

**Spiritual and Social Dislocation in Conflict Situations  
Lessons learnt from methods of peacemaking in Solomon Islands,  
with particular reference to the role of  
the Melanesian Brotherhood and the Religious Communities.**

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When the islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita became involved in ethnic conflict in 1999-2004 it was an indigenous religious community, the Melanesian Brotherhood, and three other religious communities-The Sisters of the Church, The Society of St. Francis and The Sisters of Melanesia- which played a major role in peacemaking. This was a conflict in which the people lost faith in both the governments ability to find solutions, which lead to an attempted coup in June 2000 and also the credibility of the national Police and paramilitary Field Force. It was the religious communities to whom many people turned not simply for spiritual support but also for protection and peacemaking. Why was this? It was the experience of the Melanesian conflict and attempts at establishing peace that social disruption, the break down of trust, and the brutality of ethnic conflict, need solutions which go further than development packages, economic aid, foreign advisors and peace keeping forces. Holistic solutions are called for; solutions which involve the hope of forgiveness, truth, catharsis, healing. Faced with human culpability in violence and evil there is a deep need for recourse to God, to a belief that something better is indeed possible and to put ones faith into action. Yet the religious communities which were able to express that faith in an indigenously and culturally appropriate way, a way which people were able to understand, trust and believe in during this major upheaval. In so doing they were able to embody many of the strengths of the community and culture. It was their ministry and integrity which during the conflict and its aftermath offered and continues to offer an alternative to violence. The murder of seven Melanesian Brothers who died while trying to bring peace to the Island of Guadalcanal leaves a lasting legacy: their deaths witness both to the terrible human tragedy and cost of violence and also to the nations longing for peace and justice. Their deaths have had an a powerful influence even beyond the context of the Solomons- the belief that somehow truth telling goes beyond political negotiations and settlements it actually has a spiritual dimension which is fundamental to healing and lasting peace. Their deaths speak of a hope that we hold to in so many situations of conflict that in the words of Desmond Tutu:

*Goodness is stronger than evil  
Love is stronger than hate  
Light is stronger than darkness  
Life is stronger than death*

*The background to the conflict*

The Solomon Islands known as “The Happy Isles” had not witnessed any major conflict or violence since the Second World War when Guadalcanal had been the scene of major land and sea battles between the USA and Japanese. The ethnic conflict and near civil war which broke out in 1999 came both as a shock and tragedy for a group of islands which on the surface seemed to have established a harmonious relationship between different tribal and island groups and a strong and balanced sense of community and tradition despite the pressures of modern development. As the nature of the conflict which developed is not widely known outside Melanesia we will begin with a summary of that conflict and the resulting failure of government, police and “custom” to know how to deal with it. The scenario seen here is a familiar microcosm of other ethnic conflicts throughout the world and perhaps the simple lessons learnt are similarly applicable.

The conflict developed on the island of Guadalcanal where, ever since the Second World War, there had been a steady migration of people from other islands settling especially around the Capital of the Solomons, Honiara. A large proportion of those coming to settle were from the island of Malaita. It was the Malaitans who began to make up a large proportion of the labour and work force on Guadalcanal. They provided many of the construction workers, the work force for SIPL (Solomon Islands Plantation Ltd) crew for the Japanese tuna fishing fleet, and workers for the logging companies, plantations, small industries, factories and shops. Many Malaitans had become successful at setting up their own small businesses. Malaitans also became the dominant island group within the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force.

Many Malaitan settlements began to be built not just within Honiara but within a thirty mile radius of the capital. Some of those coming from Malaita bought land from Guadalcanal landowners, others

simply came and settled. At first, when land seemed plentiful and relationships were harmonious, the Guadalcanal people gave their land generously and agreements were often undocumented. Over a period of twenty years these settlements grew in size with members of the extended family coming in search of work from Malaita and a high birth rate. Malaitans began to take up an increasingly large number of places at Guadalcanal schools. Often because of their industrious, hard working entrepreneurial approach they were more materially and financially successful than their Guadalcanal neighbours. In many ways there was much integration and harmony in the relationship between the people of Guadalcanal and Malaita: there were inter-marriages, sports competitions, shared feast days, and a common Christian faith. In schools, church and community activities there was often a rich a joyful sense of cultural diversity with different ethnic groups sharing worship, songs, dances, customs and traditions from the diverse island groups. Yet beneath the surface there was among some Guadalcanal people a growing resentment: the prejudice that Malaitans were increasingly encroaching on their land, taking advantage of their generosity, failing to respect Guadalcanal custom, sometimes causing violence and conflict within the community. They believed Malaitans were using Guadalcanal land to become richer than the indigenous population and that their domination of the land would increase. Into this equation was added a new source of suspicion and grievance when in 1998 Gold Ridge Gold Mine was opened by an Australian Company in East Guadalcanal. Many Guadalcanal people felt aggrieved that such a small proportion of the rumoured massive profits were going to the people of Guadalcanal themselves and such a large proportion to what they saw as financing an increasingly Malaitan dominated government and public sector.

