**When Jesus said, “Love your enemies,” I think he probably meant don’t kill them.**

From a song by Linda K. Williams, First Church of the Brethren, San Diego, California

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**BEHIND THE BUMPER STICKER**

by Linda Williams

**QUESTION: WHAT IS IT THAT . . .**

- caused a normally mild-mannered pastor to honk at the car in front of him and wave the driver over to the side of the highway?
- resulted in a National Youth Conference worker literally giving the evening’s preacher the shirt off his back?
- made the shouting stop at a heated political rally?
- has been central in a young adult’s theological formation?
- daily invites an educator and relationship facilitator to “hit the pause button” to reflect on how Jesus is calling us to follow him?
- inspired a Church of the Brethren pastor to do photo-shoots in diverse and far-flung locations to celebrate that “It’s everywhere!”?
- gave one sister such challenging food for thought that she decided that, to follow Jesus’ call on her life, she needed to be a pacifist?

**ANSWER:** A little bumper sticker that reads: “When Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies,’ I think he probably meant ‘Don’t kill them.’”

Since 2003, when the bumper sticker was first made available, more than 30,000 have found their way around the world. It sprang from a song penned in 1998 by Linda K. Williams, a member of First Church of the Brethren in San Diego, Calif. We asked her to share with MESSENDER readers how “the little bumper sticker that could” began, and how its message has touched lives in the Church of the Brethren and around the world. To help tell the story, Williams invited people to share testimonies of how the powerful little phrase has touched their lives. The dozens who responded range from Hollywood celebrities and Brethren pastors to seminary professors and college students. Yet more evidence that low-key Brethren evangelism, although at times unconventional, can have quite an impact. —Ed.

**T he bumper sticker came from a song I wrote, and the idea for the song sprang from this quote from Gandhi:**

“The only people on earth who do not see Christ and his teachings as nonviolent are Christians.” What a powerful statement, and how tragic it is that, for the most part, it’s true. Most Christians do not believe that to be a Christian means to follow the path of love, peace, and forgiveness, rather than that of violence, revenge, and retaliation.

I wanted the song to celebrate that fact that the Church of the Brethren embraces Jesus’ teachings about peace. And, I figured, if I could put just a bit of “tongue in cheek” into the song, it would help grab listeners and encourage them to realize: “Hey, being a ‘Christian’ war-promoter really doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“Everybody living in the neighborhood surrounding your church should know that there are Christians who

At a recent Annual Conference, Linda Williams stopped for a photo with DGenna J. Ulrich, who was instrumental in getting a Song and Story Fest version of her “bumper sticker song” onto YouTube.
believe that we shouldn’t go to war, that to follow Jesus’ teachings means that we will love our enemies, not kill them.” Those words from [the late Brethren author and peace activist] Art Gish resonated strongly with me when I heard them years ago, and I smiled, thinking, “Yes! Each time someone reads our bumper sticker, they’re receiving that very message!”

I always love the reactions to my “silent witnessing” with this bumper sticker—or T-shirt, as the case may be. One of my favorites was from a flight attendant who tilted his head to the side to read the bumper sticker on my guitar case. He said, reflectively, “Well, I’m for the war, but, I’m for Jesus, too.” (I cheered inside, thinking “Yes! Cognitive dissonance!”) I gave him some stickers to share with his Bible study group.

We never know what impact we might make with the seeds of peace we sow, or how our actions may bear fruit we’ll never see. As Albert Schweitzer said, “No ray of sunshine is ever lost, but the green which it awakens into existence needs time to sprout, and it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in faith.”

I’m thrilled that the bumper sticker has become an effective way of letting people know that there are Christians who don’t go along with waging war. It is my hope and prayer that we in our beloved denomination will become even more intentional about sharing that message as widely as possible. I hope that, long after my earthly days are over, the phrase and concept will continue to circulate, continuing to raise consciousness, create cognitive dissonance, and cause more people who consider themselves followers of Jesus to conclude that that means they need to accept the “package deal” of Jesus’ teachings, including that part about loving our enemies, not killing them, even if killing them is perceived by some—or even the majority—to be in our national interests.

It gives me great joy to know that, with each bumper sticker that is out and about, we are sharing Jesus’ call to peacemaking, and sharing the fact that the Church of the Brethren, our beloved denomination, is a peace church!

I already knew that the sign I carried was definitely an attention-grabber. My wife and I, both 78 years young, had made the long journey to Washington, D.C., to join with others in a passionate plea for peace. When considering what message to share on the sign I would carry, I hit upon the idea of simply attaching my favorite bumper sticker to both sides of a small piece of cardboard, mounted on a tall stick.

