

Engineering Peace: Nonviolence, Transformative Action, and Building Community

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I will introduce my topic of “engineering peace” by describing the path that led me into this topic. As a progressive Catholic, I struggled, and continue to struggle, with the question of how to live nonviolently in a world that seems to require, at a minimum, participation in institutions that wield power and authority through the use of lethal force or its threat. These issues came to a particular head during my graduate school years as I attempted to reconcile the war-enabling function of engineering with my convictions and vision for working for peace and justice. Although I was not performing any military or defense-related work, I became embroiled with the question of how to avoid such activities in engineering.

I realized, among other things, that focusing only on criticism and escape from complicity was incomplete and even debilitating. What led me back to engineering was a gradual discovery of the wealth of opportunities to advance humanitarian and peaceful causes. But to engage in these activities requires participation in community – in my case a community of thoughtful students and colleagues, a faith community, and a creative community in my neighborhood and city – vital element of the process of Transformative Action that has been recently formulated and promoted by the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy.

Borrowing from themes articulated by Catalano, I will pose a general question against which engineering endeavor can be evaluated, in the sense of a design constraint: “does the current work advance the cause of peace and/or minimize requirements to invoke direct or indirect uses of force?”. I will argue that in general, responding to this question requires community engagement at several different levels. I will close by discussing a concrete example – inspired by my membership in a community-owned, cooperative business in Milwaukee – of how engineering can be conducted in a community oriented framework and simultaneously serve the wider community.