Nurturing Peacebuilders for the Future: International Service Learning in One Mennonite High School

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"Sin el pan, no hay ninguna justicia; sin la justicia, no hay ninguna paz."
(Without bread, there is no justice; without justice, there is no peace.)
— *Juan Pablo Morales, Guatemala (2011)*[1]

For close to two decades, Rosthern Junior College (RJC), a Mennonite high school serving Saskatchewan and Alberta, has created opportunities for students to understand the connections between justice, peace, and Anabaptist theology. Each academic year, all students participate in ALSO (Alternative Learning and Service Opportunities) locally, nationally, and internationally. Since 2007, I have been a researcher-participant with groups that have travelled to Central America, collecting data for a longitudinal study on the perceived impact of this experience on student participants. Their experiences in rural Indigenous communities in Guatemala and El Salvador have given them insights into the impact of colonialism, the effects of neoliberalism and globalization, and the marginalization of the Mayan people, especially women and children. Exposure to these issues, as evidenced by the research, provides the foundation for students to begin thinking of themselves as agents of social change and peacebuilders. Well-crafted and scaffolded experiences expose students to the ongoing impact of colonial violence, and plant and nurture the seeds of peacebuilding in the young participants.

Rosthern Junior College, like many Mennonite institutions, emphasizes the peace position of Anabaptist theology. While the roots of this pacifist theology can be found in the writings of early Anabaptists such as Menno Simons, how this philosophy of peace is enacted has been interpreted

[1] Personal communication, 2011.

Global Mennonite Peacebuilding: Exploring Theology, Culture, and Practice, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen, Paul C. Heidebrecht, and Reina C. Neufeldt, special issue, *The Conrad Grebel Review* 35, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 348-360.

in various ways and continues to evolve. Although the mission statement of RJC refers to "peacemaking," current interpretations frequently use the term "peacebuilding," recognizing the relational work needed to make peace. Peacebuilding, as defined by peace studies scholar Reina Neufeldt,

> refers to efforts undertaken before, during, or after violent conflict which focus not only on stopping violence, but also address and transform the deeply-rooted structural issues and divisive social relationships that drive conflict.[2]

Indubitably, colonialism, "the historical process whereby the 'West' attempts systematically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the 'non-West,'"[3] is a violent conflict, the effects of which continue to impact much of the world's population through ongoing physical, social, psychological, and economic violence. The most devastating effects of colonialism are borne by Indigenous populations, as revealed by Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the ongoing inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, which parallel similar inquiries in South Africa and Central America. Neoliberalism, like colonialism, continues to negate the value of the non-West by moving

> the State's center of gravity away from regulation, social investment (e.g., universal public schooling), and mild redistributions of wealth; and moves that center instead toward indulgence of corporate interests (e.g., tax breaks), bailouts, and heightened policing of the social disaster associated with unrestrained markets.[4]

Neoliberal economic policies combined with globalization have continued the economic and social violence begun by colonialism evidenced in increased migration and the exploitation of workers, particularly in the

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[2] Reina C. Neufeldt, *Ethics for Peacebuilders: A Practical Guide* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 5.

[3] Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), 16.

[4] Brian Michael Goss, Joan Pedro-Cabaña, and Mary Rachel Gould, "Introduction: Washed Up on the Shores of Neoliberal Globalization," in *Talking Back to Globalization*, ed. Brian Michael Goss, Joan Pedro-Cabaña, and Mary Rachel Gould (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016), xix.

Global South. The need for peacebuilders who understand these complexities is increasingly urgent. By participating in ALSO, secondary school students are exposed to these complexities and encouraged to begin exploring their role as contributors to the issues and the solutions.

Through these experiences, students have begun to see the world differently, making connections between Indigenous issues in Central America and Aboriginal marginalization in Canada. This paper considers the impact this experience has had in the attitudes of young adults as they grapple with the connections between justice and peace. Central to the experience is the careful planning and scaffolding built into the program, designed to empower young adults to become doers of justice and builders of peace. RJC's ALSO program can potentially provide a blueprint for peace and social justice action for adolescents.