While carrying my thought-provoking sign at the march and rally, at least a dozen fellow marchers had come close to me to read the relatively small print, then asked, “May I take a picture of you with your sign?” I enjoyed this at first, but later, wearing a bit of such attention, I handed the sign to my wife. She then “enjoyed” the attentions of one photo-shoot after another, just as I had. I had to chuckle, but I also had to ponder the power of my sign’s message.

Then it was time for us to join the march. To our left, we saw that an energetic counter-demonstration group had gathered. Tension was in the air. The angry counter-demonstrators pressed closer and closer to the wire fence which the police had put in place to keep our two groups separated.

Then the shouting began. “Commies! Communists!” Name-calling and insults were hurled from their side of the wire fence to ours. The irony struck me as some marchers on our side of the fence—while carrying signs with pleas for peace—hurled the epithets back with energy.

I had an idea. With my sign once more in hand—and with much perseverance—I slowly squeezed my way through the shouting protesters on our side of the fence. Finally, I was close enough to touch the fence, and to look into the eyes of the counter-protesters. Without a word, I raised my sign high above the wire fence which divided us.

The voice of the most strident name-caller on the other side rang loud and raucous in my ears, and I saw the intensity of emotion on his face. I saw many other faces also contorted with anger. Then, suddenly, that loudest voice was quiet.

Mystified, I looked into the face of the previously most energetic name-caller, and I saw that his eyes were lifted up, his lips moving silently as he read my sign. I was then astounded when his eyes dropped from my sign to lock onto my eyes, and he gave me a warm, genuine smile, which I gratefully beamed back at him. As we stood there sharing the moment, I realized that our side had ceased their counter-shouting, too!

We had found, and were silently celebrating, common ground—something that linked us together, heart to heart, through that wire fence.

—from former Church of the Brethren moderator and seminary professor Dale Brown
I have those bumper stickers posted all around the house—in our bedroom, in the kitchen, on the refrigerator. They remind my family what we really believe and why we believe it. I am a Mennonite and was raised Mennonite, and so was my husband. Our pacifist beliefs are at the core of our faith. Sadly, we see many people in the Anabaptist churches—both Mennonite and Church of the Brethren—throwing away these pacifist beliefs and embracing the way of “empire thinking” of this culture and country. That is why I want my family—and especially our 16-year-old son—to be reminded of our core values and pacifist beliefs. That is why I have the bumper stickers all around the house.


A 2008 interview with Mike Farrell, (B.J. Hunnicutt of M*A*S*H) ended with a lot of those “favorite color,” “favorite movie” kind of questions. The last one was: “What’s your favorite bumper sticker? He replied, “When Jesus said ‘Love your enemies,’ I think he probably meant ‘Don’t kill them.’”

Linda Williams contacted him by email recently to ask why it’s his favorite. He replied: “I chair an organization working to end the use of the death penalty. I love the bumper sticker because of its simple logic, and also because it baffles me that so many who profess to be Christians continue to support state killing.”

—Actor Mike Farrell, who portrayed B. J. Hunnicutt in the TV series M*A*S*H

This has always been my favorite quote. I love the simple logic of it. It’s hilarious and also true. The logic is unavoidable and it’s presented in such a way that you can’t help but smile or laugh. But after the laughter dies down or the smile fades, I find that I am always still thinking about it hours later. I’m pretty sure Jesus had a good sense of humor, and I wouldn’t be surprised if, while preaching the Sermon on the Mount, he paused to chuckle and clarify that yes, his teaching on “loving enemies” really actually meant that they probably aren’t allowed to kill them.

—National Youth Conference coordinator Tim Heishman

I have always deeply appreciated the bold simplicity of this statement that captures, with wry humor and profound wisdom, the essence of Jesus’ nonviolent love and challenges us to follow his call to discipleship. Would that we would all grow more faithful in practicing this wisdom on every level of our human interactions.

—Nancy Sollenberger Heishman, Church of the Brethren moderator

Guess what I saw today? On a file cabinet drawer of one of our speakers, and also on the bumper of a car here in Bethlehem, was On Earth Peace’s witness that “When Jesus said ‘Love your enemies,’ I think he probably meant don’t kill them.” Way to go OEP and Brethren peacemakers!

—Church of the Brethren general secretary Stanley Noffsinger, from the Holy Land in 2012

“In early summer 2010, my wife, Jenn, and I returned from our peace-building work in Nigeria to attend several Church of the Brethren events, including National Youth Conference. Upon arriving in Fort Collins, Colo., we got into the registration line behind [Church of the Brethren general secretary] Stan Noffsinger and a dreadlocked individual whom I at first mistook to be author and Christian activist Shane Claiborne. It turns out that this guy was not from Philadelphia but from Perth, Australia. It was Jarrod McKenna, and we quickly began to talk.

