

“Building Peace in the Solomon Islands” by Ron Kraybill



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Trinity

My mission this morning is to convey to you something from my experience in the Solomon Islands, and to draw on the

scripture in today's liturgy in doing so.

I was appointed as peacebuilding advisor by the United Nations for a 6 month term, November to April. The Solomon Islands has a history of political violence often triggered around elections. From 1998 to 2003 the entire country was paralyzed as a result. During that time and twice since then, protesters looted and torched shops in the Chinatown District of Honiara, the capital city.

Why target Chinatown? There's no obvious explanation, other than that when anger and mistrust are high, human beings seek targets for blame. With shops in many communities and a reputation for looking after their own and no one else, the Chinese make an easy target for blame.

The entire Pacific region is now engulfed in a vast arms buildup from another direction. China is determined to force Taiwan, the small island on its eastern coast that has been asserting its independence since the 1950s, back into the China fold. The US, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, the Philippines, and other nations in the region have supported Taiwan. For some years now, China has been building up its military readiness to forcibly take over Taiwan and the US and other countries have been building up military defenses against this.

The Solomon Islands is a pawn in this struggle. China is aggressively courting government officials with development projects and slush funds so it can count the Solomon Islands as one of its allies. They are doing this in blatantly manipulative ways, mostly with money. They're buying off not only politicians but the media.

My assignment for the UN was to be present in this tinderbox for the last six months before the election and figure out

ways to support dialogue and create public messaging that would support a peaceful election. I was told I had a \$50,000 budget to support this work, and it was for me to figure out what to do.

What actually happened was complex:

1. On April 17, the Solomon Islands held its national election and there was no violence. It would not be difficult to pretend that had a very successful mission! But in fact, the honest truth is that it would be very difficult to make any connection between what I did in the six months and this peaceful outcome. As you will see, I'm not just being modest! Here's what happened.
2. I spent the first 3 months immersing myself in the culture. I was laser focused on 2 key questions: 1) Exactly what were the dynamics of escalating of tension into violence in the past; and 2) What could be done to de-escalate if it happened again; in particular, whose voices would make a difference? I developed a handful of strategies in response to this that I will tell you about in a minute. In December and January I sought approval from my superiors for the strategies and release of the money it would take to implement them.
3. The reply was slow in coming and it was hard to believe when it did. There was no funding forthcoming. The UN is in bad shape financially, depleted by emergencies – the war in Ukraine, the Israel/Hamas conflict, refugees in various locations, and more. I knew that important staff positions were being cut but I had assumed all along that the \$50K promised my work – a small amount really in the context of UN budgets, was secure.
4. So all my analysis and lovely strategies had no purpose! In fact they'd set up exactly a scenario that happens often in peace and development work. It's very easy if you come from abroad associated with a big and

well funded organization to get a lot of attention quickly in situations of economic hardship. Everybody wants to get on the gravy train! You might be a nobody at home but if you walk around talking about ideas for meetings and dialogues and convening important people, you'll probably be treated like royalty. It's a dynamic that's pretty hard to avoid. My feeling about it has always been, at least be careful with it and don't ever stir up false hopes.

This turn of events was both shocking and deeply demoralizing to me as a key actor in it. I'd like to use it as a reference point in reflecting on the requirements of peace in our world. I'm going to highlight causes of failure. This is not a success story, so let me pause first and highlight one important contribution that I was able to make in the Solomon Islands. There is an entity in the UN called the Peacebuilding Fund. Funded by the handful of wealthy countries who seek to build a peaceful world through non-military means, it releases millions of dollars every year to support special peace strategies.

As a country with a history of repeated outbreaks of violence, the Solomon Islands has for a number of years been identified as a priority recipient for funds from the peace building fund. In fact, UN agencies wrote up a 2 1/2 million dollar funding proposal about 18 months ago to fund a series of special strategies for building consensus regarding how to de-centralize governance, a key issue that has been a part of the tensions of the past.

But the UN agencies were not able to agree among themselves on how to divvy up the funding! Part of my mandate was to break this impasse so the agencies could agree on a common proposal and get the funding.

So in December, January, and February, I spent a lot of time

in meetings with the UN agencies and government officials to get a consensus for this proposal. We submitted the proposal in February and it is now moving forward for funding by the Peace Building Fund. The \$2.5 million dollars to fund peacebuilding activities for the next 18 months is on its way! This helps explain why no one seem to notice or care very much that I had been brought all this distance for six months of election support with no budget for implementation. I remember thinking to myself in the early weeks – whether or not I deliver in getting that proposal through is actually how I'll be remembered in the Solomon Islands, so stay on top of it!

In the end the UN got what the bureaucrats really wanted from my time there. So let me use the overall experience of failure as a case study to talk about about the challenges of peacebuilding and why it remains so elusive.

