

# **Study War No More**

## **By Pastor Lee Lever**

**...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nations, neither shall they study war anymore. Micah 4:3 NRSV**

I am a U.S. Army Vietnam veteran. I served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1971 at the edge of the city of Saigon, helping the military offload cargo ships at the Saigon seaport and transport the supplies to outlying units. At the time of this writing, I am the lead pastor of the Eden congregation. My experience of being part of the military in a foreign country and seeing only a small part of the suffering caused by the military mission led me to search for an alternative vision and led me to the Mennonite church. I have shared my journey with a number of Mennonite congregations and at reunions of those who served in alternative service. As a person who served in the military and discovered the Mennonites after that experience, in some ways, my story does not belong to this collection of stories. My hope is that my story will affirm these stories and their witness to nonviolence and Christ's way of responding to the enemy.

One day in Saigon in 1969, I was walking along a city street and noticed a group of children playing together. They were probably five to ten years old. I looked their way and smiled, and they responded with smiles and laughter and moved toward me. They gathered around, and I interpreted the encounter as friendly meeting between young children and an American soldier until I realized that every one of the children had a hand in one of the pockets of my jungle fatigues! I twisted and turned and jumped away from the group, and as I got several yards away, I looked back and noticed one little guy standing with his hand to his head crying. In my twisting and turning, my elbow had bumped the side of his head and had hurt him. The memory of that incident stayed with me and jostled me toward the first steps of a journey toward the way of Christ and the way of peace.

When I was there, the city of Saigon, built for a million people, was bulging with three million. The children I encountered on that street in Saigon were part of the refugee population, trying to survive in whatever way they could. Several years after my time in the military, I reflected on my encounter with the street children of the city and I wondered what I had been doing in a situation where I was harming a child, a child who was put into the position of trying to survive on the streets of Saigon because of the actions of my government and its military. I began to think about the mission I had participated in as a soldier. My encounter in Saigon was fairly benign compared to the horrors experienced by the children, families and soldiers of Vietnam as bombs and bullets tore into their flesh and land, killing and maiming precious lives created in God's image and creating wounds and scars that would last for generations.

As I reflected upon the face and impact of war and learned more about what was happening to the people involved, I came to the realization that these stories are repeated in every place and every time where there is war and violence. Everyone suffers, especially the innocent, especially

the children. I became aware of the consequences of conflict and violence taking place in the world and its impact on real people. I learned that vast resources of nations are poured into weaponry and armaments and military personnel and vast resources are taken away from the hungry, the poor, and the sick, and the oppressed. And as I became more in tune with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, I became convinced that God really did not intend for the world to turn out this way.

I came to understand that humankind was created for communion and conversation with God, for a life of peace and trust with each other and for sharing the earth's resources. I believe that much of humankind has turned away and hidden themselves from that truth, hidden themselves from God. In the biblical story, the first humans hid themselves from God and God had to ask, "Where are you?" The next generation of humans had more severe problems. Cain got angry and murdered his brother. God had to ask Cain, "Where is your brother?"

These two questions "Where are you?" and "Where is your brother or sister?" can be heard as God's ongoing challenges for humankind. These questions stir us to examine our relationship with God and our relationship with our neighbor. When we can respond in positive ways to those two questions, then we have begun the journey toward a more peaceful world, toward what God intends for humankind. I am convinced that the foundation for making peace is to respond to the one who made us for peace and to the needs of those around us.

For many years God was saying to me, "Where are you?" I realize now that as a young man I did not hear that call, or I chose to ignore it. On April 3, 1968, I enlisted in the United States Army. I was nineteen years old and did not have the slightest clue that what I was doing had anything to do with right or wrong, good or bad. Family and friends reacted as if it were the natural patriotic thing for me to do. I do not think I was untypical of many young men. I simply did not question the military and the government. I trusted them to look out for my best interests and I assumed that whatever they and I did would be honorable and just. I did not even think about the mission and goals of the military and how I related to that as a soldier.

There was a song we marched to in boot camp (basic training) that seemed an especially appropriate expression of my lack of awareness:

**Oh, you knuckleheads!**  
**You dumb, dumb knuckleheads!**  
**Marching down the avenue!**  
**Three more years and you'll be through!**

What a knucklehead I was! How numb I was to the larger scheme of things, the big picture, the way of Christ, the one who came preaching peace and ministering to the sick and feeding the hungry. I went through eight weeks of basic training designed to make me efficient at taking life, following orders and not thinking seriously about what I was doing. Talk about being out of touch with God and not caring about my neighbor!

There were other marching songs:

**I want to go to Vietnam.  
I want to kill some Viet Cong.  
Sound off! One, two.  
Sound off! Three, four.  
Bring it on down! One, two, three, four...**

I was learning childish new songs. We never counted higher than four! As a child, I had grown up in the church with songs that taught a very different vision:

**Red and yellow, black and white,  
they are precious in his sight,  
Jesus loves the little children of the world.**

And:

**We have heard the joyful sound, Jesus saves, Jesus saves. Spread the tidings all around: Jesus saves! Jesus saves! Bear the news to every land, climb the steep and cross the waves;  
Onward! 'tis our Lord's command; Jesus saves! Jesus saves!**

The churches where I learned these songs of sharing God's immeasurable love and saving lives would have sung them with vigor. And they would have with as much vigor affirmed my alliance with the military and its mission of taking lives. Something was out of kilter. I was only hearing part of the gospel.

It was about this time I began to read about the Mennonites. My father has always been interested in Amish and Mennonite life and he subscribed to the Budget and other publications and so I began to read the Mennonite Weekly Review, the Mennonite, and Harold Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision" from Guy Hershberger's book Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision. I also began to receive Sojourners magazine and the Other Side. I was being exposed to new ideas and to publications and writings that helped me understand more clearly what was at stake as I struggled to clarify my Christian commitment.

I was impressed with the beliefs of Mennonite Christians because I sensed balanced, healthy beliefs. Following Christ is central; the Bible is authoritative but not authoritarian; relationships among Christians are taken seriously; and service and peace are major commitments. I learned that Shalom is the central message of the Bible and includes very concrete acts of justice, salvation, and peace, the bringing together of faith and action. This is a major theme for a healthy Christian faith and I learned that the Anabaptists take it seriously. Centuries of persecution give testimony to those convictions. I became convinced that these people, these Christians who called themselves Mennonites and who practiced nonresistance, nonviolence, service and peace were my spiritual family. And so about twenty years ago I became part of the Mennonite Church at Lombard, Illinois, and committed my life to Christ and the way of nonviolence.

I hope that we continue to be a strong witness to peace and reconciliation. Our churches, communities and world need that witness more than ever as the culture of militarism and the politics of empire challenges the followers of the Prince of Peace. May we be a people that "study war no more."