

"Regarding the pain of others"

A Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand^[*]

I visited Mexico when I worked for Amnesty International. Near the border with the USA there is a free trade zone full of shanty towns which house the workers in the nearby factories. I learnt the dreadful story of that place. That over the years, many young women had disappeared. Mothers held photos of their daughters for us to see: the photos and the memories were all that remained of precious lives. The women just sat there. No one knew what happened to the girls, and no one seemed prepared to find out. But their bodies keep on appearing in the fields. And as I listened to their stories, I remember thinking; this could be me, with a picture of my own daughter. I was overwhelmed.

At home, I watch the news. Genocide in Darfur, unending fighting in the Middle East, Iraq and Afghanistan, ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka; the violence of poverty and social injustice at home and world wide; violence against women and children and old people; injustice and lack of keeping faith for indigenous peoples. The distance detaches me.

We don't tend to look at it and think those are our children, our parent, our grandparent, our brother or sister or friend because, day after relentless day, we simply couldn't bear it if it were.

In the face of all this, often we feel simply helpless. There doesn't seem to be anything much usefully that we as individuals, ordinary people, can do. We don't seem ever to know enough anyway, and even if as Christians we believe that any response should be a non-violent one, we don't know how to make one.

This was exactly the thinking which led a British lawyer, Peter Benenson, to the founding of Amnesty International over forty years ago. It is also a part of the motivation of a group which has been working over the last year to establish a Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in a University here in Aotearoa. The Centre is intended to be as independent as possible in a University setting and provide degree courses on all aspects of peace theory and practice, from international peacekeeping to domestic violence, from ethnic conflict to indigenous rights, from restorative justice to theories of non violence. It is modelled on the highly successful and influential Centre at Bradford (UK) but it is to be grounded especially and uniquely in the peace history of all the peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand. It will provide short courses for peace activists - and for all of us and practical on the ground experience will be part of some of its courses and its research methodology.

Why have such a Centre in a University? Won't it be just another talk fest? A University Centre will be a sign that peace-making is being taken seriously; in the same way as we train doctors, lawyers, accountants, policy makers, so peace makers too can benefit from engaging in and reflecting on both the theory and practice of peace building in a range of contexts and cultures.

While the Centre will probably begin with courses at Masters level attracting students from here and overseas from a wide range of disciplines, it is intended to expand to include undergraduate, doctoral and short term (continuing education) programmes.

The idea for the Centre has been guided by three Trustees and a Steering Group representing a range of interests. This group has held a number of meetings around the country to gauge popular interest and support and has raised over one million dollars in donations, set up a database of over 600 supporters and established contact with a number of overseas institutions. It has invited expressions of interest in hosting the Centre from New Zealand Universities and has recently agreed to enter into negotiations with the University of Otago. While one University will serve as the host university, a central focus of the group has been to set up a collaborative model, with other Universities and indigenous peace centres involved in planning and delivery. From the beginning the group has included tangata whenua representation and such continued representation is seen as essential in the planning and delivery of the Centre.

For people of faith this Centre has another dimension. If we are to really take to our hearts the Gospel call to love others,¹ to love our enemies,² and to follow Jesus' example and teaching of non-violent action and response, then should we not bring to this task all our resources of reason and experience as well as passion and faith? Walter Wink³ has made the point that responding to violence non-violently is not a natural reaction for human beings: it has to be painstakingly learned and practised. It is our hope that the new Centre will provide opportunities to do just that.

**Margaret Bedggood,
December, 2006**

Margaret Bedggood is one of the trustees of the Aotearoa New Zealand Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, and was for six years a member of the International Executive Committee of Amnesty International.

Footnotes:

¹ John 13 : 34 - 35

² Matt 5 : 43 - 45

³ Jesus and nonviolence. A Third Way (Fortress Press 2003)

[*] Written for 'Just Living', published by the **Social Justice Commission** of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia.

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