

Space For Peace: Grassroots Peace-building in Conflict Zones

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

It is a rehabilitation project of conflict-affected communities as a result of 4 wars in Pikit from 1997-2003. The communities are inhabited by Christians, Muslims and Indigenous People and are called Space for Peace communities – a geographical, psychological and emotional space where civilians feel safe to return after the war. Supported by the military and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front through negotiations conducted by the parish and village officials, the Space for Peace communities are declared by the people themselves. The declaration appeals to the military and MILF not to make their villages as battleground of their forces.

The project is comprehensive in the sense that it addresses both the visible and invisible effects of war. In partnership with several local and International NGOs, the parish with 12 full-time staff, implements socio-economic projects that include shelter, agriculture, livelihood, water and sanitation, and health education. It also implements psychosocial intervention, gender awareness seminars, education on the UN Guidelines and Principles on Internal Displacement, and culture of peace and dialogue seminars that include history of Mindanao, conflict analysis, conflict resolution skills, cultural dialogue, interfaith dialogue, healing of biases and prejudices, visioning and ritualization.

CATHOLIC CHARACTERISTICS AND ITS SOURCES

1. The inclusive **compassion** of Jesus that embraces everybody; his way reveals the **universal love of God** for all mankind. **All God's creatures** come from Him; they belong to the **same human family** and live in the **same world**.
2. Use **biblical teachings** on **forgiveness, love of neighbor** and **peace**. In the Bible Jesus rejected the “eye for an eye” Jewish teaching and instead exhorted his followers to forgive their enemies not only 7 times but seventy times seven times. He challenged the exclusive and limited practice of love of neighbor that excludes non-Jews and extended this teaching to all those who are in need regardless of who they are. His first message during his appearance to his Apostles was Peace and repeated it thrice. Likewise, the biblical meaning of ‘**shalom**’ is not just inner peace but holistic to include good health, harmonious relationship, justice and food.
3. **Theological foundation** that teaches respect for the **sacredness of life**, the person being made in the image and likeness of God. It is **promoting socio-economic, political, cultural and religious rights** of everybody and **denouncing human rights violations** perpetrated by the military and the armed opposition. **War is perceived as cruel and a crime against humanity**.

4. **Understanding of the Church and its missionary character.** The Church is not an end itself. It is a leaven, a light, the salt of the earth. It is God's instrument of love, healing, peace and justice in the world; a means in the building of His Kingdom on earth.

5. **Social Teachings of the Church** on engagement and involvement with all strata of society. The Church encourages Catholics to get involved in the transformation of society.

6. **Vatican II documents**, encyclicals, papal exhortations, synod documents that **promote Interfaith Dialogue.** This includes *Nostra Aetate*, *Lumen Gentium*, *Ad Gentes*, *Ecclesiam Suam*, *Redemptor Hominis*, *Redemptoris Mission*, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, and documents of the **Federation of Asian Bishops Conference, Ecclesia in Asia**, and **Plenary Council of the Philippines.**

7. **Linking with the Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Social Action** of the Archdiocese and the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, **Bishop-Ulama Conference**, various **local and international NGOs, academe and media.**

8. **Operating under the parish structure and mobilizing basic ecclesial communities.**

9. Anchored on the spirituality that there is **basic goodness** in the heart of every individual. We relate with the military, rebels and local government officials based on a **dialogical attitude** and not on confrontational and adversarial approach. It is **planting the seed** of goodness not knowing if and when it is going to grow. But we have faith that only **goodness will triumph in the end.** It is a **journey** with the people without detailed plan and allowing goodness to evolve not in our own time but in God's time. It is **submission** rather than control.

PRINCIPAL PARTNERS

1. **CRS** other **local and international NGO's** (OXFAM, Canada Fund, UNMDP, PDAP, PBSP, MIVA, Balay Rehabilitation, Balik Kalipay, **military, armed opposition (MILF)**, MNLF, **Local Government Unit, religious leaders and barangay officials.**

IMPACT IN THE WIDER CONTEXT

1. Space for Peace is a grassroots initiative and a **collaborative effort of all stakeholders.** It is a **peace process at the horizontal level** that is meant to **complement the peace process at the top or at the vertical level.** It is a product of the realization that not even a peace agreement can bring peace in our communities as long as there is an **unseen war** going on in the hearts of the people of Mindanao because of historical animosities and deep-seated biases and prejudices. It is slow and tedious process. It is **like building blocks.** You don't build by starting from the top. **You build from the bottom and up.**

2. The Space for Peace communities have become **one of the models** in grassroots peace-building where scholars, practitioners and students of peace-building and interfaith dialogue visit and **exposurists** go to learn lessons from the communities.

CHALLENGES

1. **Some people, sometimes your own, let you feel that what you are doing is wrong.** It is a new ministry in the Church and not everybody understands it, lay leaders, priests and religious alike. There is a need for an intra-religious dialogue among church people.
2. **Demand of expansion from other barangays.**

LESSONS AND INSIGHTS GAINED

1. **Commitment must be rooted in faith** and in Christian traditions as well as other religious traditions.
2. Need to have a **good vision** and it must be **inclusive** so that it can be **shared and owned** by everybody.
3. **Engage the principal actors** (military and armed opposition) and engage them in a **dialogical approach**. It means believing in their **basic goodness** as well.
4. Address both the **visible and invisible dimensions** of the conflict.
5. **Empower communities** so that they themselves will **sustain the peace** in their own communities. Act not as an actor but as a **facilitator** in the whole process.
6. **Respect existing structures** in the community. Avoid creating unnecessary structures that disempower the local governance and may unnecessarily create rivalries among leaders.
7. Establish **personal relationship** with Muslims and other tribes. Listen to their **stories**.
8. **Collaborate with other stakeholders** (NGOs, academe, media, religious leaders) in a multi-tract approach. Peace is too complicated to be accomplished by one institution alone. **Don't work only within the confine of church structures and networks.**
9. Recognize the importance of **peace education and role of religions** as powerful instruments in peace-building. If people can be trained for war, certainly, they can also be trained for peace. Take importance of **story-telling** as a methodology.
10. Learn paradigms and frameworks from the evolving process. Exercise **critical appreciation of models** that may not be appropriate with the context and local culture.

11. Think small. Follow the rhythm in the community. Peace-building is **not a linear task but a cyclic process.**

CONCLUSION

I used to go to remote villages to say mass. During the month of June, when rain starts to fall, you see vast fields practically bare. It does not mean though that nothing is happening just because you do not see anything on the ground. The seeds have been planted and soon they will grow.

(A sharing presented during the Second Annual International Conference on the Catholic Peacebuilding Network held in Waterfront Hotel, Davao City on July 13-15, 2005.)