### *The ethnic conflict and failure of response*

At the end of 1998 a militant group on Guadalcanal emerged. They have known by various names: initially the Guadalcanal Revolutionary Army (GRA) and then later the Isatabu Freedom Movement. They began by claiming SI \$2.5 million compensation for the Guadalcanal people they claimed had been murdered by Malaitan settlers over the years. They demanded state government for Guadalcanal and that all Malaitan settlers go back to Malaita. Although many believe that the movement was politically motivated by certain opportunistic politicians, it quickly became a popular young peoples' movement on Guadalcanal. It began with almost a sense of excitement that harnessed the energies of a lot of disenfranchised village young men. For this group aged between 14-30, who had little status within the village, education or stimulating work prospects, IFM provided a common cause to unite behind. This Guadalcanal army quickly grew in size. There was a syncretic mixture of influences: a return to traditional warrior culture and custom mixed with a militarism adopted from a diet of US Hollywood war videos. They dressed in any bits of khaki uniform they could find, often "Rambo" style head bands mixed with kapilatos (the traditional bark cloth loin cloths). The group began military style training in bush camps and carried an assortment of hunting rifles, home made guns, bows and arrows. They dug up old ammunition left behind by the Japanese and US at the end of the Second World War. At first it was almost as if they were surprised by their own success. Malaitan School children in the Guadalcanal Weather Coast Schools feeling threatened were evacuated. Then slowly the IFM, empowered by the fear they generated and the new status their weapons helped them command, began to move against the Malaitan settlements east and west of Honiara. The IFM quickly developed a cult-like status. There were rumours that they were adopting heathen practices from the past, sacrificing to ancestors, using magic and custom to gain power and the movement was surrounded by secrecy. Those who may have initially had sympathy with the movement now become frightened to speak out against what was happening for fear that they would be targeted.

The government were unsure how to react to the tension and fear that was quickly developing. The Prime Minister vacillated losing the trust of both sides and the Police Force alternated between occasional displays of force when they sprayed the bush with machine gun fire and alternatively doing very little to stop the displacement and destruction of Malaitan villages. What in effect happened in terms of directly addressing the issues involved and holding anyone accountable, was very little. The expatriate Police Commissioner did not renew his contract.

Between 1999-2000 some 20,000 Malaitans were driven off the land in Guadalcanal, back into Honiara and on to Malaita. Most of their homes were burnt. The government's attempts to organise customary peace ceremonies to pay compensation were a travesty of true customary practices. A compensation ceremony orchestrated by government as middleman and trying, (often unsuccessfully) to pay the inflated compensation demands on behalf of the ethnic groups in conflict, increased suspicion and prejudice rather than restoring peace. The hostilities continued.

At first the Malaitans seemed to do very little to resist this huge displacement. But with increasing violence and destruction of property there were rumours that pay back time was coming. Towards the end of 1999 the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) came into operation after a raid on Auki Police Station in Malaita in which automatic weapons and ammunition were stolen. The MEF set up roadblocks in Honiara on the pretext of defending Malaitans and began armed raids against the IFM on the outskirts of Honiara from which there were fatalities. The violence now escalated. While the Guadalcanal militants had pushed the Malaitans from their land they had effectively cut themselves off from the Capital Honiara and thus from the resources and infrastructure of the country: access to banks and finance, fuel, provisions, medical supplies, the hospital, and transport. The Honiara Police Force became increasingly compromised as the many Malaitan Policemen were seen as supporting MEF. In 2000 many of the weapons held in Honiara Police armoury found their way into Malaitan hands and these automatic weapons gave them a lethal advantage over IFM who themselves had acquired some automatic weapons from their raid on Gold Ridge Mine. In June 2000 the MEF, believing the government had done too little to protect their interests and demanding compensation for the land and property they had lost, attempted a coup to oust the Prime Minister. Though he was reinstated a week later the damage was done and there was no longer any confidence that either he or his government could restore order and he was later deposed by a parliamentary vote. The coup, and international condemnation that followed, led to the exodus of most expatriates from the country and the withdrawal of economic aid.

The two opposing factions now faced each other in bunkers across a no man's land on both sides of Honiara. Fighting went ahead with the loss of lives on both sides. MEF sought to isolate IFM from the resources of Honiara while IFM continued to surround Honiara with the hope of driving the Malaitans off Guadalcanal. There was complete economic collapse in the country with neither the government nor the Police Force providing any credible alternative to the factionalism which had developed. Custom, and traditional community methods had also failed for weapons produced a new authority isolating chiefs and elders. There was fear in the villages while armed militant groups patrolled the roads the authentic authority and voice of chiefs and elders seemed silent. The custom of "paying compensation" traditionally used to weave together the fabric of community and reconcile disputes, was now being used to justify extortion. It was a dangerous syncretism which generated a lot of fear in the power of devils, magic, sacrifice and custom to provide protection and power. There were acts of atrocity on both sides with reports of torture, beheadings, rape and casualties. The MEF controlled government patrol boat shelled Guadalcanal villages and several wounded militants were even shot dead while in hospital. To everybody's shock the Happy Isles had developed into a situation of violence and war with stories of cruelty that few had imagined possible.

