

- I've had two deployments and have been diagnosed with PTSD. They've given me lots of drugs but it's not helping. I have suicidal thoughts.
- I no longer believe the military is right for me. I don't even want to train with my gun anymore. I wonder if I am a conscientious objector.

All of these types of calls and many more are handled by roughly twenty counselors scattered across the country. We meet annually for additional training and mutual support. It is not unusual to work with conscientious objectors for up to a year, with repeated phone calls and e-mails to review their application narrative. We may even testify at a conscientious objector's hearing to vouch for their sincerity. In some cases we continue relating as friends after a successful discharge.

The Hotline is not about stopping wars, but about supporting people who are struggling amidst a large and sometimes oppressive military culture that stirs deep questions about purpose, morality, identity, and allegiance. Military personnel often carry the trauma of war deep inside their souls and face important decisions about their future. Hotline counselors help them reflect on the values they hold dear and outline potential options for them to consider. A veteran friend once told me, "If you want to be a peacemaker and you are not talking to soldiers, you are not thinking nearly big enough." The Hotline enlarges my thinking and expands the arena of peacemaking.

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PAYRA: Adult Peace Education in Bangladesh

PAYRA (meaning "dove" in Bengali) is an initiative of Mennonite Central Committee Bangladesh that has emerged from grassroots efforts to train local communities in peacebuilding and conflict transformation skills. Many of the initial efforts have been, and continue to be, coupled with multi-sector

development initiatives that inform the PAYRA approach. The specific objective is to build peacebuilding capacity by offering adult participatory Learning Sessions in the Bengali language—by Bangladeshi facilitators—to staff from other organizations with the potential to conduct grassroots activities as part of their work. Target groups include families, union council members charged with arbitrating local disputes, and, more recently, mid-level civil service workers and politicians. PAYRA has also been developing a peacebuilders network and a peace resource center.

Building upon English-based international peacebuilding institutions, PAYRA broadens the reach of adult peace education to those whose language or economic barriers prevent international travel. The approach has been to work with participants to identify concerns from the community's experience and to develop sessions accordingly—redeveloping outside learnings for needs embedded in the life, language, and context of Bangladesh. The all-Bangladeshi staff seek to act as servant facilitators, which is somewhat unique for the country, where teachers or trainers commonly mirror the colonial legacy by acting like “the boss.”

Also, virtually all the current efforts in Bangladeshi peacebuilding have been primarily either top-down interventions at the upper political level, targeting specific groups such as extremists, or academic research programs. Part of what makes PAYRA unique is the focus on empowering average Bangladeshis facing daily conflict and violence with practical, accessible tools to address the multiple root causes of conflict from the bottom up. Participants have noted that the impacts they see in their own family relationships provide motivation for community-level action.

Through reaching out to other organizations, PAYRA has discovered the need to address the many socially and culturally-constructed boundary walls between emerging peacebuilders that hinder cooperation. An NGO may not feel confident or comfortable reaching out to an Imam, or vice versa. Student groups may not trust politicians, and political groups get stuck in party lines. PAYRA seeks to pass on the ideas of relationship and listening to organizational and community leaders from various political or religious perspectives in order to avoid creating further dichotomies. Staff have sought to model these ideas through engaging with participants from Madrasa teachers to rural politicians to NGO field staff. At the same

time, in building on nearly 50 years of MCC wisdom in Bangladesh, PAYRA has had to be mindful that a peacebuilding approach requires patience, transparency, humility, and an openness to its own transformation through these interactions.

Another learning that has shaped PAYRA's approach in the last couple of years is the use of culturally rich metaphors to convey new and abstract concepts in a relatively short Learning Session and to work towards worldview transformation. For example, in conversations about the interests and needs of a given conflict actor, the metaphor of a "char" (a sand island created by the sediment of a shifting river current) has emerged to visualize how we can get stuck on our own island, isolated by positions which separate us. But it also opens a discussion on what is going on under the surface, where we can not only begin to understand the ground on which others stand but may also see the possibility for common ground in shared values, or even shared needs and interests.

A further example is the "conflict tree" metaphor, which opens conversation about healthy roots needing to be nourished in order for a family or community to produce peaceful fruit. Similarly, "justice flowing like a river" is a metaphor that has helped refocus narrow, passive perceptions of justice, suggesting that true justice has the power to wash away the old and to bring forth new life and energy.

Poetic metaphors are very familiar to Bangladeshis, and in fact the many revered Bangladeshi poets, such as Rabindranath Tagore (d. 1941) and Fakir Lalon Shah (d. 1890), create an undercurrent of Bangladeshi identity that supersedes much of the religious difference. People of all the major faiths know and sing the same songs from these thinkers, and PAYRA staff have noticed that opening space in Learning Sessions for these songs, and encouraging creative metaphors to emerge, solidifies the learning and brings participants together into more meaningful and transformative relationships.

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