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Peace Building and Reconciliation in Divided Societies

The present article is mainly based on the writings of John Paul LEDERACH, a Mennonite peace researcher and practitioner, about his experiences and studies on peace building and reconciliation, and on a WSCF CESR seminar held in the summer of 2004.

I. Putting Yourself in the Picture

As a first step in the process of reconciliation and peace building, the participants should engage in an exercise to make them think about their own identity and their nationality and ethnicity.

They are asked to meet in smaller groups in the corners of the room (this part is called *corners exercise*) and exchange shortly their views and self-images on the following issues and topics:

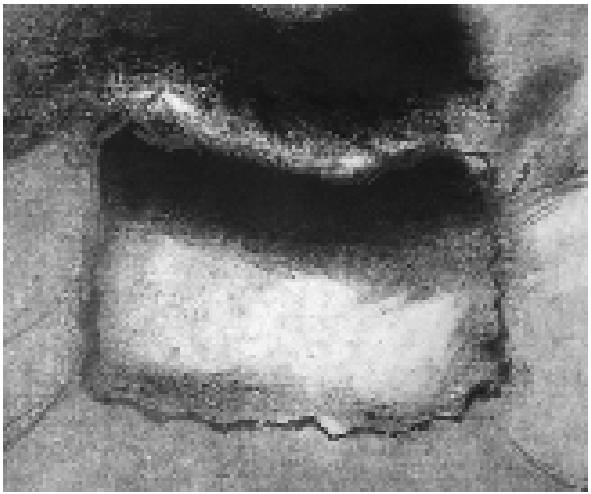
They should tell each other which nationality they are and how important they would rate belonging to this nationality on a scale from ten (it is very important) to one (it is not important at all).

They go into groups of their own nationality (Austrian, Czech, Magyar, Polish and Slovak). They have to tell, which past or present conflicts they perceive that their own group has with any other nationality or ethnic group.

After these stories, all the participants have to rate these conflicts according to their potential of escalation into violence from five (it is very high) to one (it is very low, or it does not exist at all).

Before the next round we read Psalm 85 and the group is asked to split following the key verse of the Psalm which reads: "Truth and Mercy have met together, Peace and Justice have kissed."

Each group should first brainstorm images and meanings that come to their mind when they think about, respectively, the concepts of truth, mercy, justice and peace. Then they should imagine their concepts as a person and find out what she would have to say about her role in conflict and conflict transformation, what



her positive and negative aspects would be and what she could or could not contribute or achieve in conflict resolution.

In the dialogue that develops, it becomes clear that truth, mercy, justice and peace all have specific roles in the process of transformation of a conflict, and that they are interdependent. LEDERACH insists that all four aspects need to meet and talk to each other, and the "place" they all come together he calls reconciliation.

II. Three Basic Assumptions About Reconciliation

In the second part of the process, we try to develop some deeper understanding of what reconciliation really includes and how peace building in deeply divided societies could be described.

LEDERACH puts three basic assumptions at the centre of his thoughts, which are driven by a strong emphasis on a holistic and dynamic view of conflict transformation and the human person in it, in opposition to a merely mechanical or static approach of conflict "resolution" or "management."

Relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution. This means that reconciliation is not pursued by separating different conflicting parties from each other and minimizing their affiliations, but rather by (re-)building relationships as the centrepiece of a system of conflict.

Reconciliation represents a place of encounter where concerns about both the past and the future can meet. Therefore reconciliation allows space to express grief and anger about experiences of loss and to acknowledge these feelings on both sides.

At the same time reconciliation must envision a shared future for the opponents in conflict, because they will stay dependent on and related to each other; and only by this will they have the chance to change the present situation.

Finally, if we want to achieve reconciliation, we need to look for new, innovative ways and methods which are able to embrace paradoxes – seemingly contradictory concepts like truth and mercy, justice and peace – and to bring them into balance, because all the poles are needed to find a comprehensive way of going forward on the path to reconciliation.

III. A Conceptual Framework of Peace Building and Reconciliation

John Paul LEDERACH explains his model in the context of a specific form of conflicts which are regarded as the main type prevailing in present days: long lasting (protracted), deeply rooted ethno-political conflicts inside nation states, which are based on issues of identity (tribe, community, religion or nation).

This focus is therefore not directly applicable either to situations we would describe as "classic" wars (between nation states or in the form of intervention of armed allied forces in a country, eg. Afghanistan or Iraq), or to situations we might find in our Central and Eastern European contexts, where some potential for conflict may exist (latent conflicts) but has not escalated into open use of violence. Nevertheless the model provides us with different "lenses" for a comprehensive view of conflict transformation which can be explained on three levels.

