

"I used to have nothing but fear and hostility toward Serbs. My heart is still heavy with the pain, killings, and suffering caused by 'Serbo,' the mock name I have used for all Serbs. But today I can say that I have met Serbo, and I have seen him as a human being. We have listened to each other, and I can even say I like him. Now I can return home with a new understanding and a new desire to work for reconciliation, something that before I could not imagine feeling."

These are the words of a Croatian woman who recently participated in a dialogue held between Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs in Vukovar, Croatia. The dialogue was organized by Lidija Obad, director of Conflict Resolution Training for Religious Communities and People (CRTRCP), a joint project of the Center for Peace, Nonviolence, and Human Rights in Osijek, Croatia, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC. As director and trainer for the Religion and Diversity Project in the USA, I introduced CRTRCP to the "Facilitated Dialogue" process used in Vukovar. I also worked with Ms. Obad to organize and facilitate the dialogue.

In 1991, Vukovar, with a population of 44,000, was approximately 47% Croat and 32% Serb. During the war, Vukovar was surrounded, bombarded, and under siege by Serb forces for four months. In November 1991, Serb forces mounted a final assault and took control of the city. Fifteen thousand Croatian residents were evicted or imprisoned. The destruction of Vukovar was as complete as the heavily bombed cities of World War II. Today the city still lies largely in ruins.

Many Serb residents presently in Vukovar are displaced from their former homes in Croatia or are refugees from Bosnia. They too were driven from their homes by ethnic hatred and war. Today, Vukovar residents live in bombed-out remains of homes, in the few homes that survived the bombing, or in the very few homes rebuilt in the past years. Residents of Vukovar have little sense of security. This city that they once took in military victory is now legally part of Croatia, and the Serb "occupiers" are surrounded by their former "enemy." The city is also still surrounded by barbed wire and land mines. Travel into Vukovar is restricted by the United Nations.

Ecumenical Dialogue in Croatia

by Herb Walters

One thing is evident when you enter Vukovar. Many residents want nothing to do with Croatia. The Cyrillic lettering of the Serb people is on signs all over the city. It is a strong symbol of their rejection of the Roman alphabet of Croatia as well as their determined rejection of the Croatian state of which they are now legally a part.

For many Croats, the feeling is mutual. Serbs are considered vicious aggressors who showed no mercy in their bloody attacks on the Croatian people. "The Serbs are up to their necks in blood," I was told by more

than one Croat. Many Croats will tell you that the Serbs must either be punished or leave Croatia. Or, if they are not guilty of war crimes, they must become loyal Croatian citizens.

The idea of reconciliation in such a highly polarized country seems unthinkable for many. Yet, it is happening in small but important ways, thanks to the efforts of grassroots citizens, both Croat and Serb. Organizations like the Center for Peace, Nonviolence, and Human Rights (*Centar Za Mir*) and CRTRCP are essential to a grassroots reconciliation process.

The Vukovar dialogue, with its focus on Catholic/Orthodox relations is part of ongoing efforts to bring church leaders more fully into the process of reconciliation. The potential for religious leadership in reconciliation was evident throughout the Vukovar dialogue. Priests and lay people alike were able to draw upon scripture and other religious teachings to find a faith-based foundation for reconciliation.

Father Branko Kosec led the opening prayer and referred us all to "God's command in the Lord's Prayer: *'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against*

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DIALOGUE

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us... ' God is love and truth, mercy and faithfulness, and we must look to St. Francis to advocate peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation," he said. Srbslav Mikic, a Serb, offered the Ten Commandments as the basis for reconciliation and added: "If we had followed them, the war would not have happened."

One of the dialogue questions asked people to remember what relations were like before the war. Everyone had positive memories to share. The differences were there, but there was a general acceptance of these differences. A Catholic priest who participated in the dialogue recalled many cooperative Christian activities between Orthodox and Catholic. He also remembered the fear that made positive relations virtually impossible during the war.

Dialogue gave this priest the opportunity to speak of the experience of being arrested and sent to a concentration camp during the war. Two of his parishioners attending the dialogue were also imprisoned. As former residents of Vukovar, they spoke of their experience of being bombed day after day. After the city was largely a pile of rubble, the Serb forces attacked and took the city. The husband and the priest were sent to one concentration camp. The wife was sent to another. The husband and wife spoke of the terror of being under attack and then being taken prisoners. They recalled the moment of parting when they knew they might never see one another again. Fortunately, they were released in a prisoner trade.

