

Report: The Problems of Peace

The following is a report on the Mastery Foundation's work in Northern Ireland during July. I hope you will take the time to read it and find out more about the magnitude of the possibilities and work ahead of us in 2004.

July 23, 2004



The Problems of Peace

Early in July, I spent 10 days working in Northern Ireland. What struck me most was how serious, how urgent, how difficult, and how largely invisible are what, for lack of better language, I will call the problems of peace.

For the most part, the violence of "The Troubles" is gone and Northern Ireland is enjoying its longest period of peace since 1968. No wonder then that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is predicting a fifth consecutive year of increases in visitors, largely due to peace.

There was also news in July that one of those visitors next spring is likely to be Pope John Paul II. He will find a very different island than the one he last visited in 1979. That year almost 90% of Irish Catholics attended church weekly; today less than 30% do. And 25 years ago, it wasn't considered safe enough for the Pope to cross from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland. If he makes the trip this time, it will be in large part to visit the North and affirm the peace process.

All this is a radical change from my first visit to Derry-Londonderry seven years ago. Then, it was common to see British Army patrols in armored vehicles and to be stopped and questioned at checkpoints. On this trip, even though there are more British soldiers in Northern Ireland (12,500) than in Iraq (9,000), they were nowhere to be seen. No soldier has been killed in Northern Ireland since 1997, and no policeman since 1998.

Even so, there are tensions and deep-seated issues that need to be worked out if peace is to last.

Marching Season

July is the height of the marching season in Northern Ireland. The marching season runs from Easter until September, with more than 2,600 Protestant marches taking place in almost every city and

village. Members of the Orange Order, the largest Protestant organization in Northern Ireland, parade wearing bowler hats and orange sashes, and carrying large banners. Often they are accompanied by pipe or flute bands.

The marches commemorate the victory in 1690 of Protestant Prince William III over England's last Catholic King, James II, at the Battle of the Boyne on July 12th. Hence, the largest parades are in July.

Some of these marches, because they pass through (or want to pass through) Catholic or nationalist neighborhoods, cause tension and even violence between the two communities. Oddly enough, 1998, the year the peace agreement was signed, was particularly violent. Here are some 1998 statistics from the police [then called the Royal Ulster Constabulary or RUC] on incidents between 6 a.m. Saturday, July 4th and 6 a.m. Tuesday, July 14th:

- a total of 2,561 public order incidents recorded by the RUC
- 144 houses damaged in attacks
- 165 other buildings damaged
- 178 vehicles hijacked
- 467 vehicles damaged
- 615 attacks on members of the security forces, including
 - 24 shooting incidents
 - 45 blast bombs
- 76 police offices injured
- 284 people arrested
- 632 petrol bombs thrown
- 2,250 petrol bombs recovered by the RUC
- 837 plastic baton rounds fired by the RUC

The last few years have been relatively quiet. Even so, July remains the most popular time for residents to go away on vacation. Normally, we avoid scheduling programs in Northern Ireland in July. This year, however, there were those in Derry-Londonderry who wanted to participate in the Community Empowerment program, and early July was the time that suited them best.



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We did make one concession to the marching season by beginning the program on Tuesday, July 6th rather than Monday, July 5th. This was because the parade most associated with violence over the past 10 years was scheduled to take place on Sunday, July 4th at a little place near Portadown called Drumcree. We knew if there was trouble at Drumcree, some of the community leaders attending our program would need time on Monday to deal with the reaction in their communities to it.

But the biggest news out of Drumcree this year was no news at all. Members of the Orange Order went to Sunday services at Drumcree parish and then marched down to the bridge and police barrier below the church, handed over a note of protest at not being able to continue down the Garvaghy Road, and left. Unlike previous years, the oldest of all the Orange Order parades, dating back to 1807, took place without incident.

A week later, there would be violence during a July 12th parade in North Belfast. But even that situation played out in an unusual way – the rioting was stopped not by the police but by members of the Sinn Fein party and republicans who intervened and calmed the situation. The actions of the police will now be reviewed by the Police Ombudsman, another peace-time addition to handling conflict.

