



Report: Northern Ireland and Israel

The following is a report on the Mastery Foundation's work during June and July in Northern Ireland and Israel. I hope you will take the time to read it and find out more about our work in support of peace and reconciliation.

July 26, 2003

NORTHERN IRELAND

June 10 to June 21st

Absorbing a changing landscape

In early June in Belfast, I met Mary Breslin, the woman who coordinates our work in Northern Ireland. It was the beginning of several hectic days of meetings with old and new friends and dinners with community leaders we have invited to attend the Intensive in the fall.

The changes in Belfast are more subtle these days. In 1994, a friend and I drove from the Republic of Ireland through Belfast on our way to see the glens of Antrim. At the border between the two countries, we were stopped and questioned by soldiers. In downtown Belfast, British armored troop carriers with guns pointed out of swiveling turrets mixed with the city traffic. Even on a sunny day, the effect was bleak and chilling.

Today, the border checkpoints and troop carriers are gone. You have to venture into the neighborhoods off the city center to pick up the signs that this is not just another small European city. Some of those signs are very colorful. Whole ends of buildings are painted with amazingly colorful murals memorializing scenes or martyrs of the cause – the cause, of course, depending on which side of the conflict the people of the neighborhood identify with. It is also common in these neighborhoods for the street curbs to be painted in stripes of either red, white, and blue or green, white, and orange.

Less obvious to visitors in June, were the empty lots in some neighborhoods with signs asking people to bring their scrap lumber and add it to the growing pile. These piles would become huge bonfires on the evening of July 11th commemorating the victory at the Battle of the Boyne on July 12, 1690 of the Protestant King of England, William III of Orange, over his father-in-law, the exiled, former Roman Catholic King of England, James II. More than

300 years later, that victory is celebrated by many Loyalists and Unionists with bonfires and parades by members of the Orange Order as the holiday that marks the English claim to the entire island.

The most obvious sign that Belfast is still a divided and troubled city is seen in those places where Protestants and Catholics live in close proximity. Called (without any sense of irony that I could ever detect) 'peace walls,' they are blocks-long towering walls of green corrugated metal topped with wire mesh and barbed wire erected between the two neighborhoods along what is called the 'peace line.' Each year they grow longer and higher (15 feet of mesh were added to the top of one wall in June) in an attempt to keep the residents apart and to keep rocks and bottles from flying over the top.

While Mary and I had lunch with our friends from Community Dialogue who live and work right next to one of these walls, a workman came to repair windows broken the night before. I asked Sister Noreen what she does on the nights when there is trouble. Interestingly enough, she doesn't call the police, she calls whichever paramilitary group is most likely to come and restore order.

The day before, we had met with an Anglican clergyman in another Belfast neighborhood made famous by disputes between Protestants and Catholics. He is new in this parish, but seems at ease here and certainly not tempted to rush in and begin solving problems or giving advice, even though for the past 10 years he has headed one of the most respected cross-community organizations in Northern Ireland. Instead, he is immersing himself in the daily life of the parish, taking the time to get to know his parishioners and to build relationships with them and the community.

Creating the foundation for our work

Building relationships is at the heart of everything we will do on this trip. Before I leave



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Northern Ireland, the Mastery Foundation will have hosted five dinners and one lunch in Belfast, Armagh, Omagh, and Derry for more than 60 community leaders who have been invited to attend the Intensive in the fall.

At each dinner, we bring to one large – sometimes very large – table, the voices that make up the conversation in Northern Ireland today: community workers, activists, and volunteers; trade union organizers; pastors, priests, and nuns; members of victims groups; youth workers; police; dialogue groups; members of church organizations; teachers; business people; ex-prisoners; farmers. Surprisingly, though most of the guests live in the same area and work to bring the two communities together, only a few of them will have met before.

Out of these many voices, we create one conversation – first by asking each person to introduce themselves and say why they accepted our invitation to come to this dinner, and then by opening the discussion to whatever they need to know to make a choice about whether they will accept our invitation to attend the Intensive.

Each dinner itself is a model of how we work and of the possibility of creating new conversations. Over a period of no more than three hours, the individuals gathered around the table begin to develop a connection to each other, a connection which can be the beginning of a relationship based on respect and trust. Almost all of them will attend the Intensive (we have already reached our capacity of 60 new participants), but even those who don't will have had a most remarkable evening.

Our policies and respect for privacy and confidentiality make it difficult to talk about just how amazing these dinners are. While everyone shares a commitment to cross-community work, they also share the pain and scars of living in a deeply divided place. Those who lost family members to sectarian violence and found it in themselves to move on and work for a more inclusive community, may now find themselves at the same table with former members of paramilitary groups known for promoting violence. It is one thing to share a commitment to peace and reconciliation, it is another thing entirely to share a meal. After all, when was the last time any of us had the opportunity or the courage to sit down to eat and

talk with those we most deeply distrust or fear?

