BUILDING BRIDGES OF UNDERSTANDING AND PEACE:  
A TWINNING PROJECT BETWEEN MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN YOUTH

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2009

Acknowledgement

The Center for Peace Education (CPE) is grateful first and foremost to the SGIDU Program (Strengthening Grassroots Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding) of the Australian Government. It has consistently supported the twinning project whose story you are about to read in this publication.

The Center is also grateful to the following organizations and persons. They have helped the CPE in bringing together the two school communities, Rajah Muda High School and Miriam College (especially its Grade 7 and High School students), into a learning partnership:

The Miriam College Community (All Units)
The Rajah Muda High School Community
BALAY Rehabilitation Center
Peacemakers Circle
Cotabato Division, Department of Education
Maryknoll College Class 1979
Maryknoll College Class 1968
Grade 7 Parents Council 2007-2008
Oliver Miniano and Viola Esparagoza
Cora Derige and Jaime Villafuerte
Melinda Lamorena and Grace Ricamata Dino
The CPE Associates
Pax Christi of the College and of the High School
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The Need to Build Bridges

Building Bridges is a good metaphor for this project, which seeks to create new relationships between two groups that have been divided by historical and geographical circumstances. A bridge seeks to connect two places and enables easy access between those who live on both sides. This is the goal of the project— to connect two groups of youth that prior to the project have suffered from negative attitudes toward each other— to enable them to communicate and have meaningful encounters that can break the prejudices that divide them and in its stead build bridges of understanding.

Gordon Allport (1958) asserts that humans have a propensity toward prejudice. This propensity lies in their normal tendency to form generalizations and categories whose content represents an oversimplification of their world of experience. David Hamburg (1993) adds that field studies on intergroup behavior have indicated a striking finding: the propensity of people to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, between “us” and “them”. Hence, intergroup conflict due to narrow ethnic, religious or national orientations has been a historical problem.

To address this propensity toward prejudice (or in Hamburg’s words, against those perceived to be in the outgroups), Allport says that the “trend of evidence favors the conclusion that knowledge about and acquaintance with members of other groups make for tolerant attitudes.” He adds that contacts that bring knowledge and acquaintance are likely to engender sounder and truer beliefs and for this reason contribute to the reduction of prejudice.

Prejudice is an attitude which prejudices a person or group without sufficient experience or evidence. Most often these prejudices become commonly held beliefs which are usually used to justify acts of discrimination and exclusion.

In the Philippines there have been countless reports of such prejudice, discrimination and exclusion, particularly against Muslims. Although it can be said that many Muslims
in the Philippines also harbor negative stereotypes about the Christian majority, it is a fact that the latter’s prejudices against the former are uglier, more serious and pronounced. This is shown by studies that have been made, for example, by the Filipinas Foundation and the Philippine Human Development Network (Abhoud Syed Linga, 2007).

Zainudin Malang (2007), Director of the Bangsamoro Center for Law and Policy, asserts and agrees with the view that bias against Muslims and their socio-economic exclusion are among the underlying root causes of the conflict in Mindanao. He cites the Philippine Human Development Report 2005’s recommendation that there is a need to build a constituency for peace and that constituency must be built not only within the government but in the greater populace.

Armed conflict and displacement have disrupted people’s lives in conflict areas in Mindanao for four decades now. Although a peace accord was signed by the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in 1996, there have been problems of implementation to this day. A second large resistance group emerged in the mid 1980s, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and it did not participate in the 1996 Peace Agreement between the GRP and MNLF. The armed conflict between the GRP and the MILF in the last decade has caused much destruction and suffering to both combatants and non-combatants. In the war that started in Pikit, Cotabato last February 2003, hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced.

The GRP and MILF have undertaken peace talks, with the Government of Malaysia as mediator. However, the peace process between them has been marked by obstacles and intermittent fighting despite the Ceasefire Agreement that they have signed in 1997.