We ended up talking frequently over the next few days. Jarrod was at NYC to preach during one of the main worship times. Upon arriving in Fort Collins, Colo., we got into the registration line behind [Church of the Brethren general secretary] Stan Noffsinger and a dreadlocked individual whom I at first mistook to be author and Christian activist Shane Claiborne. It turns out that this guy was not from Philadelphia but from Perth, Australia. It was Jarrod McKenna, and we quickly began to talk.

We ended up talking frequently over the next few days. Jarrod was at NYC to preach during one of the main worship times. On the day of his sermon, Jenn and I were returning to our room and stopped by to say hello. He asked us how the youth would like it if he preached in the T-shirt with the famous phrase on it. Given his time limitation, we went to the bookstore to get one for him. But the bookstore had run out of them, so we returned and I gave him the shirt off my back.

—Nate Hosler, Church of the Brethren advocacy officer in Washington, D.C.
“My Church of the Brethren T-shirt with this slogan on it has got me into lots of Christ-like trouble. Funnily enough, it’s been mostly with Christians. It’s become my favorite shirt to preach in. In a large stadium event in India, I was asked to remove it because “it might be seen as offensive.” I said, “Only as offensive as the Gospel of the Cross.” The organizers let me wear it with a smile. When I think of the Church of the Brethren at its best, I think of the dear friends who live the message I wear on this shirt you gifted to me. Thank you!

—Author and Christian activist Jarrod McKenna

Since 2003, I have distributed copies of the bumper sticker from my medical office and human rights non-profit organization located in the heart of a non-religious community. The thought expressed on this sticker seems to resonate with people of various faiths. Some read the sticker in our reception area, pause, and sheepishly ask for a copy. A few burst into laughter and reach into the basket to “Take One,” as the sign suggests. Others ask if they can take two or more. Some smile, shake their heads and express a desire to be more loving.

Before long, we began seeing cars in our area with these stickers. Knowing there were no other immediate sources for them, I was certain they came from patients and visitors to the office. People are so touched by the thought of Jesus’ intent for our peace that they want to spread the word. Over the years, I have ordered hundreds of the bumper stickers. Today, I have about five left in my basket. I believe that’s a good start.

—Dena Lee, Physician at Imani Medical Corporation and former On Earth Peace board chair

“The Church of the Brethren has a really good bumper sticker like that. Have you seen those?” His right hand gripped mine in a firm handshake, his left index finger tapped the front of my shirt that read, “When Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies,’ I think he probably meant ‘Don’t kill them.’”

After telling Tony Campolo that yes, I indeed had seen those bumper stickers, we chatted for a few minutes before he had to take the stage for the Pray-In for Peace held outside of the White House in Lafayette Park as part of the 2006 Spiritual Activism Conference. Staff of the Brethren Witness/Washington Office attended the pray-in to show support and to be a part of the continued peace movement to end the war in Iraq, to prevent war in Iran, and to pray and work for peace in all areas of the world.

—former Church of the Brethren volunteer Todd Flory

During seminary, I was part of a solidarity delegation to visit Uganda and Rwanda. Our flight there had a layover in Nairobi. This happened to be at the peak of some political fighting after the presidential election in January 2008. Tensions in Kenya were so high that there was no option for us to leave the airport and see the city. During our layover in the airport, I was wearing a button with Linda’s quote. One of the desk clerks read my button and nodded.

She said, “That’s something people here need to remember.” I took the button off and handed it to her, and she pinned it onto her uniform. I figured that place was where the peace message was most needed at that moment!

—Audrey DeCoursey, pastor of Living Stream Church of the Brethren

This bumper sticker is why I’m here (at Camp Myrtlewood, Oregon, for Song and Story Fest, summer, 2013). I read it and thought,

“Oh, my goodness! That’s a statement!” When I go back to California [at the end of my Summer Service project], it’s going to be very much different. I’m not going to be afraid anymore to stand up for what I exactly believe.

I had stayed away from religion because, in the church where I grew up, there was so much hate toward people who were different. People from that church had told me, “No, you can’t love this way, you have to hate this way.” It’s tough; they’re telling me to hate, but I want to love, no matter what differences or sins people may have. I would hold my peace and try to understand.

Coming here, I’ve been enlightened, and I’ve found balance in my faith. I know it in my heart that my Lord wants me to love, no matter what, and I’m going to stand up for that love.

—Estella Amador is a student at University of La Verne

Linda Williams is a member of the San Diego First Church of the Brethren. For more testimonials, and information about how to obtain bumper stickers, T-shirts, buttons, or bags, go to www.BetterWorld-Resources.com.