

# The Heart of Reconciliation

A CONVERSATION WITH  
JOHN PAUL LEDERACH

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**H**is travel resumé reads like a list of destinations any cautious traveler would avoid: Bosnia, Northern Ireland, Spain after the death of dictator Francisco Franco, Nicaragua during civil war, Cambodia following tyrant Pol Pot, and Somalia. But for John Paul Lederach, the journey toward building peace in conflict-torn situations, as a consultant and friend both to the highest government officials and to national opposition movements, has never been about playing it safe. “Reconciliation is at the very heart of who we are called to be as the people of God,” he says. And Lederach follows the God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, who has never been One to play it safe.

A former director of the International Conciliation Service of the Mennonite Central Committee, Dr. Lederach is Distinguished Scholar at Eastern Mennonite University and teaches international peacebuilding at Notre Dame University. He founded EMU’s innovative Conflict Transformation Program in 1993. When we talked this summer, he was on break before final examinations in his Summer Peacebuilding Institute. Our conversation moved naturally from his current work, to his spiritual pilgrimage and the centrality of reconciliation to the Christian life.

**Bob Kruschwitz:** In addition to traveling around the world in mediation efforts, you bring people from many conflict-torn countries together in Harrisonburg, VA for the Summer Peacebuilding Institute.

John Paul Lederach: Yes, the SPI is a component of the Conflict Transformation Program that runs 15 shorter, intensive courses during

May and June. This summer 180 people are attending from about 55 countries. The vast majority work in non-governmental groups—relief and development, humanitarian aid, etc.—or in church organizations. They come together to study elicitive methods of conflict transformation.

**You have pioneered *elicitive* methods. How do they work?**

“Elicitive” is the notion of drawing from people’s understanding about the context of the conflict situations they’re involved in. For many years North American approaches to peace building dominated the conflict resolution field with a prescriptive modality: “You’ve got a problem—we’ve got a recipe for how you can handle it.” However, as you begin to work in different cultural settings, both with diverse communities in North America as well as internationally, one of the things that becomes quite apparent is the need not to rely on a transfer model that assumes a particular approach with its cultural biases would be relevant to every situation.

The eliciting model essentially says that how conflicts are responded to is significantly affected by the culture and context that they’re in. Designing appropriate response mechanisms will require you to have a capacity to draw from people’s understanding of their context and culture, as well as introducing new ideas. It parallels what’s referred to in Latin America as “popular education”; it is similar to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy that encourages a lot of participatory education, as opposed to one-way knowledge transfer from expert to student.

There are times when I’ve found the word being spelled with an “i” instead of an “e”—of course, that kind of creates a whole different meaning!

**This view, that social conflicts are deeply rooted in culture, reminds me of your story “The Colonel” in *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999). You write, “enemies are created” and “an enemy is rooted and constructed in our hearts and minds and takes on social significance as others share in the creation” (p. 47).**

In *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* I was reflecting on stories from my



**John Paul Lederach** travels the world to practice the good news that he teaches: “Our lives can be a journey toward reconciliation.”

own learning process. “The Colonel” is about how easy it was for me to engage in the creation of enemies around people that I didn’t even know personally—just by the very nature of who they were and how I positioned myself vis-à-vis them. In that particular case I saw myself in a superior position because I was a peace-making pacifist and here, across from me in the Honduran airport, was a soldier whom I would’ve seen as

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being engaged in violence and warmongering, if you will. In less than an hour, without ever knowing this person personally, I suddenly discovered the humanity side of him—by watching him as a father greet his daughter who

was returning from the U.S. after treatment for a crippling disease that made her unable to walk. I was struck by my own capacity to create an enemy and how quickly and easily that’s done. It was, of course, counter to the very sense of values that I was purporting to believe in and trying to incarnate. “The Colonel” is about how enemies are created. Not only people who are evil do this; it’s something you find very close at home.

**You frequently tell stories in your books. Is there a story about your calling to your ministry in international mediation? Why did you get involved?**

There is not one sparking incident, so to say. I can track it by phases. An early phase for me would’ve been in my late teens when I became quite engaged personally with what we Mennonites call the “peace position”, which is our view of non-resistance and non-violence. That led me to stop my college at the sophomore year and go into a Mennonite Central Committee assignment.