In October 2001 in Townsville, Australia, where a peace agreement was signed which ended the direct hostilities. New National Elections were held in 2001. Yet neither side would honour their commitment to disarm and the aftermath of a peace process brought lawlessness, further economic collapse, and a host of other social problems. Many had been empowered by the weapons used in the conflict and were not willing to relinquish that. Nevertheless the conflict did find methods of reconciliation and resolution which helped contain and limit the violence and its consequences. It was in this role that the Melanesian Brotherhood and the religious communities played such an important part as indigenous peacemakers.

### *The role of the Melanesian Brotherhood and religious communities*

The Melanesian Brotherhood, the Society of St Francis, the Sisters of the Church and the Sisters of Melanesia are all Anglican religious communities. Each member of these communities takes the religious vows of poverty chastity and obedience. Living a radical life style of simplicity, prayer and service they aim to live out the Gospel in a direct way. The Melanesian Brotherhood is the largest male Anglican religious Community within the world-wide Anglican Church. It is an indigenous community founded in 1925 by a man from Guadalcanal, Ini Kopuria, and it now numbers more than 400 brothers working in Solomon Islands, PNG, Vanuatu and most recently the Philippines and the UK. The ethos of the community is to live the religious life but in a Melanesian, indigenous way. Thus their way of life tries to reflect many of the strengths of Melanesian tradition. There is an emphasis on working together, building their own traditional houses with woven sago palm roofs, they plant gardens together, fish, hunt or rear pigs for feast days and share all they believe God provides. It is a community which has inculturated the Christian message both in its worship, using

pan-pipes, dancing, and traditional songs, and also in its collective life-style and dependence upon one another, the environment and the blessings of God rather than on individualism, competition or the desire for private profit. Even their religious vows reflect Melanesian culture for they take temporary rather than life vows for an initial period of three and then a further four years. Thus after a period of service they are free to leave the Brotherhood and return to their villages and the Brotherhood honours the important place marriage and family life holds in the community, rather than demanding life long celibacy. Leaving the Brotherhood after several years service, many return to their own villages and communities enriched by their experience of being a brother. The Melanesian Brotherhood aims to reach out to the wider community, inclusively welcoming all who come to visit, sharing their resources, offering man power and support and showing care and respect for the wider community. Reciprocally they are greatly respected by Melanesians for their sacrificial life style and service and are supported with food, prayer and offerings by many people.

All these communities have their headquarters in the area of rural Guadalcanal controlled during the conflict by IFM but also households in Honiara which became controlled by MEF. Thus the religious communities found themselves bridging the war zone, divided by the broken bridges, road blocks and check points of the two opposing militant groups. Throughout the conflict, when schools, colleges, villages, even families divided against each other on ethnic lines, in contrast each one of these communities managed to maintain their unity: Malaitans living side by side with Guadalcanal brothers and sisters on both Guadalcanal and Malaita. What is more they were the only group who most the militants themselves did not seem to discriminate against or judge according to island or tribe. They were considered first and foremost religious brothers and sister with an allegiance to God and to all Melanesians. This was an astonishing recognition in such an ethnic conflict where the opposing island groups were treated with such bitterness and suspicion.

The first response of these religious communities was a humanitarian one. As Malaitan settlers were driven off the land Tabalia (the Headquarters of the Melanesian Brotherhood) to the west of Honiara and Tetenikolivuti (the headquarters of the Sisters of the Church) to the east of Honiara, became places of refuge for Malaitans driven from their homes. IFM respected the sacredness of these places and the community stations were places where no militant from either side would invade or defile. The communities were able to safeguard the Malaitans seeking refuge and transport them to Honiara. During the height of the tension it was only the religious communities to whom the militants allowed freedom of movement – the vehicles of the religious communities passing freely through the road blocks and check points of both the MEF and the IFM. The religious communities were able to help the displaced Malaitans get safely to Honiara and thus controlled the violence that could have developed and any resulting repercussions. At the same time impartiality was vital and it was not long before the IFM were similarly needing help from the religious communities and sanctuary when their own villages and homes were threatened by MEF and they were unable to get medicines and vital supplies through the Honiara roadblocks. In Honiara the religious communities remained places of sanctuary where even at the height of the tension the Brothers' authority was respected and those who fled to these houses were not harmed. Thus the Religious Communities became both in rural Guadalcanal and Honiara the only places which people felt were safe and could be trusted to help. The requests began to pour in to these households and the Brothers and Sisters were stretched to the very limits. People needed them to search for relatives, to reunite divided families, to pick up property and possessions they had left behind in the displacement to protect the threatened and to transport family members to safety. Many families and marriages were divided by ethnicity and once again it was the religious communities who people sought to help reconcile these divisions and disputes over the custody of children of mixed marriages.

