
Global Peace Services USA

...an idea whose time has come

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Building a Peaceful Society

Michael Wessells, a professor of psychology at Randolph Macon College, Ashland, VA, spoke at the annual GPS membership meeting on October 25 in Washington, DC. As the senior technical advisor and consultant for the Christian Children's Fund (CCF) Dr. Wessells is well qualified to talk about the effects of war and violence on children living in the conflict situations of Iraq and Sierra Leone. He concluded his presentation with his thoughts on how to prepare future peace workers.

Realizing that the first part of any humanitarian effort has to be a careful analysis of the situation, the Christian Children's Fund, with UNICEF and five other agencies, did a survey in Iraq last summer to assess the post-war perceptions. The results showed that the Iraqi people believe they are much worse off now than under Saddam Hussein. In the mixing of military efforts with humanitarian ones, the US has not only failed to bring peace, but has also created an environment ripe for terrorism.

The failure to have a better life in post-war Iraq revolves around two primary issues: the lack of security and the lack of electricity. The rise in organized crime and violence in the neighborhoods, the scale of drug and alcohol abuse by young people, and the immorality have shocked and outraged the Muslim parents. Half the population of Iraq is under eighteen years of age. For safety reasons, children are kept at home where the brutal temperatures increase the stress. In addition to the extreme discomfort the shortage of electricity has caused, it has also given rise to a conspiracy theory. If the United States is the most powerful nation in

the world, why isn't the electricity being restored in a more timely fashion? The question becomes, "Does the United States want to dominate Iraq?"

Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone is one of the most impoverished of the war-torn countries in the world. Dr. Wessells addressed the huge problem presented by the former child soldiers. These young people were either abducted into the military by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) or were attracted to it by the ideology and the offer of training. As soldiers the youth joined in the violence and destruction of the conflict, hacking off people's arms and carving their chests with razor blades. Many say these former child soldiers should be treated as war criminals, prosecuted and never allowed to return to their homes. CCF asked can they be reconciled with society and re-integrated into their communities. If so, how?

The CCF began a re-building process in the city of Makeni in the Northern Province of Sierra Leone, and the location of the RUF headquarters. In the beginning there was no thought of peace at the grassroots; the local villages didn't understand that they must be part of the peace process. Dialoguing with the local communities was the first stage. What would make the most difference in the lives of all the children? The paramount need was for a school, which they had never had, and for a medical facility that would extend the lives of the children, one-third of whom die before their fifth birthday. From the start, the CCF learned that the communities and these young people can do very positive things.

Plans were made for a center for civic work. Construction was begun by a mixture of soldiers and citizens, ex-combatants and non-combatants, RUF members and former Civilian Defense Force (CDF) members. Working side by side and sharing a common goal reaffirmed their common humanity.

There was a realization that both sides had suffered and that the child soldiers had the potential to give back to the city. The ex-combatants received a stipend that enabled them to buy food and clothing. For the first time they saw hope for themselves in civilian life. They could help determine their own futures. This transformation of attitudes, resulting in the healing of the lives of young people, is the work Wessells does with a passion.

Workshops on reconciliation were run simultaneously with these civic works. How did people in the past deal with issues that fractured the community? Traditions of reconciliation and non-violence were re-awakened and applied as a means of resolution. Stigmatized and ostracized, the boy soldiers needed to keep a low profile and conduct themselves with humility to gain acceptance. When arrangements had been made by the parents, the youngster would prostrate himself on the ground in front of the local chief, put his hand around the chief's ankle and tell his story truthfully and with remorse. A parallel project, a local purification ritual, restored harmony for the former girl soldiers and signified their new life. With community service the young person could continue to make amends and recover a sense of civic virtue and membership in the community.

Preparing Future Generations of Peacemakers

Talented undergraduates and graduate students want to do humanitarian work but they lack the essential tools. Channels to provide linguistic expertise, cultural understanding, and above all, relevant experience are incoherent and scattered. Structuring the interplay between classroom and fieldwork presents a challenge. Most faculties don't understand their mission to be service and are opposed to the concept. Their vision is that academics must be about the acquisition of knowledge and research, or it is not doing its job. While some faculty members are lukewarm to the idea of service, the remainder understands that the pursuit of knowledge and service together can be a transformative experience.

In working with students in the field, Dr. Wessells has seen the challenges to peace service when students are not adequately prepared. Those who approach their work with a patronizing air or as tourists can do serious damage. Longer and more systematic peace service training that includes prerequisite courses and a screening and selection process is necessary before a student embarks on an intercultural experience. A regional approach with many colleges supervising the internships in the field for a full year or semester could provide a positive opportunity for graduate students. Dr. Wessells concluded by saying that he resonates with the kind of service-learning approach GPS is taking, one of thinking systematically about how to prepare the next generation for conflict analysis and how to build the skills essential to healing and reconciliation.