I originally wanted to go to the Middle East but ended up in Brussels, Belgium in a student residence for 30 to 40 young men coming from Africa and Latin America. Every night we had long conversations about the nature of international conflict and change. That, in many ways, was my introduction to the whole process of dealing with cross-cultural and international conflict because I was living in a house full of folks who were from 20 different countries. When I came back I sought out a program at Bethel College that would permit me to get a major in the peace studies field—there were very few of those back in the late 1970’s.

Brussels was also the launch pad for the years that my wife, Wendy, and I spent in the Basque provinces of Spain, following the death of Francisco Franco who had been a 40-year dictator. We worked with the

conscientious objector and non-violent movement in Spain and in an emerging Mennonite community. In both groups I came to see more clearly the need to find ways to deal constructively with conflict among the people who purport to believe very much in peace. Just because we have a peace position doesn't mean we know how to deal with conflict! In *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* I reflect upon how we have had a very strong history in the Mennonite Church on the peace end of things, but we've not always had an equally strong theology of conflict—that is, how we can deal with it more constructively. It was in Spain that I began to explore how does one respond constructively to situations of conflict as they run all the way from interpersonal, small-group, and congregational levels to the international one.

So I track my sense of calling across three phases. (1) Early on it was theologically oriented. That differentiates me, and I think others from Eastern Mennonite University, from many others of the professional field who come at conflict studies much more exclusively from the social sciences. (2) I got very much engaged in the cross-cultural, international arena and that, of course, has remained the mainstay of my work over the last two decades. (3) I got pushed in the direction of how to think more pragmatically, not so much at a theoretical level. How do you actually *do* this? I tell my students that I'm more of a practitioner than I am an academician in the purest sense. I try to bring into the classroom some direct experiences of what it feels like to do this work on the ground, either internationally or in congregational community work.

### **Why is there so much conflict within the congregational free churches?**

I've worked across a lot of different denominations, including working at Notre Dame University with Catholic-related communities. My impression is that there's an equal amount of conflict in all of these places, so I'm not sure that it's more prevalent in free churches.

However, I do think that how we understand the organization and structure of church—our ecclesiology—has a significant impact on how we deal with conflict. In the free-church tradition there's a much keener sense of a priesthood of all believers—which is the idea that people have a capacity to go directly to the word, there can be personal revelation, and this personal side needs to mesh with the community's discernment. Consequently there is greater emphasis on the local and most meaningful community, being that of which you are a direct part, discerning what it is that God is leading it to do. This model suggests that we need a relatively high tolerance for ambiguity, as we're sorting things out together. I'm not sure that our churches have always taught us this capacity for ambiguity, but it's essential to the free-church tradition to engage in more of that.

Also we are quite serious about finding the ways to walk properly in the path of Jesus and where God is leading us. When people do take seriously their faith, there will be a natural level of conflict, given the nature of who we are as human beings, because things are not always exactly clear. It's precisely because you care deeply about something that conflict emerges; if you didn't care at all, you would have much less of it.

Sometimes we despair when we look at how conflict emerges around

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things that seem potentially unimportant, like how we dress or what's the proper set of doctrines to follow on a minor issue, but I think it's really a positive sign that people seriously want to engage their faith and to do so within a meaningful community.

Where I find there is still a great deal that we could learn and more constructively do, is in handling this conflict more openly. Too often we drive disagreement underground, in order not to be seen as having too much disruption in the church. These conflicts then crop up in ways that are much less manageable and they often cause significant splits.

Not every community ought to stay together; in other words, I think there may be significant differences that require members to choose different paths. The question I would bring to bear is: "To what degree have we applied the discipline that we find in the teachings of Jesus?" Matthew 18 is a concrete example: have we seriously pursued what we hear God is saying to us, while at the same time being true to the discernment process within the community and a deep level of listening to other Christians? When we have engaged in that process, what we carry forward—even if we choose different pathways—is an understanding of who we are and what we're being called to by God, as opposed to the residue of bitterness that accompanies feeling like we have not been understood or that others have marginalized us in one form or another.

