

Some thoughts on Reconciliation

I have been part of the Community for Reconciliation (CfR) for nearly 30 years and Chair of Trustees for nearly 8 years. For a small organization we are quite complex and it is not easy to say in a few words what we are about – CfR is different things to different people. You may have visited Barnes Close, the home of CfR. But CfR is much more than that. A recent review of our overseas work was very encouraging. Projects in Romania, Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and previously India are well supported. But you know most about Footprints and the fact that you are reading this is demonstration of your support for the work that Clive Fowle and others have been doing in the former Yugoslavia for many years. I recently visited Croatia and Serbia as part of a small group led by Clive and Inderjit Bhogal and just over a year ago I visited our partners in Kenya and Rwanda. So what have I learned about reconciliation in these and other travels?

Relationships are broken in many situations – between individuals within family life, in churches and in society at local, national and international levels. Reconciliation is positive but often costly. It involves finding a creative way forward where there are differences; healing where there is hurt; opposing injustice and working for peace. We therefore seek reconciliation within ourselves, between each other, and between God and us. At the heart of this is the costly sacrifice of Jesus, bringing about our reconciliation to God.

While it can be summed up in a short paragraph, the outworking of reconciliation varies in different contexts. There are however, common themes.

My visit to Rwanda, just over 20 years after the genocide came the same week as the Africa Leaders were meeting in Kigali. Security was tight as planes came and went bearing various Heads of State. (You will remember that the genocide was prompted by the shooting down, over Kigali, of a plane carrying the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi in 1994). However my first impressions of Rwanda, having previously spent two weeks in Kenya, were of a clean, quiet country with many new buildings. Yes, there are poor areas in Kigali, but nothing on the scale of the slums around Nairobi. I was told that it was safe for me to walk to the shops and cafes of the central business district on my own - in daylight. This was not the case in Nairobi where the Catholic Retreat House where I stayed was surrounded by high walls and a big gate manned by at least one security guard. I was advised not to venture out, not even to the market a couple of blocks away. I was driven everywhere. Having visited Kenya in my 20s and, with a couple of (female) friends wandered around wherever we fancied, this came as an unpleasant surprise.

So back to Kigali, where I was welcomed by a group of young women learning to sew. At the end of their course they will have a skill and with some business support and a smattering of English they will be able to earn a living. These are girls born around the time of the genocide, often as a result of rape, with no family support. They were interested in my family and when one discovered I have a son in his 20s, did her best to convince me that she would be an ideal wife for him!

At Rukumbura, a small village, an hour's drive from Kigale, I was welcomed by a group of women singing and dancing. They showed me their banana plantation, rainwater harvesting, bee hives, sewing and carpentry classes - all set up with overseas support. CfR has recently sent them money to buy 30 goats. All these resources are for the benefit of the whole community - not just those who are able to work. The majority of adults are living with AIDS as well as the psychological trauma of past events. When I asked whether they get fed up of well-meaning, middle-aged, white women visiting, they replied "No, it makes us feel safe."

There are many villages like Rukumbura. Our partners in Rwanda have facilitated countless mediation workshops and other projects in the last 20 years. Is this very different from those workshops led by Clive and Judith in Croatia? Probably not. However, I was struck by the Government's decision to release thousands of perpetrators of the genocide from prison - the prisons were far too full and those who had killed less than 100 people - deemed to be lesser criminals - were sent back to their villages. There, they were tried in the Gacaca Courts and now live alongside the families of their victims. Such prisoners, doing community service, keep the city and countryside clean and tidy. One important element of the Reconciliation Workshops is that everyone eats together. This is initially a problem as each side is convinced that the other will poison them - they refuse to eat and to speak, until with prayer and patience one person will share their experience and another will say that her experience was similar. Gradually they all share and eat together.

It is estimated that about 90% of Rwandans will say that they are Christians, and the church has considerable influence. Communities meet regularly for worship, prayer and teaching. Undoubtedly there has been a vast amount of healing and reconciliation, however . . . remember I mentioned a plane crash in 1994 was the catalyst that started 100 days of killing. Within hours of the crash, road blocks were set up and guns were readily available. All was prepared in advance for this genocide. Did no-one see it coming? Did no-one try to stop it? What did the churches do? Where was God in all this? Can we prevent something similar happening again? What is our responsibility?

In the Genocide Memorial in Kigale, there are displays of other such conflicts around the world, including the former Yugoslavia and the Holocaust. I believe we must be prayerful and vigilant - and ready to speak up or to act when necessary.

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