The challenge for others, including educational institutions, is to accompany this “formal peace process”, which at the time of this writing, is still suspended, with a “people-to-people peace process”. The latter is a crucial step, if we are to build a peace constituency who will be supportive of the peacebuilding efforts in Mindanao. Historical circumstances have created and deepened prejudices between Christians and Muslims believers. Although the root of the armed conflict is not religious in nature, there are those who have used religious differences to exacerbate the conflict. Generations of youth have been receiving negative messages about the other group, and this cycle has largely been perpetuated by fear of and ignorance about the other.


**Launching of the Twinning Project**

It is in the light of these circumstances that the Center for Peace Education (CPE) initiated a “twinning project” between Miriam College (MC), a Catholic school located in Metro Manila, and Rajah Muda High School (RMHS), a public school attended by Muslims located in Pikit, Cotabato. The latter is a conflict area in Central Mindanao. RMHS was recommended by a partner organization that works in Mindanao, the BALAY Rehabilitation Center. Thereafter, the CPE wrote a letter to the Head of RMHS to express its intent to have a twinning project with RMHS, which he reciprocated with a similar letter of intent.

The theme that was adopted for the project was “Building Bridges of Understanding and Peace.” The project sought to build bridges between the students of the aforementioned schools and to enable them to have contacts and encounters that can bring “knowledge and acquaintance that are likely to engender sounder and truer beliefs” about each other. It was hoped that through the project they would gain a better understanding of each other, thus contributing to the reduction of prejudice between the two groups.

The launching of the twinning project took place on August 30, 2004 and the launching was held simultaneously in MC and RMHS. The teacher-coordinator of the project and a student leader from RMHS came to Miriam College during the launching. The students of MC received the guests very warmly and gave gifts for RMHS including a big dictionary and a globe for the RMHS Library. The Miriam students were excited to meet and hear the RMHS student’s message that focused on their situation. Among those who attended the launching ceremony and program were MC students especially from Grade 7 and the high school, friends from the peace and peace education community led by the Balay Rehabilitation Center and some alumnae from College Class 1979 who had given financial support for the project’s initial activities.

Since then letters have been exchanged between students of the two schools and pen friendships have developed. How this exchange of letters has affected them will be the subject of their first joint newsletter published at the end of the school year, April 2005.

**The Mindanao Week of Peace 2004**

During the Mindanao Week of Peace 2004 (last Thursday of November until first week of December) the CPE in cooperation with the CPE Associates (administrators and faculty) and students who were involved in the project held a “lugawan” or selling of rice porridge to raise funds for the project. It was heartwarming to see how the students gave their all - selling tickets, selling the “lugaw”, washing the dishes and cleaning up.
The money that was raised was contributed through Balay to help this organization build two very simple classrooms for RMHS. It is because the school was destroyed during the 2003 war and they were at this time still re-building the classrooms. A small portion of the proceeds was also used to help the Bantay Ceasefire, an NGO that monitors the GRP-MILF’s compliance with the ceasefire agreement of 1997.

“Pag-asap”, The Joint Newsletter

On April 5, 2005, a newsletter was published by the students involved in the project. It featured reflection-essays, poetry and drawings that were contributed by the students from both schools. Their contributions showed how they appreciated the experience of writing to each other; developing friendships with one another; realizing the problems of the Rajah Muda community because of the armed conflict; and understanding the need for justice, mutual respect and acceptance despite differences, cooperation and solidarity.

The name given to the newsletter was “Pag-asap”, a word that means hope and is used in both Tagalog and Maguindanaon, the languages of the students from MC and RMHS, respectively. It is a beautiful and fitting name for the newsletter because hope is an essential element in building peace.

In this first issue of the newsletter, an MC grade 7 student, Lean Camille Lumabas, narrated her experience of receiving her first reply from her RMHS pen pal this way: “Nang matanggap ko ang liham, kaagad ko itong binuksan at binasa, at sa sobrang pagkasabik ko, nasira ko pa ang sobre ng liham. ... Nang mabasa ko ang kanyang liham, naghalo ang saya at lungkot. ... Mapalad ako at nabiyayaan ako ng magandang buhay sa piling ng aking pamilya. Sa kabilang banda, nalungkot ako dahil sana, ito rin ang kanyang nararanasan sa buhay – malayo sa panganib, at masaganang buhay. (“When I received the letter, I opened and read it right away, and in my excitement, I accidentally tore the envelope. When I read her letter, I felt a mix of joy and sadness. … I am lucky to be blessed with a good life with my family. On the other hand, I am sad because I wish the same things for her – freedom from danger, and a prosperous life.”)