**In *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* you say, "I think the central dilemma that we face in the church is the tension between ambiguity and holiness" (p. 96). What do you mean by that?**

The core movement of God in history through Jesus Christ is incarnational, in which the Word became a living flesh to dwell among us. That movement is toward, not away from, the suffering and messiness of the world. What you find in *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* are some

stories where I struggle with the fact that when you follow Jesus into that messiness, you face situations of complexity where it's not always clear how to make the proper decision. It's much easier for me to remain in a small community of people who are exactly like I am and not have to be in conversation with a guerilla leader in Columbia. Or to be in the messiness of deciding whether to provide an educational program at the United States Army War College in Carlisle, PA, when my lifework has been dedicated to trying to change such military structures and make them no longer predominant in our country. Or to be in a situation like Somalia where all of the people that I work with are Muslim, so that I have to decide how to be true to who I am as a Christian, yet in a respectful relationship with those who are Muslim. Now in all of these circumstances, you face high levels of complexity and ambiguity; you are in relationships where it's not easy to discern the answers that might be found in a small group of people who are very much alike in their faith. But that for me is the fundamental notion of participating in God's incarnational mission: it's about developing relationships with people who are not like you.

So I understand the motto 'we are in but not of the world' (based on John 17:15-18) to mean *not* that we separate ourselves from the world in order to sustain our purity, but *rather* that we attempt to make present in the world the reconciling love of God.

**Traveling with the Conciliation Team during the Nicaraguan civil war, you reflected every day on Psalm 85. How do you understand the psalmist's vision?**

Reading Psalm 85 with a group of people who were attempting to end a war, I came to see the essence of the psalm to be the story of the people of Israel returning from exile to their homes and the psalmist weaving an appeal of what could be and what should be. In the translation that I was hearing in Spanish, verse 10 says essentially that "Truth and mercy have met together, justice and peace have kissed."

This psalm has become a powerful tool in my work because I developed a little exercise that I've been doing with groups, Christian and non-Christian, diplomats and grassroots—I've done it with virtually everyone you can imagine. It's extraordinary that Psalm 85:10 translates itself to all of these very, very different communities. The psalmist personifies truth, mercy, justice, and peace—as if each were a living voice, energy, or presence. In the exercise I invite a person or small group to identify with one of the voices, to ask, "What would truth say in our situation?" and so on. The voices meet in the psalm; so in the exercise I invite the persons to speak to one another the words of truth, mercy, justice, and peace.

You find very quickly, when you work with virtually any level of human conflict, from local family and interpersonal all the way to international, that it is precisely these four voices that are hard to hold together. It's not easy to connect the voice of mercy with the voice of truth. Truth is often focused on shedding light onto the past and bringing forward what has happened. In the context of conflict, the truth is oriented towards saying, "What actually did happen?" Whereas mercy is saying, "There has been failure, but we have to provide a new start." Mercy wants to permit relationships to move forward again, to find some way to bring redemption. So how one holds together at the same time an encounter between truth and mercy is one of the most difficult things that we face in working constructively with conflict. You can very easily find individuals or even whole communities within a conflict who fall on one side or the other of that divide. They become either more truth-oriented—they push for saying, "We've got to know"—or they push in the mercy-direction of "Can we not start again? Can we forgive?" The same is true with justice and peace. Justice says, "How are we going to make right what was wrong?" and "What changes will occur to prove that there has been a turning or conversion?" Justice requires that wrongdoing be accounted for. Peace, on the other hand, is about reconstituting the well-being of the community in the form of harmonious, proper relationships. Again, these two are not easy to hold together. In the context that I was hearing the Psalm day in and day out—in the deep violence that was happening in Nicaragua—it became so obvious that these were exactly the four things that we were trying to work on, but they were so hard to hold together. These paradoxes are at the heart of reconciliation in its deepest sense. Reconciliation is not about just saying the proper set of words and moving on, nor is it exclusively about going back and hammering on things that have happened, but it must combine these concerns.

**What would you say to people who are experiencing conflict in their local church or denomination, and to those who are very concerned about the world situation?**

I would go back to the most basic elements: (1) conflict poses the possibility of a tremendous opportunity and at the same time a tremendous risk; (2) reconciliation is at the very heart of who we are called to be as the people of God; and (3) it's a lifelong process. One of the misconceptions about reconciliation is that it's a once and over thing. The very nature of who we are as human beings created by God means that we are in this lifelong journey toward reconciliation that encompasses our families, schools, communities, and across our globe. If we're able to capture it as a sense of a longer mission, reconciliation is one of the most exciting things we can ever be involved in. It is a sacred process. It's church at its best. ☸