The Slower Urgency of Peace

Late one night several summers ago I listened to a young activist talking on the phone as he hitched a ride with a friend and me from Belfast to Dublin. There was trouble brewing between rival factions back on the streets of his neighborhood, and his advice was needed to keep the situation under control. I remember wondering at the time if he would find the work of peace quite so exciting or fulfilling.

For many of those caught up in the struggle and violence, there is an element of urgency and righteousness, a sense of having a role to play in a larger drama and a very immediate feeling that you make a difference. The everyday work of peace seems duller and quieter by comparison – lots of meetings and paperwork. And the results tend to come more slowly while the frustrations are numerous and less easily dealt with.

It was knowing this that prompted the involvement of the Mastery Foundation in the first place. We have the kind of tools that make a difference once the violence subsides — tools for building relationships, restoring trust, dealing with the past, and creating new conversations and new possibilities for the future.

Building a Foundation of Relationship and Trust

Perhaps the most empowering tools we can give grass roots and community leaders are those that build authentic relationship and trust between people who have a long history of mistrust, fear, and even hatred of each other. Only when people share a background of relatedness and trust are they equipped to really communicate and work out their problems.

It sounds easy enough, but anyone who has tried it will tell you that merely getting people together for the equivalent of singing Kumbaya does nothing to address the real issues and feelings at the heart of the conflict.

Let me illustrate the difficulty by repeating a story told by a Catholic woman to a Mastery Foundation participant. The Catholic woman received a phone call from her husband, who like many men in Northern Ireland has found work outside the country. In the course of this work, he has become friendly with co-workers who are also from Northern Ireland but Protestant. Now he was calling his wife to say he was sending her £100 through the wife of a Protestant co-worker.

The day the Protestant woman knocked on her door, the Catholic woman – knowing who it was and knowing the visitor had her much-needed household money – could not bring herself to go to the door. Instead she hid in the back of the house, hoping the Protestant woman would go away. Eventually, the phone in the Catholic house rang. It was the Catholic woman's husband calling to say the woman was at the door with the money; why wasn't she answering the door?

The Catholic woman finally went to the door, opened it, took the money, and quickly closed the door. She went back into her house trembling and

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feeling physically ill. Her mind was racing with all the things she could do with the money in the envelope she held. She had seen a table in the shops for £99. She could get rid of this Protestant money by buying the table, but then what would she do for groceries and wouldn't the sight of the table always be a reminder? Perhaps her mother would take the money in the envelope and give her other money in exchange. But why would her mother want to touch it?

Finally, as she sat agonizing over what to do, it came to her that perhaps it was not the Protestant money in the envelope that was making her ill, but the ideas in her own head.

To Americans, this must sound like an extreme example of the divisions within the society of Northern Ireland. I can assure you — and more importantly, the community leaders who participate with us can assure you — it is not. It is the kind of problem they face every day in their work. And unless it is resolved, it is the kind of problem that will prevent a lasting peace and a functioning democracy.

The Community Empowerment Program

The two-day Community Empowerment Program we held in Derry-Londonderry is specifically designed to give participants an experience of creating relationships and trust across divisions and creating new possibilities to empower the work they are doing.

This was the second time we offered this program in this city, and we did so specifically at the invitation of local leaders who had participated with us before. This core group is committed to applying and teaching what they had experienced in earlier programs, as well as to bringing other community leaders into the conversation.

The two days were led by me, Allan Cohen, Mary Breslin, and Jinendra Jain — a new volunteer with the Mastery Foundation. Jinendra, with his years of practice as a Buddhist, brought a new dimension to the periods of quiet and reflection. Depending on the program, periods of silence or of Centering Prayer, are an integral and invaluable part of what we offer. Too often, those whose lives are committed to grass roots work and to peace and

reconciliation neglect to take the time to replenish themselves.

Cistercian monk and author Thomas Merton says: "There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by the multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes one's inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of one's work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom, which makes work fruitful."

