

Mr. Charles Walker

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Promoting Gandhian Values outside India-1991

Charles Walker was born in 1920 in Pennsylvania. He completed B.A. in 1941. Even as a student, he abhorred violence and became a conscientious objector to World War II. He was a Board Member of the Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors to War. He was imprisoned for this activity and detached to hospital service. In 1944-45, he did Graduate work in Sociology of Religion at the New York University. For some time he worked as a High School teacher and also as a coach for games and athletics. He then worked at the Haverford College.

Soon Walker evinced a keen interest in Gandhi and made a deep study of Gandhiji's life and techniques of social action, especially civil disobedience and satyagraha. He was the Director of the Gandhi Institute for well over 10 years. The Institute specialises in matters concerning the theory and practice of non-violence. Walker is a co-author of, and has contributed chapters in books on themes like Gandhi's relevance for our times, theory and practice of civil disobedience, and, non-violent action and social change. Besides, he has taken a leading part in organizing a number of national and international seminars on Gandhi and his philosophy, and has presided over many of them.

But Walker is more widely known as an activist and has made a significant contribution to Peace Activities, Civil Rights Movement and other movements involving issues of great human import. In all these fields, he excelled as a group organizer from local to international levels, and as originator and leader of several campaigns against the authority of the State. He also emerged as an outstanding resource person for training and author of training manuals. He has even functioned as an administrator of action projects and a peace consultant.

Walker was a Founder Member of the World Peace Brigades (WPB) and was Chairperson of the training commission. He was also a Co-organiser and Member of the Directorate of the Peace Brigades International (PBI). Both these organizations co-ordinate peace activities the world over.

Peace Brigades sends unarmed peace teams invited into areas of violent repression or conflict. Their work is to reduce the violence and support local social justice initiatives through a. protective accompaniment of those whose lives are threatened, to foster reconciliation and peace dialogue among conflicting parties and to educate and train in non-violence and human rights.

WPB aided in the Zambian independence movement in Africa and interceded during the Chinese-Indian border conflict. In 1972-74, World Peace Brigades volunteers were instrumental in the Cyprus Resettlement Project which carried out reconstruction and reconciliation work among Greek and Turkish refugees. Walker was a member of the Project.

PBI established international Peace Teams in Guatemala (1983) and El Salvador (1987) countries that have suffered thousands of kidnappings and murders. The El Salvador team is developing curriculum materials and conducting teacher training in conflict resolution and cooperative skills for use in Salvadorian schools. In Guatemala, the PBI team provides workshops and resource material on human right upon request. Similar work is going on in Costa Rica and Sri Lanka.

Walker has led several non-violent struggles and agitations for protesting against aggressive designs of rulers. He took initiative in the Culebra project in Puerto Rico, which resulted in the US Navy's halting its use of the island for naval training for the Vietnam war. He went to Namibia and took part in the protest against its continued occupation by South Africa. He was also the originator and co-chairman for the Vigil at Fort Derrick, a 22-month long appeal to end preparations for germ warfare and establish a world health centre.

Walker worked as a Coordinator for 6 national organizations for local and regional programmes to oppose nuclear weapons testing; a Project Director of the Panama Project for protesting against U.S. intervention policy there, and an Organiser and/or Director of peace action projects, such as: protest at the White House, Vigil at Cape Canaveral, anti-draft actions, etc.

In the Civil Rights Movement, Walker took up the issue of integrated schools and was Coordinator for Philadelphia for the National Youth March on that issue. Another issue he fought was the education of the poor. As part of the Poor Peoples' Campaign in 1968, he initiated the training section of Poor Peoples University. He has written extensively on the Civil Rights Movement.

In 70s and early 80s, as member of the Friends Suburban Project, Walker devoted himself to a number of problems faced by ordinary citizens affecting their individual and community life. These problems related to crimes like murder, rape, kidnapping, child abuse, souse abuse, gang fights, etc. The Project trains citizens for tackling these problems through community mediation. The Project also focused people's attention on police excesses. Walker has taken particular interest and lead in enlightening people about communal reconciliation and training/counseling them on crisis management.

Among the other activities of Walker, mention must be made of his campaigns for abolition of capital punishment and prison reform. He not only did extensive propaganda work on these matters through writing, speeches, radio and TV appearances, etc, but also organized several protest meetings and action projects and courted occasional arrests, especially on the question of death penalty.

It is noteworthy that Walker, wife Marian and their children have lived for 20 years in an inter-racial community founded to give impetus to integrated housing.