Rosthern Junior College

Rosthern Junior College is a historic Mennonite high school, founded in 1905 on the Canadian Prairies.[5] From its beginnings as the German-English Academy to its present iteration, a recursive relationship between church and school has been evident. A comment from the founding meetings clearly expresses this relationship: "What our school is now our church will be later."[6] While the initial purpose of the school was to provide a good education in the German language that would ground students in biblical principles, changing demographics and historical events refocused those goals. By the 1970s, according to historian Frank Epp, the emphasis shifted to "Mennonite specialties such as nonresistance" and the "thought processes and value systems of the students. The intention was to give to those students a richer and fuller life and through them, in their respective professions, a strong contribution to society."[7] In the ensuing decades, the desire to instill Anabaptist values that will ground the spiritual, ethical, and practical

[5] While the school was founded by Russian Mennonites, the student body has always been ecumenical. Currently, approximately 40 percent of the students have Mennonite roots. The majority of students are Saskatchewan residents, with additional representation from other provinces as well as other countries.

[6] Frank H. Epp, *Education with a Plus: The Story of Rosthern Junior College* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1975), 22.

[7] Ibid., 374-75.

foundations of RJC students has led to the development of intentionally focused programs. The current mission statement embodies these intentions: "Rosthern Junior College, in partnership with home and church, seeks to nurture the development of each student's identity and potential in the preparation for a life of faith, service and peacemaking."[8]

The notion of service to the broader community has always been a core value. In early years this notion manifested itself in workdays, opportunities for students to help in the harvest of vegetables grown specifically to supplement the school's larders. In later years, workdays became an opportunity for students to be ambassadors and hopefully receive a donation for the school. As a student in the mid-1970s, I remember participating in volunteer opportunities that included flood clean-up with Mennonite Disaster Service and dorm cleaning at a children's home in northern Saskatchewan. These opportunities were obviously created to instill the value of altruism in the participants, but preparation and debriefing were minimal. However, I believe these experiences were the roots of current initiatives.

While no one is sure when exactly the ALSO program was established, there is general agreement that it came about in the early years of this millennium and has gradually evolved to be more focused in its mission and purpose, through the building of relationships with diverse community members and agencies. ALSO is housed within the Christian Ethics program, a series of required courses. For one week each academic year, all students participate in "intensive times of 'learning while serving'"[9] locally, nationally, and internationally. Various ALSO opportunities are available. Canadian ALSO trips are covered through student tuition, while international trips have an additional cost, limiting participation to students with financial means. In developing the program, teachers have used the pedagogical framework of service learning.

Service Learning

Service learning has its roots in the concept of experiential education fostered

[8] Rosthern Junior College, "Mission Statement," https://rosthernjuniorcollege.ca, accessed August 15, 2016.

[9] Rosthern Junior College, "ALSO," https://rosthernjuniorcollege.ca/academics/excellence-in-education/learning-and-service, accessed August 15, 2016.

by John Dewey and Jane Addams, and became popularized in the 1960s with the establishment of the Peace Corps in the US and in college work-study programs.[10] Differentiating service learning from volunteerism, internships, and practica became necessary as such programs grew in popularity. Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher provide this definition of service learning:

> A credit bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Unlike extracurricular voluntary service, service learning is a course-based service experience that produces the best outcomes when meaningful service activities are related to the course material through reflection activities such as directed writings, small group discussions, and class presentations.[11]

The ALSO program at RJC fits within the parameters of service learning, since it is a course-based learning experience falling under the umbrella of Christian Ethics. The careful development of relationships with host organizations enables staff to prepare students for the experiences that they will have. Whether they are working with Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) locally, Out of the Cold in Calgary, Habitat for Humanity in Alabama, or MCC in Central America, students are introduced to the goals and purpose of the organizations and tasks that they might undertake. Preparation for the ALSO trips varies; students going to Central America will have had weekly meetings, basic Spanish, and an introduction to political and social history. Many of these students will be part of the Peace and Justice Christian Ethics class. Staff accompany students on these trips, and daily debriefings are the norm. In addition, carefully structured journal prompts, such as these, guide students in reflective writing:

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[10] Geraldine Balzer, "Why Go to Guatemala: International Service Learning and Canadian High School Students," in *Contemporary Studies in Canadian Curriculum: Principles, Portraits and Practices*, ed. Darren Stanley and Kelly Young (Calgary: Detselig Press, 2011), 125-50.

[11] Robert G. Bringle and Julie A. Hatcher, "Implementing Service-Learning in Higher Education," *Journal of Higher Education* 67, no. 2 (1996): 221.

- Tell me about a 'need' that you saw today that you had never really noticed or thought of before. What is one thing you can do to respond to that need in the world?
- Tell me about someone you met today. What was their story? What did you learn from them?
- How can service be understood as a part of your value system? Give examples from the work you did today.
- What is one thing you learned this week? Have you changed in any way? What new questions or insights about the world and society do you have as a result of what you did this week?

