

Learning to Become Peacemakers

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Since 1995, several dimensions have been identified over the years as being essential for harmonious relations between people. An approach has been developed and formation in peace is now an integral part of the program offered at the *Institut de Formation Humaine Intégrale de Montréal* (IFHIM).

Stages of Formation

This peace formation is based on drawing out strengths of individuals by teaching them to re-examine their meaningful experiences. During this training course, people learn:

- (a) To recognize their openness to the other and discover the resulting impact on peace that this openness may effect.
- (b) To discern in everyday life, that which fosters greater freedom in decision-making.
- (c) How to rebuild peace in and around themselves by managing their emotions and frustrations.
- (d) To recognize and overcome obstacles in themselves or in the other and become capable of approaching the other; becoming more comfortable with the unknown and with differences related to age, language, culture, ways of doing things, etc., that could keep them at a distance.
- (e) Finally, there is a focus on how to awaken peace leadership within oneself by becoming aware of one's own biases as well as developing the capacity to break down prejudices between people and build bridges of peace.

An Immersion Experience

Each year, immersion students benefit from a week of peace formation. During the summer, a week of formation is also offered to anyone who wants to sign up for it. As part of the “*Processus et Mission*” (Process and Mission) seminar, our students get involved in specific projects with different groups in Montreal. This year, four groups of students are involved with children or young people with the goal of initiating training in how to become peacemakers.

Youth Commitment for Peace in Montreal

The following are excerpts from the testimony of eight students in Immersion two and three: Marie Berthe from Togo, Madeleine from Côte d'Ivoire, Agathe from Burkina Faso, Marie Monique from Rwanda, Hortense from Congo Brazzaville, Rufine from Cameroon, Luc from Belgium and Violaine from Canada.

Following the attack on the Great Mosque in Quebec City on January 29, 2017, we became aware of how much Quebec and the rest of the world needs peace. What future? How do we see peace? As part of the *Process and Mission* seminar, accompanied by Élisabeth Michaëly and Claire Lutz-Sierra, instructors in Integral Human Formation, we set up a collective project: *Les Secouristes pour la paix* (Relief Workers for Peace).

Since we are men and women concerned about the growth of young people and confident in their ability to bring about change in order to build peace, we reached out to them to show them how they are already actors of peace and how they can become even more engaged.

Uniting Different Cultures

We shared with Alfredo Ramanandraibe, parish priest of Notre-Dame-des-Neiges in Montreal, the fire that is inspiring us to reach out and help young people between 12 and 18 years of age see themselves as actors of peace. Uniting different cultures is a very real need in this parish. The proposal to create a new group of young *Relief Workers for Peace* is helping to achieve this goal and make it a success. Following an announcement in the parish leaflet, fifteen young people signed up for the *Relief Workers for Peace* training. They come from different countries in Europe, Africa and the Americas.

We have already had three meetings with them; we meet one a month, from 3:00 to 4:30 p.m. At the first meeting, we collected their dreams for the present-day and all of them expressed their need for peace, which coincided with our objective. We created a relationship of trust with them by seeking out their interests through a question-and-answer game, songs, sketches and what it means to be a Relief Worker for Peace. Through their personal giftedness, and through their daily habits, our training helped them see their values and how they were making decisions for peace.

Overcoming Fear of the Other

By teaching them to examine their decisions, they were gradually discovering that an action done with love opens up to life and to peace. With these learning (or practical) skills, the teenage boys and girls begin with conscious decisions to build peace within themselves and in their surroundings. The parents are proud of the fruits of this project and are already seeing changes in the lives of the young people. One mother was telling us that her son is a little more cheerful and more open at home than before, which is fostering a better relationship between them.

One youth, who joined the group on the recommendation of his mother, said that he decides himself whether or not to come to the meetings. That decision came after a workshop in which the youths learned to recognize the ways that prevent them from freely making decisions that are values-based. Thus, they were able to recognize their personal pathways of "likes" and desires on the one hand and those of obligation, imposition on the other, thus moving them towards free decision making, which differs from reactionary decisions and impulsive action. They have learned to walk the line from impulse to decision, from obligation to personal commitment. They have seen how to move from acting out of impulse to a responsible decision, one that is rooted in their values.

Trusting one another, they managed to surpass the fear of the other (the unknown), a foundational experience that will allow them now to dare to take the step towards peace. Training continues in this manner with them.

What We Have Seen Among our Students

We have seen people experiencing better relationships with authority. We have seen people from different countries sharing community life in harmony despite differences in culture and ways of doing things. People from “enemy” countries have become able to collaborate on joint projects. We have seen Tutsis and Hutus from Rwanda who had lived through the genocide, living together and sharing as brothers and sisters, when they were once enemies.

What We Have Seen with our Alumni

In the **Democratic Republic of the Congo**, postulants of the Sisters of St. Chrétienne are initiating children in becoming peacemakers with their director of formation.

In the **Central African Republic**, together with our alumni and students from different congregations (Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Daughters of Wisdom, Missionaries of Christ the King, Little Sisters of Jesus, Montfort Missionaries and several indigenous congregations), Christians and Muslims follow peace formation together and then become ambassadors for peace in their community.

In **Rwanda**, couples are committing themselves to becoming families of peace and inviting other families to do so as well.

In **Haiti**, sisters from various congregations, including the Sisters of Charity of Saint-Hyacinthe, the Missionary Sisters of Christ the King, the Spiritans, are initiating children to become small builders of peace bridges in their schools and families.

In **Lebanon**, the Good Shepherd Sisters are initiating children to peace by giving them the opportunity to participate concretely in receiving Syrian refugee children, and doing so in war conditions.

A Project for the Future

In **Colombia**, the Provincial Council of the Montfort Missionaries has decided to offer peace training to two groups starting in October 2017. The first group will be comprised of 100 people that will include their fellow Montfortian brothers, parish leaders, youth group facilitators, and men and women religious. The second group will consist of 250 lay Montfortians. The objective of this formation is to contribute to their country's efforts for the peaceful integration of former guerrillas into civil society.

Opening up to the other is an apprenticeship that is increasingly necessary in a world in which the stranger quickly becomes “threatening.” There are many formation courses in our different locations. The formation offered at the IFHIM was developed by one of our own¹ and was first tested in Quebec. Now it continues to reach people of all ages, both in this province and elsewhere.

¹ Marie-Marcelle Desmarais, « *Un urgent besoin de bâtisseurs de paix dans tous les coins du monde* » [“An urgent need for peacebuilders in every corner of the world”], *Le Magazine de la personne*, Montréal, IFHIM, vol. 3, n° 1 (mai 2002), p. 16–22.