Empowering local communities

On June 19th and 20th, we were joined by five volunteers and board member Fr. Gerry O'Rourke from the U.S. to deliver a Community Empowerment Program for 25 members of the Derry-Londonderry community. Three of the volunteers, Mary Stroupe, Debbie Frieze, and Ruth Mott along with Mary Breslin were being trained to lead the program, while Allan Cohen and Michael Johnston had led it in Belfast and Omagh last year.

The Community Empowerment Program is designed to empower people's relationship to their communities, giving them new tools to make their communities the places they want them to be. Derry-Londonderry, with a population of almost 100,000, is the second largest city in Northern Ireland and one of the longest continuously inhabited places on the island of Ireland. To the casual visitor, it is a beautiful city spread out along the banks of the River Foyle with interesting sites and friendly people. Indeed, it is ranked one of the ten best cities of its kind in the UK in which to live.

But even as the hyphenated name indicates, Derry-Londonderry has long been a divided city. Originally named Doire, the Celtic word for an oak grove, the city and county were renamed Londonderry in the 1600's when the City of London began the plantation there of Scottish and English colonists (Protestants). With the partition of Ireland in 1921, Derry (as the Catholics called it) became a border city in Northern Ireland.

The years since then have been marked by the sporadic violence of The Troubles. Perhaps best remembered today is Sunday, January 30, 1972 (now known as Bloody Sunday) when a civil rights march was fired on by the British Army, resulting in 14 deaths. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, life has been fairly quiet in Derry-Londonderry. (Not withstanding occasional events like the 600 pound bomb found and detonated by the police while we were there.)

Today the citizens of Derry-Londonderry deal with both the obvious issues of jobs, education, and government and the less-obvious issues of sectarianism and inclusion. This is, after all, a



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city where you have to read two newspapers, one Protestant and one Catholic, if you want news of the entire community. And while there is no peace wall in Derry-Londonderry, the river acts as a natural divide between the Catholic Cityside and the Protestant Waterside.

The city also has a long tradition of people working for the betterment of the whole community, as the 25 individuals who participated in the Community Empowerment Program demonstrated. They included the principal of a Catholic high school, directors of two different peace centers, youth counselors, the director of an agency working to support women in business, community organizers and activists, several business men and women, a priest, a policeman, and a nun. A number of them were alumni of earlier Mastery Foundation programs and were eager to participate in a program specifically directed toward empowering their community work.

For two days, this group worked with us and with each other through a series of exercises designed to help them create new distinctions about community and the role they play in their community. Did it make a difference? We know that two of the participants came to the program having all but decided to leave Derry-Londonderry because they no longer felt they could have a positive impact on the community. By the end of the two days, both of them had decided to stay and had recommitted themselves to making the city a welcoming and inclusive place to live. We also know each participant left empowered to take great strides forward in their work, though it is too soon to know what the specific results will be.

Passing on what we know

We will continue to maintain contact with all 25 participants and to look for ways to support them in their work. We hope they will form a core group that will reach out and bring others into the next Community Empowerment Program. We are convinced that by continuing to provide this kind of small-scale community intervention repeatedly and consistently, over time it will result in a large-scale impact.

For this reason, we are also keen on transferring what we teach to those in Northern Ireland who

will then train others. Rather than creating another organization working in Northern Ireland, we see our role as being a resource to existing organizations. So on Saturday, June 22nd, we offered a day of training for anyone who works or volunteers facilitating communication among disagreeing parties. Ruth Mott, an experienced facilitator and new Mastery Foundation volunteer who is being trained to lead our courses, did an excellent job of guiding 30 people through a series of tough conversations.

Training new volunteer leaders is a critical part of our work and our future. The following week, an Irish team of Mary Breslin, Patricia McBride, and Annie O'Hare along with Bill Cawley from New York and Fr. Gerry O'Rourke from San Francisco led the Making a Difference Course for 15 lay and ordained ministers. This is the second time the Irish team has led this course, and now that they are not dependent on leaders from the U.S., they plan to offer it more frequently.

One last note on Northern Ireland: While we were there, Queen Elizabeth II released the list of British citizens to be honored on her birthday. At least two of our friends were honored with awards for their service to their communities. Mary Breslin was named Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her years service to business and the community of Derry-Londonderry, and Ken Humphrey, who participated in last year's Intensive, was named Member of the Order of the British Empire for his work with the Mornington Community Project and his services to the community of Belfast.

Interlude – LONDON

June 24th

Between our visits to Northern Ireland and Israel, Allan, Debbie, and I had three days to rest and recuperate. Allan and I went to London where, along with board member Michael Moran, we had a reception at the home of Bela and Ellen Hatvany. It was a beautiful, warm summer evening, and we spent two hours sipping wine and talking with our six guests.

