

History moment #5: Consensus process and the Honeywell protest

The year was 1981, and Faith Mennonite Church was 20 years old; new life and vibrancy came into the congregation in an influx of young people from outside the ethnic Mennonite fold.

Fortune 100 Honeywell Corporation was one of the largest employers in the metro area, with a dozen plants and the headquarters in south Minneapolis (where Wells Fargo mortgage is now). They manufactured thermostats, computers, MX missile guidance systems and cluster bombs. The cluster bombs became the focus of a peace coalition called the Honeywell project. In May and June of 1981, Israel's use of cluster bombs in their invasion of Lebanon became the impetus for new life in the Honeywell project.

Four Faith Mennonite members were part of a core group (together with Catholic Workers, Fellowship of Reconciliation, Clergy and Laity Concerned, and Northern Sun Alliance) which organized weekly protests at the Honeywell headquarters. Faith members Frank and Julie Trnka were in charge of one of these vigils per month. A protest organized for the February 1982 stockholders meeting forced a move from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts to the downtown Hilton, presumably to limit access of demonstrators. The Honeywell Project asked four demands in a letter sent to chairman Edmund Spencer:

1. to stop production and development of conventional weapons
 2. to stop production of nuclear weapons systems
 3. to convert production to peacetime uses
 4. to give one million dollars—the total contributed yearly by Honeywell to the United Way—to victims of cluster bombs in Vietnam and Lebanon.
- These demands were defeated by the stockholders by 98 to 2.

The core group subsequently began plans for a vigil, demonstration, and act of civil disobedience which would involve blocking the entrance to the Honeywell headquarters. A participant observed that the Mennonites made a significant contribution to the tone of the protests.

“Our major contribution was in shaping the statement to Honeywell that expressed our hope of what Honeywell could become if it ceased to be a war industry. We also talked about symbols. Some acquainted with Berrigan-led demonstrations in the East suggested the use of blood as a symbol. Others of us viewed this as too violent. Our voice was heard. The sharing of bread emerged as the central symbol of the action.”

Five FMC members were hoping to participate—two in civil disobedience and three in support positions. They discussed their possible involvement with their small group, with FMC pastor Myron Schrag, and the church council. The council decided to set up two informational meetings on subsequent Sunday afternoons with the intention to come to a congregational consensus about whether to support Faith members in this action. The congregation was asked to support in three ways:

1. make a statement of support for the five in the November 4 action;
2. make a donation to the Project for a leaflet explaining the witness, and
3. write letters of concern to congressional delegates and to the chairman of the board of Honeywell.

At the same time at FMC, an Adult Education class was studying the consensus process, using curriculum from the Mennonite church called “Justice and the Christian Witness”. Pastor Schrag preached a sermon focused on “Holy Obedience.” There was significant interest in the congregation to use consensus for addressing this potentially divisive issue.

After two informational meetings, the congregation met to decide whether to support the protesters. Agreement was that the congregation would move forward only by consensus; if anyone dissented, no decision would be made. Members were asked to subscribe to one of four positions: 1. agree, 2. agree if certain modifications were made, 3. do not agree but will not stand in the way, or 4. do not agree. This meeting drew the largest attendance on record. Small groups met first. Out of these groups, suggestion was made that wording be changed from the protesters being “congregational representatives” to “we support Frank Trnka and Troy Couillard with our prayers and our financial support if need be.”

One participant observed, “The consensus process elevated the minority position. Everyone had to say what he or she thought.” In one of the small groups two older people commented, “When this was first discussed we couldn’t support the action, but after the two informational meetings we could support it.” At the end of the process all participants but one supported the action. “Jim” had to leave early and the congregation decided to delay final decision until he could be contacted.

A member of Jim’s small group was designated to talk with him; he learned that Jim’s primary objection was that he felt that all legal and political means should be exhausted before acting outside the political process. When asked what constituted “exhaust all possibilities”, he felt he was being railroaded. He met with the pastor and circulated a letter to other congregational members. Some felt offended and felt he was deliberately

subverting the process. A number of other members, as well as one of the deacons, talked further with him.

On the following Sunday the congregation again met to continue the process. Jim did not attend. A member whom Jim authorized to speak for him reported, "Jim no longer dissents. He agrees to the consensus. He does not wish to stand in the way. He has reread John Howard Yoder's book *Nevertheless*, which impressed him as to the varieties of gifts in the church." And further, "If I must stay with the militarists of Honeywell or with the Christian pacifists, I stay with you." The congregation reached consensus and agreed to appropriate \$100 to prepare and publish a leaflet for distribution at the action.

Five members of Faith were among those engaged in the direct action on November 4. Two others led a group of six hundred in singing at the rally and many more congregational members were present for the rally, which incorporated singing, silence, and the breaking and sharing of bread. Loaves of bread were distributed. Each person broke a piece for his neighbor saying, "this bread represents..." filling in a word of information, witness, or hope. 36 persons were arrested for blocking entrances to Honeywell. One was a member of Faith.

A member of the Steering group reflected on FMC role in the project:

Mennonites had an influence far beyond their numbers, particularly as to the form of the action, the use of symbols, and in the reinforcement of Christian motivation...one demonstrator, a self-proclaimed agnostic, was always interested in hearing what was happening at Faith...the last core meeting was terrific. We talked about forgiveness, seeing the opponent as a child of God, preparing oneself to forgive one's opponents, and never losing sight that our methods are aimed to bring others to a change of mind and spirit.

Years later, the pastor reflected on this experience:

That whole process, potentially so divisive, really seemed to bring our congregation together. Although not everyone was or is convinced that civil disobedience is proper, through that process we seemed to have developed an affirmation for another's Christian experience and witness...I think that process of reaching consensus on such a controversial issue was a real turning point for our congregation."

The Honeywell project continued to conduct protests and civil disobedience actions through the end of the decade. Faith Mennonite members continued to participate.

The largest action resulted in 577 arrests, one of whom was Erica Bouza, the wife of the police chief Tony Bouza. In 1990 Honeywell spun off all of its defense-related contracts to a new entity called Alliant Tech, which continues to have its headquarters in Minneapolis. Although the company denies that the protests played any role in this corporate decision, many involved in the protests think otherwise. Certainly it was a decision made to divert attention from Honeywell's munitions production. Honeywell moved its corporate headquarters to Morristown New Jersey in 1999.

For the last 14 years a weekly protest has been held at Alliant Tech, now at its headquarters in Eden Prairie, Wednesday mornings from 7 to 8 am. FMC members including Katy Gray Brown (who was arrested at a civil disobedience action) have participated in the past. Alliant continues to manufacture cluster bombs as well as depleted uranium munitions and guidance systems for Trident Missiles. Cluster bombs continue to be used in Afghanistan. For every 1000 pound bomb dropped, 10 to 40 live bomblets are left on the ground waiting to explode if picked up or disturbed. The submunition bomblets are painted bright yellow, the same color as the humanitarian food/aid packages dropped in Afghanistan by the US.