Eventually the communities, especially the Melanesian Brotherhood, decided that they must become more directly involved to prevent further hostility. At the Melanesian Brotherhood Great Conference at Tabalia in October 1999 the community elected a Malaitan Headbrother and an Assistant Headbrother from Guadalcanal. In the middle of this tension it was a symbolic move. This new Head Brother Harry Gereniu expressed the belief that the community and ethnic solidarity of the Brotherhood must move out from Tabalia and be taken into the conflict zone. In May 2000 the Brothers chose and commissioned a team of brothers to directly work for peace; these Brothers moved into the no-mans land between the road blocks of the opposing militants and spread out to visit and to try to pacify those directly involved in the growing hostility. Their message was a simple one and the following is an extract from a letter they took to the militants on both sides:

In the Name of Jesus Christ we appeal to you: stop the killing, stop the hatred, stop the pay back. Those people you kill or you hate are your own Solomon Island brothers. Blood will lead to more blood, hatred will lead to greater hatred and we will all become the prisoners of the evil we do. Stop this ethnic tension before more innocent people suffer.<sup>1</sup>

The brothers continued to camp between enemy lines for the next four months moving backwards and forwards between the militant groups, talking to them, trying to calm them, praying with them, trying to lessen rumour and suspicion which generates between factions in such a context. Calling in the name of God, that neither side to advance beyond their barricades. Similarly the brothers visited the camps of both the MEF and IFM where the training was taking place and prisoners were being held and tortured. By their words and presence they sought and were often successful in reminding and awakening the memory of conscience and moral boundaries among the militants which are often swept away in the adrenaline rush of conflict and compulsive violence. The Melanesian Brothers also became involved in negotiating the release of hostages taken by the rival factions.

The Sisters of the Church in particular worked very courageously trying to get supplies through the road blocks to families and children. They also ferried the displaced, the wounded and the dead. Brothers carried the corpses of victims across the checkpoints to return them to grieving relatives for proper burial. They also investigated the deaths of those missing, even digging up the bodies so that they could be identified and their remains returned. Increasingly the religious communities were being called upon to become the security for commercial property and people, a role that depleted their manpower. Those who felt threatened such as politicians and even the Prime Minister and the Governor General requested Melanesian Brothers to stay at their homes but this also obviously created difficulties for the communities themselves.

### *The religious communities' methods and approach*

What was it that gave these unarmed young men and women the authority and the ability to take up this role of peacemakers? There are a number of reasons. The Melanesian Brotherhood are known throughout Melanesia. In a very real sense people feel they belong to the whole of Melanesia for men from many of the villages and all the provinces of the Solomons are represented in these communities. People have witnessed that their life style is sacrificial, with no payment or ulterior motive. The religious communities offer a Christian expression of indigenous Melanesian culture, or at least how people instinctively feel their culture should be. It is a young, energetic community which has a radical and popular image and credibility among the young. The brothers were also the same age as many of the militants, some knew each other from before, others became their friends during the conflict. Militants treated them with a mixture of annoyance, gratitude and awe, since even though they were getting in the way of their plans and lines of attack, they were nevertheless bringing a sense of providential protection to the front line. There is no doubt that many people revere them, as young men and women who have an innocence, a humility and a goodness. It is believed they are called by God to a holy vocation and thus harming them would bring the retribution of God. There is also no doubt that the more hardened politicians, and brutal militants saw them as meddling and obstructive. They accused them of taking sides and of favouring and supplying the opposition, yet most people were extremely nervous of causing them physical harm. Though exposing themselves to danger and at times very directly in the firing line, no member of any of the communities was injured and killed until the seven brothers were murdered in 2003; this too led to an increased sense of reverence verging on superstition. Some spoke of the way bullets bent to go round them or guns jammed when they tried to fire at them and one Brother was saved from serious injury when a bullet became embedded in his prayer book. Stories about the spiritual powers of the community also began to grow. Of course such incidents added to the Melanesian Brothers' spiritual authority. Militants were frightened of disobeying the requests or demands the brothers made for fear that they would lose the blessing and thus the protection of God. Melanesians have a deep belief in the world of the Spirit, devils and ancestors and were nervous of the consequences of God's anger or curse. The death of the seven Brothers initially undermined that belief in divine protection but with the resulting peace a sense that their deaths were sacrificial and led to new life.