While these experiences are short in duration, they provide students with a way to consider social justice issues and develop personal responses to issues. Staff, parents, and supporters of RJC hope that students will thereby become proponents of social justice and peace rooted in the Anabaptist tradition.

An obvious goal of the ALSO program is attitudinal change, but as Randy Stoecker points out, "service learning can also reinforce stereotypes of the poor, oppressed, and excluded."[12] This happens within the program when students echo the "poor but happy" trope in describing community children.

Methodology

My longitudinal case study employed a modified narrative inquiry methodology,[13] using conversational interviews with individual participants to generate field and research texts representing their experiences in Central America and after their return. Digital photos were part of the field texts. There was a recursive element to the creation of the field texts as we took the texts and photos to each participant for further reflection. I accompanied the students to Central America in the role of participant researcher, collecting field notes, engaging in mini-interviews and group discussions, as well as using digital cameras to collect visual texts. My position as a researcher

[12] Randy Stoecker, *Liberating Service Learning and the Rest of Higher Education* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2016), 5.

[13] This type of methodology is outlined in D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

shifted over the six years of data collection. With each subsequent trip, I became less of an outsider; I was familiar to the students and the members of host communities—I was part of the team. Because of my ongoing relationship to the program and the analysis of the data collected, RJC staff sought my expertise in developing the ALSO program. As a qualitative researcher, I recognize my subjectivity in this research. I also acknowledge that I have chosen to conduct it because I recognize the positive potential in thoughtfully developed programs—and the exploitative possibilities in programs that do not respect local contexts.

The data collected in the study involves students who participated from 2007 to 2012. I conducted individual interviews with each participant at the end of the academic year in which they had travelled to Guatemala. A research assistant with no previous connection to the participants conducted follow-up interviews, enabling students to tell their own stories rather than telling them in relation to my own account. Past participants were invited to reflect on their experience, tell stories associated with the photos, and speculate on how the opportunity impacted their philosophy and life choices. The size of the sample pool and the voluntary nature of participation is a limitation of the study. However, as with much qualitative research, the individual impact of the experience is evident even if the findings are not generalizable. Each student's story is their own, and their interpretation of that impact is simply that, a personal reflection.

Context

RJC's trips are planned in conjunction with MCC's Connecting Peoples program, which "sponsors learning tours as part of its mission to be a channel for interchange between churches and community groups around the world, so that all may grow and be transformed."[14] Although each trip is individual, there are nevertheless many similarities among them. Upon arrival, the coordinator, who will be guide and translator, meets the student group at the airport. Following an in-country orientation, students travel to communities where they participate in work projects and are hosted by local families.

[14] Mennonite Central Committee, "Memorandum of Understanding," www.mcc.org/sites/mcc.org/files/media/common/documents/mccltmou.pdf, accessed August 15, 2016.

Participant Stories

In the spring of 2013, a graduate student interviewed thirteen participants, several from each of the previous six years of ALSO trips. Each one identified how they thought their experience was currently impacting their life and future plans. Their ability to make such connections is important to the future of a program which, in keeping with RJC's mission, "seeks to nurture the development of each student's identity and potential in the preparation for a life of faith, service and peacemaking." If, as Juan Pablo Morales**,** a Guatemalan community leader and activist, claims, peace and social justice are inseparable, then exposure to social justice issues through the ALSO program should be foundational in nurturing peacebuilders. What was evident throughout the interviews was the participants' ongoing engagement with the ideas and dilemmas they had witnessed as they determined how to be instruments of change in the world. As one would expect, participants farthest removed from their high school days had clearer ideas of vocation and engagement in the adult world; however, all who chose to be interviewed demonstrated how they are challenged to bring justice to their worlds.

Three participants from ALSO 2012 volunteered to be interviewed. Since their participation in the program was the most recent, their memories of the activities and their experiences were the most vivid. Kayla[15] had completed her first year of university and was questioning the professional direction she had chosen. As is the case with many of the participants, she understands that the experience was more about her growth as an individual and as a citizen: "Not all of what the trip was for is helping people but also for learning and helping ourselves." She described it as giving her "a broader sense of how the world works" and an understanding that "learning isn't just books and teachers, but also getting out there, teaching yourselves, learning from different people." Kayla began her university program believing her chosen profession would enable her to work for social justice in society, but quickly became disillusioned. Ultimately, she changed programs in her quest to make a difference.