One of the thirty participants was Ahmad Hijazi from Israel. Ahmad came to Ireland in 2002 with the first large group of Israelis to participate in the Intensive and then declined to participate in part of the program because he disagreed with some of the content and delivery.

Nevertheless, he found it hard to escape the questions raised by the Intensive and the ideas discussed. Over time, as he thought about it, he realized there was value there for him and perhaps for others. He has invited us to come to his family village of Tamra and work with the people there, and participating in this program was part of his commitment to make that happen.

Because so many of the participants were intent on using what they learned in specific projects in their communities, we added a day to work with them on tools and ways to do that.

An Expanding Network

During the time I was there, we also had dinners in four different cities for those considering our invitation to participate in Intensive I this fall. Each guest has been recommended to us by a past participant as someone who is making a difference at the grass roots level and would benefit from what we have to offer. The dinners are a chance for them to meet others who have attended the Intensive and to check us out as well as get answers to any questions

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they may have.

When we began five years ago, no one knew the Mastery Foundation, and more often than not they showed up out of curiosity. Now there is a very robust network of grass roots and community leaders who know us and who – more importantly – through participating with us have come to know each other. The fact that most of the guests at these dinners were nominated by more than one person is just one more indication of the network’s existence and its reach into the communities of Northern Ireland.

Indeed, the network is already international in scope. For the second summer, two participants who met at the 2002 Intensive – Amit Lesham from Israel and Margaret Geelan from Omagh – organized a visit of Israelis and Palestinians to meet with their Protestant and Catholic counterparts in Northern Ireland.

Looking for a Political Way Forward

Alongside the grass roots problems are the political ones. Inscrutable in the best of times (at least to outsiders), the current political situation seems best described by the term stalemate.

The original Belfast or Good Friday Agreement reached in 1998 and endorsed by popular vote, provided for a devolved government and the establishment of a legislative assembly. (A “de-voled government” is one where certain powers are devolved from a state level to a more local level, in this case from the government of the United Kingdom in London.)

In December 1999, the Northern Ireland Assembly, made up of both unionist and nationalist politicians was finally set up to share power, with ministers and committee members drawn from both sides of the political divide. Since then, different disagreements among the various parties have resulted in several suspensions of the devolved government, the most recent one in October of 2002. When the devolved government is suspended, power reverts back to the government of the UK, known as direct rule.

Elections for the suspended assembly were held in November 2003 in hopes of reaffirming the agree-

ment and restoring devolved government. But moderates on both sides lost votes to Sinn Fein and to Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party which refuses to share power. Hence, the current stalemate.

None of the community leaders I talked with felt the situation was likely to change soon. There are too many issues to be resolved – policing, decommissioning paramilitary weapons, demilitarization of army bases and the security presence. Still, no one wants or expects to return to the previous culture of violence.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton recently summed it up this way: “I think it (the political process) is going through a period of buyer’s remorse - where people are having second thoughts. But I can’t imagine they would not want to go forward.”

Meanwhile, everyone assumes work to find a way forward is going on behind the scenes. By some reports, if the rest of the marching season passes quietly, Tony Blair’s government will make another attempt to strike a deal between Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionists and Sinn Fein that will restore power sharing.

Bringing New Possibilities to the Problems of Peace

The Mastery Foundation will return to Northern Ireland twice this fall. We will hold Intensive I for a new group of 50 to 60 grass roots leaders. This is our breakthrough program, the one that produces a real transformation in how the participants see themselves and their work. We first began developing this program five years ago with Peter Block and Werner Erhard. We now have a design that can be led by our most experienced volunteer leaders.

That has freed up Peter and Werner to develop and lead Intensive II. This advanced program will focus on what it takes to have participants deliver on their promises and turn the possibilities created in Intensive I into accomplishments.

The women and men committed to bridging their divided communities and creating a future all those in Northern Ireland can share need all the empowerment and support they can get to take on the problems of peace and succeed.