On the other hand, Norhata Malik of RMHS wrote: “Subalit, malayo man ang dalawang paaralan ito at magkaiba ang isinusulong na relihiyon ng bawat isa, umusbong naman ang pagkakaibigan, pag-uunawaan at pagtutulungan dahil sa naturang proyekto. Magkaiba man ang paniniwala, naging magkalapit pa rin. Nabura ang poot at anumang di-pagkakaunawaan sa pagitan ng Muslim at Kristiyano bunga ng di-maipaliwanag na dahilan ng hidwaan. Ang lahat ng ito’y napalitan ng matinding pag-uunawaan, pagtutulungan at pagkakaisa ng mga mag-aaral ng dalawang paaralan.” (“Although the two schools are far apart and they are believers of different religions, friendships, understanding and cooperation have blossomed because
of the project. We became close despite the differences. Whatever antagonism there was between us disappeared. It was replaced by understanding and unity.

Another RMHS student, Noraisa Lintuan, shared her feelings about their experience with their pen pals from MC: “Ang pagsusulatan ng bawat panig ay tanda ng pagiging bukas ng bawat isa na ipahayag ang kanyang saloobin at damdamin datapwa’t umaasang kapwa mauunawaan ng bawat isa ang kanya-kanyang kalagayan…. Magkaiba man ang pananaw, matatamo pa rin ang pag-asang natatanaw, ang pagkakaisa ng Muslim at Kristiyano.” (The exchange of letters showed the openness of each group to share their feelings and their situation. Despite the differences, we hope to achieve Muslim-Christian unity.

A poem from Munahain Haron of RMHS expressed his sentiments about youth and peace:

Kabataan, Kapayapaan ay Isulong (Youth, Advocate Peace)

Kapayapaan, hangad ng bayan,
Pagmamahal, pag-asang tanan.
Kabataan, sa ‘yong mga kamay
Mithing pag-unlad nakasalalay.

Bayang minamahal ng ating mga ninuno,
Nais ay payapa’t nagkakaisang mundo.
Ngunit ngayon ay may pagkakagulo,
Suliranin ng mga pulo.

Isulong mo kapatid ang kapayapaan,
Dapat sa bayan ay nagmamahahalan,
Nang ang kaunlaran’y ating matamo,
Maging ligaya’t pagkakasundo.

It is interesting that in the same first issue, an MC student spoke of the same yearning. Sophia Nadine Servano wrote: “Ang mundong gusto nating buuin ay nakasalalay sa atin…Mga kabataan, mayroon tayong tungkulin. Matutong tanggapin ito at magbigay ng pag-asang mamamayan. Hwag humintong mangarap. Sa hamong panahon, tayo ang magiging tulay tungo sa kapayapaan. Mga kabataan tayo ang pag-asad!” (“The world we want to build rests on us…Youth, it is our responsibility. Accept it and give hope to others. Do not stop to dream. There are challenges but we will be the bridge to peace. We will bring hope!”)
The Joint Teachers’ Workshop in Cotabato

On May 9 to 11, 2005, the administrators and teachers from both schools involved in the project held a joint seminar in Midsayap, Cotabato. On the first day, the RMHS teachers gave their presentations on Mindanao culture and history in general and the Pikit, Cotabato and the RMHS situation in particular. On the second day, the MC teachers shared their knowledge on teaching-learning strategies and on the main themes of peace education. The third day was used for an informal interaction between the MC faculty and the RMHS students and faculty, and was held in the latter’s school premises in Pikit, Cotabato.

Toward the end of the seminar, they planned the activities for the period June 2005 to March 2006. It was agreed that the exchange of letters among the students will continue and a second joint newsletter will be published at the end of the schoolyear. It was also agreed that in late November 2005, during the “Mindanao Week of Peace”, a joint workshop on youth peacebuilding would be held.

