

MAKING PEACE: With martial arts**STEVE THOMAS '86**

Goshen

Pastor, Walnut Hill Mennonite Church (walnuthill.in.us.mennonite.net)

Director of Peacemakers, Inc.

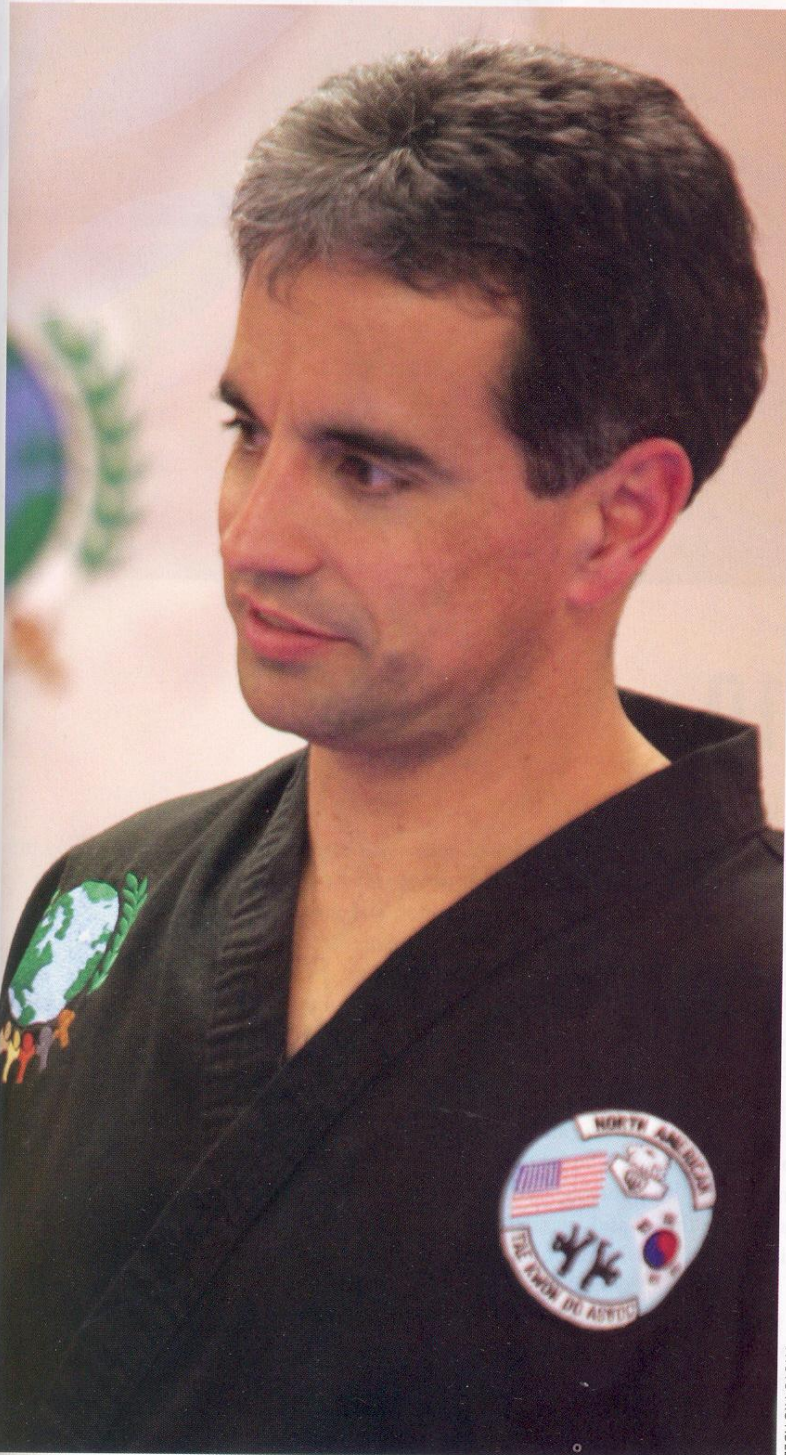


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Steve Thomas, a pastor at Walnut Hill Mennonite Church in Goshen, said he was inspired to study and eventually teach martial arts by a somewhat unlikely source: John Howard Yoder '47, the world-renowned Mennonite theologian and ethicist who advocated nonviolence and pacifism. While studying for his master of divinity degree at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Thomas recalled that Yoder delivered a lecture in which he encouraged Mennonites to learn aikido, a Japanese art of self-defense based on principles of nonresistance.

"As a student, that made no sense to me – to learn this art for nonviolence and to teach others," Thomas said. "Too often in our witness, we have been very clear in what we don't do, but we have not been as clear in what we do, such as in terms of responding to violence and how to teach our sons and daughters how to respond to violence."

Popular movies and TV shows have given martial arts an inaccurate and bad reputation, Thomas said. "I typically remind people that historically martial arts originated as systems to teach a philosophy of peace and a way of peace." Thomas said most traditions of martial arts have as their essence nonviolence, empowering people with a philosophy of peace, and a system for counteracting violence. More than just restraining violence, martial arts offer a proven way to reduce aggression, increase self-control and form respect for others. The only "fighting" that martial arts encourages, Thomas said, is conquering the enemies within – fear, anger and inner conflicts.

After becoming a pastor, Thomas said he started taking classes in Tae Kwon Do, a Korean art of self-defense. By the mid-1990s he was teaching it to others. Eventually, Thomas, his brother Phil Thomas '87 and Wes and Karen Higginbotham, both gifted instructors of Tae Kwon Do as well as members of Thomas' congregation, developed the Peacemakers, Inc. program. Its mission: to empower people to live in peace by training children, youth and adults in verbal and physical skills for preventing violence and transforming conflict. The program served nearly 700 children, youth and adults in the community in 2009 and now is being offered at two local elementary schools – Parkside and Chamberlain.

Besides his work as a pastor and with Peacemakers, Thomas teaches the core Goshen College course "Transforming Conflict and Violence" as an adjunct professor of peace, justice and conflict studies. Among the goals of the course are to try to link the college with the community and to explore the effective application of nonviolence in daily life. "We explore how to extend the way of Jesus and be peacemakers in our family, community and the world," he said.

– By Richard R. Aguirre