The communities are aware of the danger of becoming a kind of cult revered for their own powers and are on the most part eager to promote a Gospel of love rather than fear. If you ask a Brother why they

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<sup>1</sup>'Letter to all those involved in the present ethnic tension' May 2000 *A Resource Book for the Training and Mission of the Melanesian Brotherhood* ed. Richard A. Carter Honiara Provincial Press pp 80-81

were successful he would answer because of his faith in God and his prayer. At the heart of the community is a disciplined and reverent life of prayer, sacrament and study and it is this devotion to God and Christ as peacemaker which they see as the true strength of the Community. It is a mission in bold humility: disarming not because of its power but its vulnerability and simplicity. It is a mission not from the top down but from the bottom up. It assumes voluntarily and out of love for God and ones people the condition and the struggle of those most in need. It is a spirituality which moves beyond politics, or need, or desire for justice but is born out of relationship and solidarity with the victim. The religious communities are committed to the well being of the people for the people of the Solomon Islands are their extended family. For those who came to the Brothers and Sisters for help there was the sense that in a nation which had lost its faith and integrity here were men and women who had not. The communities were able to bear witness both to suffering and evil of the violence but also to a radical faith that through God's love something better was possible even for the militants themselves. Many believe that it was the death of these seven brothers which has helped to bring peace: precipitating the RAMSI intervention and the unconditional surrender of Harold Keke and his men

*The aftermath of the conflict: disarmament, reconciliation and community building*

After the Townsville Peace agreement, the Melanesian Brothers were among those who led the opposing factions into Honiara and, in a sense, presided over the celebrations of peace. The religious communities were recognised for the work they had done and the government awarded the Melanesian Brotherhood 22 Solomon Islands medals of honour. But the joy of the celebrations were short lived and the memories of the violence done would not go away. The building of peace was going to prove long and painful. While the direct ethnic conflict was over lawlessness, theft, drunkenness and criminal gangs increased and the guns and weapons from the conflict were now used for looting and crime and acts of revenge. The new government was burdened with trying to pay off compensation claims for land and property lost in the conflict and those first to receive their compensation were often the most powerful and coercive former militants and politicians and members of the government. No overseas governments wanted to give aid packages which would be diverted for such a purpose. The government were keen to keep the Melanesian Brotherhood on board for they realised their public support. Many Brothers were signed up to help with the secular Peace Monitoring Team to oversee that the conditions of the peace agreement were fulfilled. But this did not work well, brothers received pay for their work for the first time which was against their rule of their community. The PMC lifestyle was a problem with the brothers separated from their community prayer life and discipline and plied with alcohol, fancy additions to their uniforms, mobile phones and four-wheel drives. It was a sad aftermath as many brothers who had done much valuable work during the tension ended up being released from the Melanesian Brotherhood. After only a few months the Head Brother and the Archbishop withdrew all Brothers from the Peace Monitoring Council. In hindsight what was in fact needed at that stage was trauma counselling, and a renewal of their Brotherhood community life after the strains they had faced.

After the ethnic tension the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force remained deeply divided with many feeling it had lost its integrity and self-respect. Guns, including many of those belonging to the police force remained in the hands of individuals and relations and were never returned to the police armoury. In 2002 it was once again the Melanesian Brotherhood who were called upon by the government and the police to join with the Peace Monitoring Council (PMC) and International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT) to help in the process of disarmament. The Brotherhood was nervous of becoming involved again after the disruption the PMC had caused to their community life. Neither did they want to be seen as an instrument of the government, manipulated to provide credibility and popular support for government programmes. Disarmament was a divisive issue for many felt that the terms of the Townsville Peace Agreement had not been honoured nor could the government provide security from reprisals if ex-militants handed over their weapons. Yet the need was obviously great. The continued use of guns for criminal activities was wrecking the country, preventing investment and foreign aid and continuing both in Malaita and Guadalcanal to create an atmosphere of fear and lawlessness. The Melanesian Brotherhood decided that they would help with the disarmament programme but on their own terms. This time they would remain independent from the PMC and IPMT and conduct their own disarmament programme while maintaining their own community and spiritual life.

The Melanesian Brotherhood decided that they must begin disarmament by addressing the problems faced by the police force itself, for without its support there could be no credible disarmament. The Brotherhood addressed the whole police force calling them to return the guns they had in their private possession. It was the first time the police force had had the forum to discuss their grievances collectively: it was like the flood gates had been opened, there were obvious deep divisions but a real sense that these were the very issues that needed to be discussed and sorted out. There was initially a rebellion in which it was rumoured that the police station would be attacked and destroyed by those refusing to comply with the disarmament. The Brothers sat outside the Central Police Station all night with loyal police officers. No attack came, instead discussions followed and miraculously the following week the police force approached the Brotherhood to hold a service of reconciliation at the Church. At the service the different factions within the Police force publicly apologised to one another for failures and misunderstandings. It astonished the Australian advisors who had been sceptical of the involvement of a religious community. Two days later, in a public parade, the police returned their weapons, washed their hands clean in blessed holy water, and the Melanesian Brothers said prayers over the weapons and after dousing them with holy water too, locked them in the central police armoury and were given custody of one of the keys without which the armoury could not be opened.