Elizabeth and Michelle both chose to work for a year, and then travel and volunteer internationally. Michelle has become much more

[15] All names are pseudonyms. All interviewees signed consent forms, and the study was approved by the University of Saskatchewan research ethics panel.

aware of herself as a consumer. Her consideration of the economic impact of our consumer society has led her to consider her relationship to wage employment: "It's made me think how it's not just important to get a good job and make enough money for yourself and live your life without seeing what is going on everywhere else." Elizabeth, like Michelle and Kayla, was struggling with her place as an advocate of social justice: "Definitely changed my way of thinking and how I consider things. I think finding a way to really live out what I saw or what I wanted to change is hard, but it keeps me thinking of what I can continue to do." Subsequently, Elizabeth and Michelle have volunteered internationally twice, and have entered university in nursing and education.

Both ALSO 2011 participants had completed one year of university. Cindy felt her time in the communities was too short, and felt a longer period would have enabled her to become more involved and make a greater difference. For that reason, she was working toward certification in Teaching English as a Second Language. She has determined that "life is too short to just do whatever and live idly. I would prefer to care more about others than spend my life thinking about myself." Carmen's experience with food sustainability projects in Guatemala and El Salvador led her to enroll in an agricultural degree. Like Kayla, she quickly became disillusioned with her choice: "international agriculture is awesome, and then I took Agribusiness . . . and said I hate this." The disconnect between subsistence agriculture and food sustainability that she observed in Central America conflicted with the ideology of agriculture as big business developed in Canadian universities. Her disillusionment with this worldview resulted in a change of direction because, as she stated, "I think it's mostly being kind, you know, and not forgetting that we're not the only people in the world." In her mind, agribusiness forgot the people of Central America.

The two young women who travelled to Central America in 2010 were beginning to struggle with the larger issues of colonialism and neoliberalism. Both had completed three years of university and were pursuing careers in teaching. During this trip, students were exposed to Canada's involvement in resource extraction and the human and environmental impact of mining. Danielle had come to realize that the world does not necessarily see Canadians as benevolent: "we think as Canadians we have such a good

reputation in other countries and we have to learn that we are not as innocent as we think." Her awareness of these issues "influenced the structure of my projects in international studies classes," and she had become more critical of charities, needing to know what she was supporting and how her money was being used.

Amanda admitted that she was looking for something to be passionate about. She recognized that her participation in ALSO was valuable because service and learning happened simultaneously. She also identified a problem with service learning: it is frequently more advantageous to the student group than to the host community. She questions whether the work she did was of benefit to the community, but realizes that she entered into the world of global citizenship through this experience.

Jennifer and Calvin travelled to Guatemala in 2009. Following graduation, Jennifer chose to return to Guatemala as part of a longer post-secondary program. While her ALSO experience introduced her to global issues, her extended stay enabled her to "be globally aware of the things that were going on and realize the consequences of the stuff that our countries are doing." Like Danielle, she recognized the impact of neoliberalism on the Global South and was committed to spreading that awareness. After resisting education as a career choice, Jennifer ultimately recognized her strengths and the way that they meshed with her desire to be a global citizen. Ultimately she realized that teachers "have the attention of a lot of young people at an impressionable age."

Calvin was now bringing a more nuanced and analytical view to his ALSO experience, seeing the larger picture: "We could actually see what organizations are trying to do and what the problems are and how people are trying to address them." Like Michelle and Elizabeth, Calvin is challenged by the consumer culture and how purchasing electronic items, for example, is normalized regardless of the cost.

Magdalene, the only ALSO 2008 participant who volunteered to be interviewed, is able to clearly articulate her post-secondary journey, connecting many of her decisions to her exposure to social justice issues. Introduced to the dilemma of migrant workers while in Central America, she decided to learn more about their circumstances and chose to become an apple picker after graduation. From there she travelled to Thailand as a

volunteer. Although her original plan had been to study theater and film, these experiences with marginalized people caused her to choose psychiatric nursing, which "is all about hearing people's stories and serving vulnerable populations." Magdalene has an interest in working with the homeless and people with addictions. Ultimately, however, she wants "to go somewhere and train local people, like training counselors to work with women who've been involved with the sex trade." The concept of empowering local people echoes the goals of MCC.