The Joint Workshop on Youth Peacebuilding

The joint workshop held from November 24 to 26, 2005 brought together selected students from MC and RMHS. This training was supported by CORDAID. It was the first time that a relatively big number of students from RMHS and MC met in a training context. There were 24 students from RMHS and a similar number from MC.

It became an excellent venue for dialogue and a step further to promote intercultural understanding between them. The main thrust of the workshop was to develop the capacities of the students as agents of peace in their respective spheres and to encourage their schools toward becoming “schools for peace.” The training included sessions on nonviolent conflict resolution and challenging prejudice, among others.

The outputs of the workshop were doable action plans from both student groups. Among these plans were the continuation of the exchange of letters and the joint newsletter, and the formation of a Peace Club at RMHS. The MC students already had one called Pax Christi.
The second issue of Pag-asa, the joint newsletter, was published on April 2006. Once again it featured the reflections of the MC and RMHS students who were participating in the project.

Therese Villanueva was still in Grade 7 at MC when she received her first letter from her pen pal from RMHS, Norma Sanday. Therese had written her pen pal about her life and, in turn, Norma told Therese stories about hers, like the night they were awakened by the sound of gunshots. Therese related this in the newsletter: “I would often be surprised about what she told me. Whenever I heard from the news about what’s happening in Mindanao, I would always think about Norma … and how difficult their lives are.”

They also reflected on their November 2005 training. Rasida Abubakar of RMHS wrote: “Marami akong natutuhan sa workshop. Una, natuklasan ko na ang tao ay may mahalagang ginagampanan sa mundo; pangalawa, ang Muslim at Kristiyano at ang iba pang mga relihiyon ay may isang layunin, ang pagtaguyod ng kapayapaan; pangatlo, ang pagkakaisa, pagtutulungan at pagkakaisa, pagkakaisa ay may malaking ginagampanan sa pagkakaisa ng kapayapaan.” (“I learned many things from the workshop. First, I realized that people have an important role in society; second, that Muslims and Christians and adherents of other religions have the same goal and that is to work for peace; third, establishing cooperation and friendship is an important way to build peace.”)

Voices of Peace

As envisioned during the November 2005 training, in 2006 the RMHS students did set up a peace club in their school. The name chosen for the club was “Suara no Kalilintad” which means “Voices of Peace.” To help in building the capacities of the leaders of the club, ten of its student leaders (five male and five female) were invited by the CPE in the Peacebuilding Workshop for Asia-Pacific Youth Leaders that the CPE organized in September 2006, with the financial support of AusAID. Indeed the RMHS student leaders were voices of peace in this gathering. While at the workshop these student leaders decided that they would organize a peace forum in their own village when they return. On the other hand, the Miriam High School students also made plans to have their own activity with other students, particularly for those who are members of Pax Christi.
In mid-February, the RMHS Peace Club conducted a public forum using their school yard as the venue, on the theme, “Youth in Peacebuilding: A Challenge.” The club reported that a total of 278 people attended, including students, village people and some soldiers. The speakers came from NGOs: the Mindanao People’s Caucus and the United Youth for Peace and Development. At around the same time, the Pax Christi Club of the High School also organized an activity, a workshop on “Visions of Peace among Religions.” The Peacemakers’ Circle facilitated the workshop. It was attended not only by Pax Christi members but also by students from the Asian History classes.

**Pag-asa 2007**

The third joint newsletter focused on the insights and sentiments of those who were part of the Peacebuilding Workshop for Asia-Pacific Youth Leaders in September 2006.

Mujahed Nurodin of RMHS wrote: “Pagmamahal, respeto, pagpapatwad - mga salitang tumatak sa aking isipan na syang baon ko sa aking pag-uwi at naibahagi ko sa kapwa ko Muslim.” (Love, respect, forgiveness – ideas that stayed in my mind as I went home and which I shared with fellow Muslims.)