A Forum on Peace Service: the Role of Education and Training

Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, VA
March 26, 27, 28 2004

You are invited to join us. Sponsored by Global Peace Services USA

Miracle in the Maine Woods

The United Nations has proclaimed 2001 through-2010 as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World. With children at the center, the reduction and elimination of violence are the greatest gifts we can give.

The “Seeds of Peace” camp in Otisfield, Maine is one response to an international effort to promote peace among youth. Since 1993 more than 2000 teenagers from 22 nations have come from war-torn areas of the world to learn the necessary skills. The intent is that they will get rid of stereotypes and build friendships. Their home governments have chosen them to come based on academic achievement and leadership skills. At camp they speak only English and wear the same green T-shirt with the Seeds of Peace logo.

Camp Director Tim Wilson has made this community of 300 people run smoothly, but it was John Wallach, a Hearst Newspaper correspondent and foreign affairs editor, who got Israel, Egypt and the Palestine Liberation Organization to agree to work together on a peace camp. Those who come to Seeds of Peace do all the things young people typically do at summer camp. For three-and one-half weeks the young people, mostly between ages 14 and 16 and mostly from the Middle East, swim, eat and sleep side by side and get instructions in the arts and in competitive sports. But it is the co-existence groups that are the heart of the program. Intentionally organized by conflict regions, twelve campers from different sides meet daily for an hour and a half with a facilitator. Here they speak to each other directly, trying to understand their “enemy” and to exorcise their pasts.

Stephen Worchel, a professor of psychology at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, has a National Science Foundation grant to collect data to find out if this works. What does it work on? Whom does it work on, and for how long?” The real success of the Seeds of Peace program depends on the answers to these questions. Fifty years ago there was the Robbers Cave Experiment on intergroup conflict and resolution. The children at camp were divided into two groups. Rivalry spontaneously occurred, escalating into name-calling, food fights and physical violence. Then a series of challenges was created that would force the two groups to work together for a common goal. After six days most of the original hostilities were wiped out. Cooperation promoted harmony.

Worschel’s research is still in its infancy, but preliminary results do show there is a change when the youngsters go home. The most interesting and unexpected effect, and the one that seems to have some degree of longevity, is that their self-esteem increases. They begin to see themselves as people who can make a difference. The views of the outgroup—the enemy—also got more positive.

Seeds of Peace is an example of non-formal education that promotes the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviors that points toward a global culture of peace.

I claim to be no more than an average person with less than average ability. I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.

Gandhi

The Community of Saint Egidio

The Community of Saint Egidio is an outstanding example of peace service. The most well-known of its achievements is its leading role in bringing an end to 16 years of civil war in Mozambique, in 1992. This was the culmination of two years of patient negotiation by a small number of the community who had already established themselves in the country. When the danger of war loomed again in 2001, it was Saint Egidio's founder, Andrea Ricardi, who initiated a dialogue that led once more to a peaceful settlement.

It is this successful work that explains, at least in part, why notices about the Saint Egidio Community appear on the list serve on the United States Institute of Peace, and why the Community received the UNESCO Peace Prize in 1999. Henry Kissinger, who was on the award committee, highlighted the Community's "contribution to human understanding and to solving religious, political and ethnic conflicts."

The Community of Saint Egidio was founded by Andrea Ricardi, now a law professor at the University of Rome. While still a high school student in 1968, with a few friends he settled in the slums on the outskirts of Rome. They called themselves the Community of Saint Egidio, named for the church where they met to pray. They soon founded afternoon schools for children, now called Schools of Peace. Today the Community is in more than 60 countries in 4 continents. There are about 40,000 members, a third of whom are in Africa. What unites them is a spirituality of friendship, which is grounded in listening together to the New Testament and a consequent commitment to live a

more authentic life, which leads them to begin freely to be instruments of a wider love for everyone, and above all for the poorest. Members gather as frequently as they can to pray together and are often joined by others.

Friendship with poor people led Saint Egidio to understand better that war is the mother of poverty. In this way love for poor people, in many situations, became work for peace. Peace work takes the form of protecting peace wherever it is jeopardized, helping to rebuild it, and facilitating dialogue where it has been lost. In the words of the community, "The means of this service to peace and to reconciliation are the weak means of prayer, of sharing difficult situations, meeting and dialogue." It is clear that "weak" here does not mean easy, but "weak" in contrast to efforts to win by force.