The three participants from my first ALSO trip had been out of high school for six years at the time of their final interview. Each had chosen a direction in life and was working toward a goal. While Katrina still had a very idealistic view about volunteering and her ability to make a difference, she was committed to involvement in international and community organizations: "I just know there's kids out there that are way more in need than I am. I have thirty dollars a month I can spare, so why not give it?" She identifies the trip to Guatemala as planting a seed in her, a desire to make a difference whether locally or farther afield.

Carson focused on issues of consumerism in his interview. While he had always recognized the importance of fair trade, he now identified trade as a political issue. Recognizing the problems with fair trade, he identifies his new awareness as central to making good consumer decisions. His maturity and further life experiences have enabled him to become a critical thinker as he weighs his purchasing options and priorities.

Of all the participants, Felicity most clearly articulated the impact that the ALSO program had on her life choices. Prior to this trip, she had planned to be a medical doctor, perhaps a neurosurgeon. Exposure to the health challenges faced by community members caused her to rethink her goals: "After I was in Guatemala, I really started thinking about how we could make sustainable and local healthcare practices that are accessible to everyone, that we use our resources and people around us to aid in people's health, whether that be physical, mental, spiritual." Felicity majored in Gender Studies, and volunteered on a sexual assault crisis line as she extended her awareness of health and social issues impacting women in her community. At the time of this interview, she had begun training as a midwife, a health profession she saw as empowering rather than pathologizing women.

Conclusion

RJC's ALSO program is intimately connected to the mission of nurturing the development of each student's identity and potential in preparing for a life of faith, service, and peacebuilding. The impact of ALSO cannot be isolated from other experiences offered at the school and the nurturing students receive at home and in their faith communities. ALSO, however, crystalizes the school's goals in one short but intense experience, providing opportunity for staff to address issues of social justice locally and internationally. It opens the doors to conversations about the marginalization of Indigenous peoples caused by colonialism and furthered through neoliberal policies, and the ways faith can be lived out in the world through relationships, however fleeting, with individuals and communities in a very different context. John Paul Lederach states that "peacebuilding requires a vision of relationship"[16] of "artful connection,"[17] and Vanessa de Oliviera Andreotti wonders "whether knowledge is enough to change how people imagine themselves, their relationships with each other and the world at large."[18]

Participation in ALSO sets the stage for global citizenship, helping students to move outside classroom knowledge and see a world beyond their local communities, entering into relationship, albeit superficial and short term, with members of a very different community. These connections provide "a space for debate and an unexpected publicness emerges that is relevant to, for example, precarious youth looking for ways to take their place in worldmaking."[19] As Lynette Schultz puts it, "these people demand that the histories of colonial struggle for land and sovereignty and for even the possibility of leading lives of full humanity be heard at every level, local to global."[20]

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[16] John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 35.

[17] Ibid., 162.

[18] Vanessa de Oliviera Andreotti, "Global Citizenship Education Otherwise: Pedagogical and Theoretical Insights," in *Decolonizing Global Citizenship Educations,* ed. Ali A. Abdi, Lynette Shultz, and Thashika Pillay (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2015), 224.

[19] Lynette Shultz, "Global Citizenship or International Trade? A Decolonial Analysis of Canada's New International Education Policy" in *Decolonizing Global Citizenship Educations*, 115-16.

[20] Ibid., 116.

Local communities have the opportunity to tell their stories, painful stories that put a face on the violence of colonialism and neoliberal economic policies. As adolescents confront the realities of colonial displacement and marginalization in Guatemala, they are also led to consider the Canadian context and the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual violence perpetuated against Indigenous people at home. As they become aware of the exploitative role Canadian resource extraction companies play in Central America, they are challenged to consider alternative consumer practices. As Juan Pablo Morales has so poignantly said, "without bread, there is no justice and without justice there is no peace."[21] Students are challenged to see their place in building structures that will lead to a more just and therefore peaceful world.

As the quest for experiential learning opportunities becomes an increasingly popular drawing card in Canadian educational programming, the need to carefully consider the purpose and the impact of such initiatives is increasingly important, RJC's ALSO program can provide a blueprint for a program that carefully sets the stage for participants to "move from isolation . . . toward a capacity to envision and act on the basis that we live in and form part of a web of interdependent relationships."[22] While this may seem like a monumental task for adolescents, it potentially sows the seeds, which, if nurtured, will grow into peacebuilders of the future.

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[21] Juan Pablo Morales, personal communication, 2011
[22] Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 173.