Samantha Balasolla of MC participated in many peace activities in school year 2006-2007, including the Peacebuilding Workshop and the “Visions of Peace among Religions” activity. At year end she had this to say: “Knowledge about people from other religions can prevent misunderstandings. No matter how different our Faiths are, I know that most people want peace…”

**Scholarships for RMHS Graduates**

Starting school year 2007-2008, the project started to support a student who graduated from RMHS in her collegiate studies. The first recipient was the class valedictorian. She was also the president of the RMHS peace club during the previous year. The next year another scholar was again awarded a scholarship. This scholarship covered tuition fees and additional support for lodging and transportation. The funding for these scholarships have come from the Lugawan that has now become an annual fundraising activity of the CPE with the help of the CPE associates and several student groups throughout the campus especially the Pax Christi clubs. There are now two scholars who are continuing their studies under this program.
Solidarity from MC Parents

School year 2007-2008 was the year when MC parents started to be involved in the project. They heard from their children about their pen-pals from RMHS and learned of the situation of RMHS and Pikit, Cotabato. They wanted to help forward the goals of the Twinning project and gave a cash gift to the CPE for the project. They also sent a gift box containing ballpens for every RMHS student through the RMHS teachers who were at MC attending a Peace Education workshop.

Liz Dyogi, President of the Grade 7 Parents Council then, expressed her thoughts in an article for Pag-asa 2008:

“Even as our daughters were enjoying their many new and challenging experiences, we wanted their involvements to be relevant and our presence felt beyond the confines of our own faith; for them to witness firsthand that no effort is too small when offered with a big heart. And though they may never get to visit Pikit and meet their Muslim counterparts, it is our hope that the connections we have established live on as a reminder that we are all ultimately part of one family.”

Workshop Jointly Facilitated by MC and RMHS

In early February 2008, the CPE Associate Director and Program Assistant, who are also MC teachers, went to Pikit to support the RMHS teachers in organizing and facilitating a Peace Education Workshop for public school teachers in Cotabato. This was one of the many trainings that have been supported by SGIDU or Strengthening Grassroots Interfaith Dialogue and Understanding, a program of the Australian government. The workshop sought to train the participants in the basic knowledge base, skills and value orientations relevant to peace education. Another important aim was the promotion of interfaith understanding by highlighting the role of faith traditions as resources for peace.

It was an occasion for a meeting between the teacher-coordinator of the twinning project and the CPE staff and it was agreed that the proceeds from the Lugawan held in November 2007 would be used for the identified needs of RMHS: a generator, a mimeographing machine and a new restroom with water pump.
The Twinning Project on its Fifth Year

The year 2009 marks the fifth year of the steady building of bridges between the school communities of RMHS and MC. The exchange of letters as well as the regular joint activities such as the trainings and the publication of the Pag-asap newsletter have continued. The highlight of the year 1999 is the gathering together of the student leaders of both schools in a workshop entitled “Promoting Interfaith Understanding for Christian and Muslim Youth”, an event that was supported by SGIDU in January 2009.

In their written comments after the experience, the student participants have these to say:

“Marami po akong natutunan sa workshop na ito. Maraming kailangang gawin upang mapigilan ang digmaaan at mabago ang hinaharap… at higit sa lahat at ang malamang pwede palang magkaisa ang bawat tao dito sa mundo.” (I learned a lot in this workshop. There are a lot of things that can be done to prevent war and to change the future… and most of all I realized that people can cooperate with each other.)

“Nalaman ko na may mga masasakit na karanasan na natamo ang mga bago kong kaibigang Muslim. Lahat ng relihiyon ay may isang mensahe lamang, ang magmahal. Dapat marunong tayong makipagbati. Ito ay tutulong sa atin na makamit ang kapayapaan.” (I learned about the painful experiences of my new Muslim friends. All religions teach one thing: to love. We should know how to reconcile; this will help us reach peace.)

“Mahalagang…alisin natin ang panghuhusga sa kapwa. Mayroong mabuting paraan sa pagayos ng mga di pagkakasunduan. Maari tayong maging magkaibigan kahit maraming pagkakaiba.” (It is important to remove our biases toward others. There is a good way to resolve conflicts. We could still be friends despite our differences.)

Indeed, as the above sentiments indicate, there is reason to celebrate. The five years of taking this joint journey appear to have borne some fruit - new attitudes, new understandings and new friendships.
References


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