The International Peace Monitoring Teams programmes were receiving a great deal of media publicity and overseas finance, with a daily announcement of weapons collected and countdown until the amnesty deadline. One of the concepts of this programme was that each person who handed over a gun would receive a certificate of amnesty. The Melanesian Brothers however realised that there was a certain cultural resentment to this constant publicity. Like ex-militants throughout the world, they did not want disarmament to be presented as an act of surrender. Most militants still defended their cause and their right to bear arms in the defence of that cause. Yet from their counselling of those who were involved in the tension, the Brothers knew there still a lot of pain and fear from the memories of what had happened. What people were looking for was not so much documents of amnesty but a sense of closure: the reconciliation and healing from the trauma they had been through. The Brothers' method was to go to any house where they were called and with confidentiality receive any weapon offered, listening to the stories of those who wanted to hand over weapons and praying with them and their families. The Brothers emphasised the belief that weapons did not actually bring protection but made one a target and increased fear and anxiety. Disarmament was thus presented as an act of liberation from fear, putting ones trust in God and in peace. The Brothers were powerful examples of this themselves for no Brother had ever been armed or harmed. The effectiveness of this programme was dramatic. Over the next month many high powered weapons, automatic rifles and even machine guns, explosives and ammunition was returned to the Brotherhood both on Guadalcanal and Malaita and everything returned was dismantled and disposed of deep out at sea so they could never be used again.

The presence of the Brotherhood seemed to inspire police trust, friendship and confidence and when the Melanesian Brotherhood ended its disarmament programme in November 2002 it was on the condition that a small group of Brothers continue to work together with the police aiming at bringing peace and stability back to the nation. The Brothers still had a vital role to play in helping to encourage trust and understanding between the community and the police. There are still extreme economic problems within the Solomons with an economic break down which has crippled schools, clinics the hospitals and the infra structure of the nation. Neither had the work of the Melanesian Brotherhood been without its cost. Involvement in the ethnic tension and aftermath has destabilised religious community life. Many brothers after the high profile fast and dramatic life style of their involvement found it hard to settle down in rural households that may not even have electricity, transport or communication. There was also new temptations and pressures placed upon the Brothers working in the towns and Honiara. Their fame had not always proved helpful to a life of simplicity and service. There was also the danger that the government, politicians, even businessmen are eager to befriend brothers to provide respectability and encourage public support for their own schemes. The Brotherhood had been provided with money, vehicles, and resources to support their mission for peace but their new found status could subvert the religious life. The leaders of the community were aware of these dangers. To lose this integrity and simplicity of their religious life would be to lose God and lose the people. Yet the pressures were great.

Bishop Terry Brown, the Anglican Bishop of Malaita, writes:

People continue to look to the religious communities, especially the Melanesian Brotherhood (and more generally to the whole Church) as the only institution having the integrity to save the country. ... Without the religious communities' contribution, the Solomons might have ended up yet another genocide, as leaders in both groups were preparing for all out war and mass destruction of the other. The communities called the Solomons back to their Christian vocation. And while the communities suffered and continue to suffer wounds from their participation in reconciliation and peacemaking in the midst of violence, no one doubts that they will recover and continue to enrich the Church of Melanesia and beyond<sup>2</sup>

### *The death of seven Melanesian Brothers involved in peacemaking*

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2003 Christians throughout the world were shocked to here the tragic news the six Melanesian Brothers had been murdered on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal. For three months the Melanesian Brotherhood and members of our Church had been waiting and hoping and praying that these brothers were alive and would return safely. But on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August our worst fears were confirmed. The Melanesian Brotherhood was officially told by the Police Commissioner William Morrell that they had been informed by Harold Keke that all six were dead. These were brave, talented and greatly loved.

In early 2003 the situation on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal was growing worse. Harold Keke (The Guadalcanal Liberation Front Leader and his followers) based on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal, had not given up his guns and many Malaitans used this as their excuse for refusing to hand over theirs. There was a culture of fear in which few were brave enough to speak out but rumours of the atrocities taking place on the Weather Coast of Guadalcanal reached Honiara including the murder of Fr Augustine Gave, a retired Roman Catholic Priest. Many of those who Keke suspected of complicity with the government or betrayal of his cultish cause were tortured or executed including his own followers. There was news that more than fifty had been executed. The Solomon Island Police Force were poorly equipped and without the trust or expertise to deal with the Weather Coast situation and had enlisted the support of Keke's opponents and this joint operation was causing its own problems. There were accusations of the burning down of villages and human rites abuses on both sides. The majority of the weather coast people including women and children were confused and afraid caught between Harold Keke's militants and a joint operation militia which many did not trust.

