

THE GOSPEL OF PEACE IN A LAND OF WAR

I was numb from the terrible news: a number of our close friends and colleagues had been murdered while returning from a medical outreach to a rural district in the Central Asian country where we served. It was as if my emotions shut down. I brought those who had been killed to mind one by one, reflecting on what I remembered of them and how our lives had intersected. The process was emotionless as I played a slide show of each one in my mind.

In the following days and weeks the numbness gave way to other manifestations of grief. I was angry with the perpetrators. I was sad beyond words. I was confused about where God was in all the mess. I asked the question often asked in such moments of madness: “What does all this mean?” In my struggle, I came to the conclusion that meaning was something that I could have a part in fashioning. If the loss of my friends was to lead to a significant outcome, I could play a role in that outcome.

Over a year later I met to discuss peacebuilding with a number of Virginia Tech students in a room that had been witness to the worst school shooting in US history. Thirty-two people were killed and seventeen wounded in April 2007 when a mentally unstable student took out his rage on an innocent community. The university, in response, converted the use of the rooms where the tragedy occurred into its

newly formed Centre for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention.

I recounted to the students my experiences of loss and the efforts we were now making to respond appropriately to our tragedy by opening a peacebuilding programme through our agency – in much the same way that Virginia Tech had responded to theirs. Our country of service, well known for its violent years of war, seemed ripe for such a venture. A number of projects had been started over the years to emphasise nonviolent approaches to conflict.

We launched the peacebuilding programme at a memorial service on the second anniversary of the killing of our colleagues. After a time of remembrances, the gathered group of fifty watched a video about the nonviolent protests in 1960 in Nashville, where blacks were barred from eating at lunch counters. In the reflections after the viewing I remember two responses from

members of one of the minority communities present. They thought that maybe this kind of thing could happen in the US, but would never happen in their homeland.

In the two years since then, the peacebuilding project has held seminars, coaching participants in skills for conflict transformation in the workplace. Our able co-workers have trained community development facilitators in “do no harm” practices as they help empower villagers to solve their own problems. Classes in ‘Peacebuilders’ English’ have helped students in our learning centres gain both conversational skills and a new awareness of peacebuilding. Teachers conducting literacy lessons among poor women in the community have been trained in peacebuilding in the home. One woman reported that her family has remarked on the positive changes in her behaviour since she took the peacebuilding class. “I’m not as angry as I used to be,” she said.

We were not alone on our journey. Others were working in peacebuilding before us and it has been to them that we have looked for guidance. The Mennonite community has a number of organisations committed to peacebuilding. Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in the US advised us in our project start-up. Some of us attended EMU’s Summer Peacebuilding Institute, while others attended a similar study programme at the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute (MPI) in the Philippines.

The ethos of the development agency Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) has been one of fostering peacebuilding activities in all their programmes. MCC has undertaken to fund our peacebuilding project. They have also sent expatriate co-workers as consultants to provide direction for the programme. MCC have trained local workers in peacebuilding and have sponsored two of our local colleagues in their studies at MPI.



Not only is physical healing needed from the damage caused by violence, but also emotional healing.

While our Mennonite friends have supported our venture in peacebuilding in practical ways, Interserve has not been without its own voice in shaping our ministry. In its foundation documents, Interserve reflects on its values as regards relationships by affirming that our "... commitment to relationship shapes the way we work. Where there is breakdown of relationships in society (individuals and communities) we pray and work for reconciliation."

What does that look like in practical terms? In our case it meant setting up a programme of peacebuilding activities that raise awareness in a war-torn country. What about in other places where Interserve works? Most places where Interserve Partners serve are, thankfully, not suffering on-going war. However, a painful past often lies just under the surface. In our ministries of reconciliation where we work towards the transformation of lives and societies, we often uncover hostilities and find ourselves unwitting peacemakers.

What about right here in New Zealand? We in Interserve NZ have recently been on a journey to develop a greater awareness of our bicultural heritage. Where is that journey taking us? Will we uncover a history of missed opportunities and, worse, injustices inflicted by members of the body of Christ over the two centuries since the gospel was first preached on these shores? We can relegate such events to the dead pages of our past, or, where we find that the memory of

those events hinders the work of God's Spirit in our land, we can own them and work towards reconciliation in our own times. It is all well and good to go to regions of conflict in the world with the gospel of peace, but we need to be aware that the broken may not be far away from each one of us.

My English students were elated when they poured into my early morning classroom. Many of their number had sat outside Parliament and fasted for days in protest at the discrimination being practised against their people at a university. The government had researched their grievances and had sacked the man behind the discrimination. Their marginalised community had won a moral victory through nonviolent means. "Nonviolent action can work," my students remarked. Theirs were fresh voices from a new generation finding a different way forward amongst generations at war.

The journey will be a long one. More of our friends have been killed in recent months. More lives have been cut short in their peaceful service in a land of war. More widows grieve and more questions will be asked. I cannot say in what ways these recent losses will be remembered. However, from our experience I can see that an intentional plan to promote peace can yield a fruitful outcome in the lives of those we touch for Christ's sake. ☞

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