The text in Isaiah is about the messenger of the Lord being called to go and speak, and deliver a message on behalf of the Lord.

The messenger responds from a place of total overwhelming personal inadequacy. “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!”

The only thing the Messenger can to say for themself is “my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

If there is such a thing as a biblical approach to peacebuilding it begins with precisely this level of humility. Can you imagine Antony Blinken approaching the Palestinians and Israelis, in such a spirit!

The modalities of peace we know in our world are top down, based on the position and power of those seeking to be brokers of peace. Whatever agreements emerge from such a process are never transformational; invariably the political and economic interests of the peacemakers themselves play an important role

in the dynamics.

In this text, it is only after the messenger cries out in protest about his own inadequacy that the mandate to convey the message is given. There's no shortage in our world of organizations and Messengers eager to convey a message. We are targeted all day long with messages by people and organizations who are full of certainty about their authority.

This text suggests that a different modality: The message we are meant to convey is transformative only when it arises from a place of humility, self-scrutiny, and honesty.

There is an additional dimension here – the message transforms the messenger. “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

6:7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

So the weakness and sin of the messenger are blotted out because the messenger is touched by the message. There is no detaching from or separating ourselves from the message. The message must burn in the mouth of the messenger, it must be integral to the life of the messenger. This is what gives the prophet the courage in the end to say, “Here I am, send me!”

Peacemaking as our world knows it is not a message or practice that has touched the peacemakers. Rather it is something that powerful nations and people try to do to others, typically from a topdown, we-are-holier-than-thou perspective that ignores our own role in perpetuating many conflicts. It's do as we say, (not do as we do). Let us show you how to do it, or we have the answers here.

I think it would be accurate to say that my appointment as a peacebuilder came out of an institution that acts in this topdown approach to peacebuilding. My appointment was not made by Solomon Islanders; the key decisions about how I would use my time and the resources made available to do my work were all under the control of people on the other side of the world. I did my best to work in ways accountable to and informed by local insight and wisdom, but in the end the dynamics of the UN itself decided everything.

So what would it look like to do peacemaking in the world transformatively?

The first challenge in working transformatively is to connect with and empower those within a conflicted society who are respected for their commitment to peace, people who commands respect on all sides. Who are those people here, was my question in the Solomon Islands?

Religious leaders. Politicians are widely seen as corrupt or self-serving or both. The SI is probably the most “Christian” place I’ve ever lived or worked. Over 90% identify as Christian. The Anglican church is the largest; Catholics the second largest.

I set up meetings with the heads of these two denominations and found them eager to do what could be done to support a peaceful election.

Repeatedly across the years I have found religious communities an under-utilized resource for peace. Religion of course has often been a cause of conflict and intolerance. As a result, many people in the UN and other global networks seem to have reacted by keeping a distance from all religious actors. But in my view that’s throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Rather than sideline religious leaders, we should figure out ways to involve them constructively; help them take stands in the public arena that are non-partisan; that support

basic principles of democracy.

There were two additional groups of influencers I was guided to in the Solomon Islands: Certain sports figures, and a group of respected women journalists.

My plan, had the \$50,000 been available, was to use video interviews and public messaging on radio and social media platforms, to make these respected figures make calls for a peaceful election. If violence began to escalate we would ramp up their involvement, and assist them to speak out forcefully against escalation.

In the end, even without the \$50,000, the election took place without violence. Good work by the electoral commission in managing the election deserves much credit for this. In addition, the presence of a large international police force contributed by Australia and New Zealand surely made a difference.

But looking into the future, the SI is not out of the woods. It's not hard to imagine the country getting caught up again in a wave of mob violence.

To build a world in which conflict is less destructive, we need a new kind of peacebuilder. I don't mean yet another generation of smart people with money and technology able to broker international connections and make deals for three year programs of economic upgrades. We need work for development and peacebuilding that works slowly and carefully from the ground up, and supports the emergence of leaders at all levels. This needs to be done by peace and development workers who are there to serve rather than use Solomon Islanders as pawns in a larger mission for their purposes.

As Christians, we really wouldn't need to look far for inspiration. All we have to do is look at the way in which Jesus emptied himself and became a servant to those he came to assist. The challenge for peacemaking is not that we don't

know how to make peace or that the conflicts out there are unsolvable. Rather it's that the structures and practices the world uses tries to solve conflicts remain tainted by exactly the assumptions and attitudes of self-service that created conflict in the first place.

Isaiah points us in the direction we need to go:

1. Let peacemaking come from a place of modesty and humility.
2. Let the message of peace burn in the mouth of the peacemakers so that we are transformed ourselves by the message we bring.
3. Let us be willing to be sent, in trust that there is a larger purpose unfolding.