Brother Nathaniel Sado, the first of the Melanesian Brothers to be murdered, had gone to visit Keke in February 2003 with two other brothers. They took with them a letter from the Anglican Archbishop Ellison Pogo to try and open up a dialogue for peace to try and bring an end to the atrocities in which so many innocent people were suffering. It was obvious at this stage that the Royal Solomon Islands Police Force did not have the numbers, capability or support to re-establish the rule of law and order. He naively believed that he could help to bring peace. Keke was suspicious of Brother Sado as he was from the same island and language group as the Prime Minister. He was taken prisoner and accused of being a spy. On Easter day the Melanesian Brotherhood received news that Brother Nathaniel Sado had been murdered. When the Brothers heard the news of this death they were deeply shocked and unsure whether it was true. While the Melanesian Brotherhood had always tried to advocate for others now there was no one to advocate for them.

On April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003, six brothers led by the Assistant Head Brother Robin Lindsay, who was responsible for the welfare of the brothers in the Solomon Island Region left Honiara by canoe for the Weather Coast. Their mission, as authorised by the Archbishop, was to visit the Brotherhood Households on the Weather Coast to find out what had happened to Brother Nathaniel and if his death was confirmed to try and bring his body back for burial. The other five brothers who went with him were Brothers Francis Tofi, Tony Sirihi, Alfred Hill, Patteson Gatu and Ini Paratabatu.

The brothers arrived on the Weather Coast and walked inland towards Keke's village. They came upon a group of Keke's followers (Keke was not with them) who attacked them and killed Brs. Robin Lindsay, Brother Francis Tofi and Brother Alfred Hill when they refused to lie face down on the ground. The other three brothers were taken back to Keke's camp where after a night of humiliation

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<sup>2</sup> The Rt Rev'd Terry Brown: "The Role of Religious Communities in Peacemaking: The Solomon Islands" – prepared for *Anglican Religious Life*.

I wish to thank Bishop Terry Brown for his permission to use other shared ideas contained in this article which have been very helpful.

and torture they were lined up in front of a single grave and shot in the chest, falling into the grave. Those who were later arrested for their murders told that they were killed because they were considered to be government spies who had come without permission from Keke.

When the brothers did not return three months of waiting, vigil and prayer began in which negotiations with Keke for their release continued. Keke claimed all these hostages were still alive and were being held as prisoners of war. In the meantime Keke took more brothers and novices hostages. Five novices and two brothers were held for more than a month. These seven were all released unharmed. In fact Keke had asked them to pray with him and preach to his men. When they were later released he sent them back with gifts of shell money and pigs for the Melanesian Brotherhood. A week after their release in a meeting with the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) Keke announced that the seven brothers originally held were dead and had been killed on arrival. He also agreed to an unconditional surrender and the laying down of the arms of his followers. So came the hope of peace but for the Melanesian Brotherhood at great cost.

## **Lessons learnt in Christian Peacemaking**

What can be learnt by the experience of the Melanesian Brotherhood and the Religious Communities in the Solomon Islands?

Methods which were successful in conflict resolution and which were employed by the religious communities depended on the following processes.

- *Choice.* Many of those who got caught up in the violence and became part of the militant groups could have also in different circumstances been the peacemakers
- *Community and Empowerment* The religious communities provided the solidarity and strength to hold out against the coercive power and momentum of fear and violence.
- *The provision of a safe sanctuary.* The Religious Communities became the place to which people turned when faced with violence and danger. It was believed these were the places which would provide help and safety.
- *The reconcilers must themselves be reconciled.* The community itself refused to be divided on ethnic lines but remained a community of mixed tribal and language groups. Thus the role of peacemaker was not an individual but a community advocating a return to the community they themselves witnessed to by their very existence. Decisions in this peace making process were made and discussed by the community. Throughout the peace making there was a strong sense that the work would only be successful if its decisions were made “with the one mind of the whole community” This is very different from a western individualistic approach. It required waiting until the whole community felt the time was right and the whole community were unanimous in their support. The Communities believe that a plan which is embarked upon in hostility and division will not bear good fruit.
- *Shared leadership.* It was very significant that not only the community reflected a mix of language and tribal groups but also the leadership with a Head Brother from Malaita and his Assistant from Guadalcanal.
- *The integrity and impartiality of the mediator:*  
The Melanesian Brotherhood became the go-betweens in the conflict. They took the position taken in traditional society by the holy man, the priest, or elder in that they heard the story of both sides. They were considered impartial and men who could be trusted. As the mediators it was vitally important that they were not involved for personal profit or gain but seen to be acting on behalf of both sides and thus the whole reconciled community. When that impartiality was believed to have been compromised then the mediator was in grave danger.
- *The importance of relationship and belonging.* This is not a legalistic process nor one which can be initially conducted by court, police, or government legislation. It involves a face to face encounter. The Melanesian Brotherhood was respected by the culture of those to whom it went. The community was not a judge or as a detached observer but as one who enters into real relationship with the people. Yet at the same time holding a special place within the society.
- *They have a sacred record and history.* Their work is known by the people. For years they have been called upon to help in the settling of disputes, marriage problems, sicknesses or family crisis. They have a proven record that people trust and have not just been pulled in at a time of a crisis.
- *The peacemaker is also seen to have a spiritual role which is honoured and respected.* They are seen as being immersed in the Melanesian culture but at the same time they have a prophetic voice. As in traditional society it is believed there is an authority greater than human authority and the indigenous peacemaker is given the right to speak on behalf of that higher authority. Thus the indigenous peacemaker has a confidence in a greater justice, a sense that even if those in conflict fail to listen to the human negotiator there will be an ultimate justice to which they will have to respond. Ultimately however that spiritual authority was challenged with the murder of the Brothers.
- *The Religious Community’s method of peacemaking acknowledges the spiritual dislocation conflict causes.* It recognises the power of violence and evil to pull the community into its vortex and thus it recognises that reconciliation will involve healing not just physical injury and loss but also spiritual woundedness and the injuries of evil. By externalising the internal conflict both victim and perpetrator are able to seek repentance, forgiveness and healing and a new beginning.
- *Forgiveness.* Many of those who came to the Brotherhood were actually seeking not only peace but forgiveness. Some way of breaking with the violence of the actions they had experienced or been part of.