Croatians talking about being imprisoned by Serbs could easily have angered the Serb participants in the dialogue. Serbs too were driven from their homes, were imprisoned, and lost loved ones. Our dialogue had several mechanisms in place to keep the dialogue from turning into anger and hostility between former "enemies."

One of these mechanisms was an initial focus on exploring the religious roots and meaning of reconciliation. Both the Catholic and the Orthodox priests provided excellent guidance, and lay people added their wisdom. Nada Niolajevic said she often repeats a short prayer that gives her strength: "Lord, forgive those who hate me." Two of the priests referred to the Sermon on the Mount. "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..."

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This initial focus on how the church is, and can be, a force for reconciliation enabled participants to see each other as God's children, to see each other's humanity, and to understand their common desire for peace.

Other elements of facilitated dialogue that help keep the focus on empathy and understanding rather than blame and anger include:

1. Discussion and education in the philosophy and methods of listening.
2. A contractual agreement of mutual respect and listening. Each participant had to agree to seven ground rules before participating in the dialogue.
3. A facilitator for the overall dialogue and one trained facilitator for each

small dialogue group of four or five people. Facilitators were prepared to manage any eruption of anger or conflict.

Each small dialogue group session lasted about 90 minutes, and each was guided by three dialogue questions. Two of the more difficult questions (which did not come until after a good deal of trust had been established) were: "What happened to you during the war, and how did your religious faith help you cope with this experience?" and "What are the main problems you and your family or church are facing right now?"

The problems being faced right now are enormous and overwhelming for many. The hearts and spirits of many people in Croatia are as shattered as the city of Vukovar. The number of displaced people or refugees is in the hundreds of thousands. Resettlement of people to their pre-war homes has been painstakingly slow. For example, the couple who were driven out of Vukovar and imprisoned during the war are currently living in a home in the village of Okucani. They went to see, for the first time since the war, their old home. They needed a special permit to enter the city, and they were warned by neighbors that they might never return alive. When they finally stopped to see their home, they found nothing—not even a pile of bricks. Where their home had been, there was only grass. They now have a photograph of the grass.

The elderly Orthodox woman who was driven from her home cannot return because a refugee family from elsewhere now lives there. Others cannot return home because their village was "ethnically cleansed," and they would no longer feel safe there.

In 1996, about 100,000 displaced people were still waiting to return to their homes in the East Slavonia region of Croatia. Only four Croatian families have returned to Vukovar so far. Many displaced people were driven from their homes by former neighbors. In dialogue, you hear people speak with tremendous grief

and pain of the day when their neighbor, whom they had known and trusted all their lives, whom they had shared meals with and births and weddings with—suddenly these familiar neighbors became their nightmare. Old neighbors pointed the finger at a family member who was killed or raped. Or an old friend did nothing to help as they watched you flee your home leaving everything behind.

In the Croatia of 1997, there are far too many people who have seen the worst of humanity. The remarkable thing is that even in the midst of this pain and darkness, people are looking for some way out. "I don't care who my leader is," one Serb woman said. "I just want to live in peace!"

One dialogue participant spoke for others when he said:

"We have come to the realization that we have been influenced in so many ways to just see each other as Chetniks and Ustaza. These are images that bring fear of one another into our hearts, and the media and the politicians and the war itself have made these images of fear and hatred strong in our minds. But now we have new images and we see each other as people who have suffered. Now I think that it is possible that we might live together in peace once again."

In places like Croatia, I am often reminded of the slogan of Amnesty International: "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." In Croatia today, there are people who are lighting candles. The odds don't look very good. But when you see two former enemies embrace after only a couple of days of dialogue, then the odds look better.

For more information about Facilitated Dialogue, contact Herb Walters, 278 White Oak Creek Rd., Burnsville, NC 28714. (704) 675-4626.

Kindness

by Naomi Nye

*Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.*

*Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.*

*Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.*

*Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters
and purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say,
It is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you everywhere
like a shadow or a friend.*

You may reach Naomi Nye at 806 S. Main Ave., San Antonio, Texas 78204. This poem has been previously published by Far Corner Books, Portland, Oregon.