

Reflections on approaches and barriers to reconciliation

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In a series of working discussions, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) has identified common barriers to reconciliation. Making progress to overcome these barriers starts with individuals.

The concepts of reconciliation and social cohesion are intimately linked: reconciliation is a process of “recreating right relationships”, with oneself and with others, and social cohesion is the glue that holds these relationships together. Both entail a complex and at times discordant array of objectives that include peace and harmony as well as justice and accountability.

In 2018, JRS adopted ‘Reconciliation’ as a pillar of its strategic framework. This conceptual framework mirrors John Paul Lederach’s vision of reconciliation as a space for the values of truth, mercy, justice and peace.² An emphasis on non-violence underpins this framework, as do guiding principles that highlight equitable participation, restorative justice, and a universally shared humanity.

Many communities we work with, which are either suffering extreme violence or offering refuge to people displaced by it, dispute whether reconciliation is feasible. Although each context is unique, common barriers to reconciliation have emerged from JRS workshop discussions.

Common barriers to reconciliation

One barrier emerges when identity differences and power asymmetries are exploited, leading to feelings of ‘superiority versus inferiority’ that cause marginalisation, discrimination and oppression. This results in violent division between groups, reinforced by narratives that dehumanise and even demonise others.

Another barrier to reconciliation is frustration at feelings of powerlessness to stop violence and injustice. When legitimate, non-violent means of protest are brutally suppressed, the use of violence as a last resort is more likely to emerge, as is a transition from self-defence to vengeance. In contexts where there is often neither the space nor the resources to heal wounds, unhealed pain can perpetuate cycles of violence: “pain that is not transformed is transferred”.³

To meet these challenges, JRS adapts to local realities and sets manageable expectations. We listen to diverse voices, with patience and without imposing our own views. We acknowledge calls for justice even if we might be woefully unable to support their fulfilment. We do not even mention the word ‘reconciliation’ if it is deemed unhelpful or will provoke scepticism.

JRS tries to work through barriers with individuals and communities, starting at the personal level. This journey is non-linear, but trust is the ultimate destination. Every step, however modest, is progress. We begin by encouraging critical self-awareness and proceed with cultivating tolerance, being willing to listen to and respect opposing views, and with time, developing empathy.

Reconciliation in action: the experience of JRS teams

In Myanmar, online sessions organised by JRS have nourished participants’ conviction that inner personal transformation remains possible even in unchangeable situations.

The JRS Country Director, Rosalyn, said: “I believe reconciliation may happen at different levels. We cannot affect things outside of our control. Focusing on certain things like self-care, knowing and managing my emotions and responding well to incidents helps me a lot in my work and in dealing with others.”

Reflecting their contexts, our teams are understandably affected by communal tensions. In northern Ethiopia, the JRS Reconciliation Coordinator, Million, said politics and ethnicity had long impacted team dynamics. “We used to organise team-building exercises and sessions on reconciliation, which were effecting positive change,” recalls Million. “We used to cook and eat together and watch similar media sources.” However, this growing trust plummeted when war erupted in Tigray between Ethiopian security forces and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF). “News media and propaganda, identity politics and history affected relationships. The team split into two,” said Million.

Then, the team attended a three-day meeting away from the conflict zone. “We

created a safe, shared space with ground rules. Everyone shared how the conflict affected them personally;” continued Million. “[We] realised that while every individual and each experience was unique, there were many shared emotions, especially fear and worry.”

Among many others, Million had to leave Tigray because of his identity: “When we tried to leave, one TPLF administrator who knew us through our work put himself at risk to help us. We cannot generalise individuals or groups. There are good people everywhere. Our identity, experiences and perceptions create our reality. We need to prioritise the value of our shared humanity over our differences.”

Claudine, JRS Reintegration Coordinator in Burundi, previously worked in northern Uganda with South Sudanese refugees and local communities. “We brought together a group of young people of different ethnicities from refugee and host communities. Session by session, we observed the creation of a team. At first, they didn’t feel comfortable around one another and were afraid, but this changed with time and they developed



Participants at a JRS Reconciliation Workshop in Adjumani, northern Uganda, form a circle to reflect on their discussions during the closing session (credit: Diana M. Rueda Vargas)

concern for one another. When a young man was wounded in a big clash between the host community and refugees, the group kept each other informed.” Claudine says she has seen “tolerance evolve to acceptance, mistrust to trust”. She continues: “After the clash, the youth said they will no longer be manipulated by the narratives of their elders. By listening to each other, they were able to change their perspectives towards each other.”

These experiences illustrate progress along enduring journeys of reconciliation. Rosalyn from Myanmar defined it this way: “Once ruptured, relationships will not be 100% healed. They may need to be reshaped and renewed. We need to know how to repair ruptures so that we are able

to tolerate each other’s differences without tolerating injustice and inhuman acts and to respond without violence or revenge.”

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1. This relational definition of reconciliation finds justification and promotion in religious and secular understandings of reconciliation. The Catholic Church emphasises “right relations” – an understanding echoed by the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) that talks about relationships with God, with oneself, with others and the environment.
2. Lederach JP (1999) *The Journey Towards Reconciliation*, Herald Press
3. Rohr R (2016) *A Spring Within Us: A Book of Daily Meditations*, CAC Publishing