- *The restoration of the community is often seen as more important than individual rights and wrongs.* This is one of the hardest lessons for the expatriate to come to terms with but it is essential in indigenous conflict resolution. What may be judged as a failure to make individuals accountable is in fact an acknowledgement that the community has got to continue living together and there needs to be a way of saving face and returning to the community. In Melanesia criminals are not faceless statistics they are “wontoks,” neighbours, those you will meet later in the village, greet and share betel nut with in the market. The emphasis is on the community being powerful and cohesive enough to absorb back into itself those who have rebelled against it without lasting dislocation and shame. In the past this has seemed possible but now the disruption has been so great there is doubt whether the community can ever again contain its errant members.
- *Leadership and authority and the young.* If respect and authority is going to return to the chiefs, priests and village elders and to the custom practices of conflict resolution and decision making then there must be a new inclusiveness in the distribution of authority. Western-style education and all the aspirations which cause and are caused by urban drift have left their mark on growing young population. Unless the younger members of the society are taken into the community decision making processes and empowered they will remain alienated and potentially rebellious. The Melanesian Brotherhood by attracting and empowering that very disaffected age-group have shown the vitality and potential for this very group to become the community builders.
- *The indigenous peacemaker communicates not just in words but also in symbol and action.* Within Melanesian society ceremony, ritual and symbolic action and objects have as much power as words. In the role of peacemaking these actions are vital community signs of rites of passage and of sacred authority to bring change. Thus the presentation of strings of shell money becomes a powerful symbol of covenant and relationship binding together two parties. But similarly in conflict resolution there have been other signs, actions and symbols of the bringing of peace. Those returning guns to the Melanesian Brotherhood washed their hands in blessed “Holy Water” Returned guns were exorcised and prayed over before being destroyed. Similarly Christian signs and symbols are needed to bring healing and forgiveness. Those haunted by memories of their torture needed to be prayed over and the evil they had witnessed driven out by water prayer and the laying on of hands. The funeral of the seven martyred brothers became in itself part of the symbolism of bringing new life out of their tragic deaths.
- *The act of reconciliation is a shared act of faith, a re-entry into relationship.* If peace agreements are to bring peace and restoration they cannot be simply imposed political settlements agreed by politicians. Peace agreements are also religious rites they are a process a process of connection between the different parties and God. It is if you like a new covenant sealed by God
- *Through the experiences the Melanesian Brotherhood have been through there is a new understanding of the costly nature of their role.* It was certainly the death of the seven brothers had a huge impact on public consciousness which have become role models or examples of hope. Those who died and the brothers and novices who ministered on the Weather Coast had in their hearts the enormous suffering the people in the Weather Coast have undergone because of the activities of Keke and his followers. They had in their hearts the need to work for peace in the midst of violence and they did this at great personal cost. They were killed for exercising their Christian ministries. Their deaths have brought the Melanesian Brotherhood and the Churches in the Solomon Islands and PNG and beyond to the Cross of Christ: away from simple superstitious understandings of religious power to the terrible sacrifice that is sometimes required to bring change and to confront the terrible tragedy of human violence, fear and prejudice. This challenges us to reconsider the meaning of sacrifice and martyrdom at the heart of religious faith- words of which we have understandably been suspicious.
- *Finding a shared story which brings meaning to the suffering.* The Christian Gospel provided the shape and narrative with which the community could come to terms with its grief and loss and also find the story of faith which they believed could transform and bring reconciliation to the wider society.
- *Witnessing Healing* would involve trying to make sense of the suffering and telling their story as a means to transformation and peace.
- Reconciliation involves the inclusion of those involved including the perpetrator in the act of peace-building.

- Richard Carter's book: *In Search of the Lost* is published by Canterbury Press 2006

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