Another public work of the Community since 1987 is ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. The Community is committed both at the grass-roots and the international level to arrange annual meetings, conferences and prayer gatherings, where those of many different faith communities can look for ways to work together for peace.

In July of this year, Saint Egidio was invited with an official observer delegation to the Summit of the African Union, which was attended by almost all the heads of State of the continent. At the opening of the Summit the Saint Egidio delegation presented to the heads of State 300,000 signatures of young Africans to a proposal of a way out from war, corruption, and resignation before AIDS, malaria, and poverty.

Much violence is based on the illusion that life is a property to be defended and not a gift to be shared.

Henri Nouwen

Peace Organizations in Germany

On September 25-27, 2003, I had the privilege of participating in the annual meeting of AGDF (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Dienst fuer den Frieden, e.V) in Weisendorf, near Erlangen, Germany. This is an umbrella organization for about 35 peace organizations in Germany. While they operate at many levels, from local organizations confined to a city to chapters of worldwide networks, they all share a religious outlook. While most of the groups are Protestant in origin, some were primarily Catholic, and many engaged in ecumenical activities that are inter-religious as well as “ecumenical” in the older Christian sense. Indeed, we met in a conference center operated by a Third Order Catholic organization, a center named after Edith Stein, a well known convert from Judaism to Catholicism, whose membership in a Christian religious order did not spare her execution at Auschwitz because of her Jewish heritage. It was personally inspiring to see the variety of projects these groups are involved in – from efforts to introduce peace education into local school systems to lobbying with the federal government, from trying to encourage more peace action by the religious institutions to encouraging students to study abroad. One member organization regularly sends volunteers to places that suffered destruction and/or tyranny during the Hitler era; they helped to rebuild Canterbury Cathedral and have had delegations in various parts of the United States and Israel in past years.

My presence there was the result of an invitation to tell them a bit about peace activities in the United States. They had suggested that I speak about the peace movement, but I ultimately convinced them that it was necessary to speak of a variety of peace movements if they were to catch the flavor of pluralism characterizing the United States. There is, of course, plenty of pluralism in the various groups pressing for peace in Germany too, but not nearly so wide as what which we experience here. While we take for granted the perspectives of certain Asian religions and cultures at inclusive peace gatherings in the United States, these are still somewhat exotic

phenomena in Germany. Most of these groups were committed to the vision of peace developed in various international ecumenical meetings in which peace, justice, and environmental protection form an inseparable group of concerns. I was asked to comment on three papers, two of which had been developed in and for AGDF; in all three, the triumvirate of peace, justice and environmental protection was dominant. While there is concern for the “spirituality” of those working for peace, I talked to no one who began with the theme and activity of meditation as the key to any meaningful peacemaking.

As you might imagine, this was not a group of persons well disposed to the recent international activities of the Bush Administration. Indeed, I found that to be generally true outside of these groups in talking to Germans with whom I had brief conversations. There was a strong nostalgia for the days in which the United States had seemed to be a, or even the, champion of internationalism. While I experienced no expressions of personal hostility, I was frequently asked how things could have changed so rapidly and so radically in the relations between our two countries. I sensed a strong desire to rebuild the relations that had existed between our two communities.

In keeping with this desire, many of them expressed keen interest in establishing or extending international contacts between groups involved in peace work. This is, as you might imagine, a conviction of my own as well, and was a major personal motive for my participating in their annual meeting. Many of these groups train volunteers to participate in areas of major conflict around the world. They tend to focus on potential volunteers who have completed their vocational preparation, but are in a position to volunteer for a period of 2 to 3 years. Indeed, AGDF has developed a set of criteria by which to judge the adequacy of various training efforts. They therefore find novel the GPS idea of introducing peace service preparation into American undergraduate education institutions, but see how this could complement the

kind of training that they do. Representatives of several member groups were interested in learning more about GPS USA, and several conversations revolved around possibilities for cooperative work. Among many possibilities could be placements for Americans who graduate as certified to do peace service finding positions in organizations headquartered in Germany.

Perhaps a new kind of meeting ground between peace seekers from many nations will be the Nonviolent Peaceforce that recently placed its first group of volunteers in Sri Lanka. While the initial group is

small, they have been well trained and will continue to receive training in Sri Lanka. One of their policies is to work with groups that are already there and to gather volunteers from many nation states to form their teams. The first team is equally divided among volunteers from the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere. The German government recently gave this organization a substantial grant, underlining another difference between Germany and the United States. The Germans seem to have a greater willingness to devote tax monies to peace making. However, a recent email from Germany complained of reduction of support from the various political units of the country.

Harry Yeide

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