

Reflections from the CENTER FOR RECONCILIATION

The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 855)

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... (2 Corinthians 5:18)

“In the last few years, reconciliation has become one of the "hottest" topics in the increasingly "hot" field of conflict resolution. It refers to a large number of activities that help turn the temporary peace of an agreement which ends the fighting into a lasting end to the conflict itself. Through reconciliation and the related processes of restorative and/or transitional justice, parties to the dispute explore and overcome the pain brought on during the conflict and find ways to build trust and live cooperatively with each other.... Reconciliation matters because the consequences of not reconciling can be enormous....Without reconciliation, the best one can normally hope for is the kind of armed standoff....At worst, without reconciliation, the fighting can break out again...”

- Where have we seen the consequences of not having true reconciliation between alienated people or groups?

“Conflict resolution professionals use a number of techniques to try to foster reconciliation. By far the most famous of them is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that held hearings into the human rights abuses during the apartheid era and held out the possibility of amnesty to people who showed genuine remorse for their actions. Since the TRC was created in 1995, as many as 20 other such commissions have been created in other countries....These projects bring people on both sides of a conflict together to explore their mutual fear and anger and, more importantly, to begin building bridges of trust between them....”

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There is at least one common denominator to all these approaches to reconciliation. They all are designed to lead individual men and women to change the way they think about their historical adversaries. As a result, reconciliation occurs one person at a time and is normally a long and laborious process. By its very nature, reconciliation is a "bottom up" process and thus cannot be imposed by the state or any other institution. However, as the South African example shows, governments can do a lot to promote reconciliation and provide opportunities for people to come to grips with the past."

- How can the church help people change the way they think about people from whom they are separated?

"Most successful efforts at reconciliation have been led by teams of "locals" from both sides of the divide. Thus, the TRC was chaired by Desmond Tutu, a black clergyman, while its vice president was Alex Boraine, a white pastor. Both were outspoken opponents of apartheid, but they made certain to include whites who had been supporters of the old regime until quite near its end. Even though reconciliation mostly involves people talking to each other, it is not easy to achieve. Rather it is among the most difficult things people are ever called on to do emotionally." (Charles Hauss)

- How can the church create safe spaces for people to engage in the emotionally difficult work of reconciliation?

The mission of the Center for Reconciliation is to confront the history and legacies of slavery and the slave trade in order to build respectful and equitable relationships. We seek to change hearts and minds through collaboration focused on learning, healing and justice.

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