1. Timeframe

As a first step Lederach describes the necessity and interconnectedness of different timeframes in the work for peace and reconciliation. Faced with situations of immediate crisis, the outbreak of violence or hostilities, *actions* must be taken to counter the crisis (e.g. negotiations for a ceasefire or mediation, but also relief work for the affected population) in a very short time range of two to six months.

But very often one crisis follows the other when nothing is done to address the situation in a longer-term view. Therefore the next phase (one to two years) has to look beyond the actual crisis and enable people to (re)act differently, eg. by providing training and *preparation*.

The end of the peace building process is marked by the *vision* of the situation in more than twenty years, which allows people to dream about their future and is necessary for orientation along the way.

How should the political, economic and social systems look in an envisioned peaceful future? How are the relations between people imagined? The link or bridge between the short-term measures of action and preparation and the long-term vision can be described as a *design* or construction plan for building peace.

Which steps have to be taken in the next five to ten years to come from the present to the envisioned future situation? This aspect of time shows very clearly that peace building has to be thought of not only in a short-term way, but in generational thinking and cannot be achieved instantly.

2. Types of Actors

A second approach to the situation is the method of looking at the levels of actors involved in the conflict transformation process and at their different possibilities and methods applicable in this process.

At the *top level* we have highly visible actors like political or military leaders with decision making power, and so the peace building activities on this level concentrate on negotiations, mediation or other diplomatic efforts.

The *middle level* of actors consists of leaders of different sectors of a society (eg. religious, intellectual or humanitarian leaders) who are respected in society but not in a position to exert direct power.

This level can engage in activities like problem-solving workshops, peace commissions and trainings in conflict transformation; and it is in a crucial position because it links the top and the *grassroots level* of actors.

This last one comprises local leaders (eg. of NGOs, refugee camps, social workers) who are influential at the basis of a conflict-affected society, but normally not in larger politics, and who do grassroots trainings, prejudice reduction and psycho-social work in post-war trauma, among other activities.

Lederach stresses the importance of an organic rather than a hierarchical (top-down) approach to peace building and the formation of "peace constituencies" across the vertical and horizontal lines of conflict in a society.

3. The Web of Reconciliation

As a summary of the processes of peace building, Lederach turns his attention to the broader processes of transformation rather than focussing on technical tasks of transition. Again he depicts four interwoven circles or levels, which all must be dealt with in an adequate way.

On the first level the various *tasks*, the *agenda* of peace building, have to be identified and addressed, and then they have to move through a technical and logistical phase of implementation (*transition*).

This is embedded in the *transformation* processes that reach towards the deeper questions of changing the persons involved and their social networks, and is coupled with the *spiritual* dimension, a "journey toward an encounter with self and the other" which should result in the healing of relationships or reconciliation.

As an example Lederach describes the process of demobilisation of combatants in Nicaragua after the peace accords from the socioeconomic (financial aid, vocational training) and socio-political (disarmament, integration of soldiers) to the socio-psychological (dealing with identity, trauma, grief and emotions) and spiritual (healing, acknowledgement and forgiveness) dimension.

IV. Steps to Reconciliation: Examples and Case Studies

In the last part of the process the participants split into groups again and work on four texts presenting different models or initiatives for reconciliation: the first is the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* in South Africa.

The second is a *Listening Project* in Eastern Slavonia, Croatia, carried out by the Centre for Peace, Non-violence and Human Rights

in Osijek. The third one is the *"Four Opinions"* – podium talks by former soldiers from all sides of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And finally, the fourth one is the *"Oslo Channel"* about the peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians leading to the peace agreement in 1993.

In the final presentation of the group work, we consider the question of which models or steps to reconciliation the examples propose for which situations, and whether they could be applied to other conflict transformation processes.

The International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) was founded at a time (during and after World War I) when war-torn countries and societies were looking for ways towards reconciliation.

The main Christian denominations had supported their respective nations in waging war, but not so much in looking for ways to overcome hostility and violence and work for justice, peace and reconciliation.

Throughout its history – from a Christian-ecumenical and Western to an interreligious, worldwide organisation – IFOR has been vigorously promoting active non-violence as a way of life and as a method of personal, social and political change.

Hopefully, this article is able to give a small impression of the issues and working methods by which we constantly and unceasingly try to pass on our experiences and ideas of non-violence to the next generations.

Suggested Reading

LEDERACH John Paul, *Building Peace. Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, 1997.

LEDERACH John Paul, *Remember and Change*. In HERR Robert – ZIMMERMAN – HERR Judy (eds.), *Transforming Violence*. Scottdale, 1998.

MÜLLER-FAHRENHOLZ Geiko, *Versöhnung statt Vergeltung. Wege aus dem Teufelskreis der Gewalt*. Neukirchen-Vluyn, 2003.

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