless those who insult you" (Matt 5: 44; Luke 6:28)

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(1) This worksheet is excerpted from "Sowing the Seeds of Peace" by James McGinnis. The full essay is available on the website of the Institute for Peace & Justice - www.ipj-ppj.org. The passages on the backside are taken from A CALL TO PEACE: 52 MEDITATIONS ON THE PLEDGE OF NONVIOLENCE by James McGinnis. It and the other resources for educators, families, and parishes on the Pledge of Nonviolence are also available from IPJ. See the website for descriptions and ordering information.