Receptions are a way for us to tell others about the Mastery Foundation and our work. In no more



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than two hours, we try to give people a taste of what we do and answer their questions. These informal gatherings are always energizing and a great way to get the word out to those interested in participating, supporting, or knowing about the foundation. If you would like to host a reception for your friends and colleagues, just let us know.

ISRAEL

June 26 to July 8th

Creating another foundation for our work

On Thursday evening, June 26th, Debbie, Allan, and I landed in warm, humid Tel Aviv. This was only my second trip to Israel and Allan's first, though Debbie has been here many times.

If you want to work in another country or culture, there is no substitute for immersing yourself in its daily life, wandering its streets, listening to people's stories, asking questions, listening, observing the similarities and differences, being curious about everything, and always listening, listening, listening. The Mastery Foundation has more than 15 years of that kind of experience in Ireland and Northern Ireland, but in Israel we are just beginning.

This visit was designed for us to reconnect with the Israeli participants who came to the Ireland Intensive last October; to lead a program for the staff of the Rabin Center; and to meet a number of new individuals and organizations. Some of those we met will be invited to participate in the Intensive this year; others are in conversation with us about working together in Israel. Along the way, we would also be soaking up everything we could about life in present-day Israel.

Weaving together all this activity was a lot of eating. We hosted three dinners and one lunch designed to meet as many new people and organizations as possible. Seated around one table, having one conversation over the course of two or three hours, we had the opportunity to hear from more than 50 leaders in community and cross-community work as well as 16 Israelis who could become financial supporters of our work. Each time, we found ourselves bringing together individuals who had not met before but who share an appetite for new conversations and for whatever

will empower them in their commitment to creating a more inclusive Israel.

And many of our friends graciously hosted us for dinner in their homes, where it was always difficult to say which was better – the food or the long, frank conversations about family, work, Israel, and the future. Each encounter, each visit brings with it a new perspective and dimension of understanding and appreciation for life in Israel. Just as in Northern Ireland, the issues they face go far beyond religious divisions to issues of class, economic opportunity, race, and identity.

When you are in Israel, it is difficult not to feel the impact from time to time of just how deeply rooted and intractable the issues are. Our visit coincided with the announcement of a “hudna” or cease-fire on the part of militant Palestinians. It seemed strange to receive e-mails from friends in the U.S. saying how exciting it must be to be in Israel now, while those around us seemed to take no notice. When asked about it, the predominant feeling among the people we met seemed to be one of guarding against an incautious or false optimism.

Exploring new possibilities with our friends

Our first dinner was a reunion with the participants who had come to the 2002 Ireland Intensive. Eight members of that 14-member delegation were able to join us for a lovely evening of reconnecting and catching up. It was so good to see them again, these generous, adventurous individuals who, based on one conversation with us last summer, had made the leap of faith and come to Ireland. The conversation around the table was about what crossroads each of us found ourselves at now, nine months later, and the answers were candid, authentic and touching.

What came through was how each of them had maintained and deepened their commitment in the face of what most people continue to see as a hopeless situation. In addition, each person from last year's delegation with whom we had an opportunity to meet and spend time requested that we continue to explore how we could work with them to support and empower what they are doing.

On Sunday, the first day of the work week in Israel, we spent the day meeting with the Center for



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Jewish and Arab Economic Development, a Jewish-Arab organization that promotes economic and business development among the two communities. One of their co-directors attended last year's Ireland Initiative, and we discussed several ideas of how we might work together in the future. Among the many projects the Council has initiated, are programs to gain government recognition of the many unrecognized Bedouin villages, creating technological incubators, supporting women in opening small businesses, and offering management training programs for young Jewish and Arab business leaders.

The 2002 delegation to Ireland included parents of children at two of the integrated elementary schools in Israel. (Although twenty percent of Israel's citizens are Arabs, there are only four integrated schools.) In Jerusalem, we visited the Hand in Hand School which was started in 1998. An elementary school that adds a new grade level each year, it has innovative, bilingual and bicultural classes that are team-taught by Jewish and Arab teachers.

While there, we began a conversation about the possibility of offering a joint program for their parents and teachers as well as those in the integrated school at Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam. Later, we also visited the village of Neve Shalom/Wahat Al-Salam which was established jointly in 1977 by Jews and Palestinian Arabs of Israeli citizenship to work for peace, equality and understanding between the two peoples.

The idea of integrated schools, of course, is to start this kind of education with very young children, shaping an identity that is at home with both cultures and fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic. (Most Israeli Arabs, of necessity, speak Hebrew, but few Jews speak Arabic.) But bilingual and multicultural schools have a host of issues to deal with – for example, what will happen when the children in the Jerusalem school reach dating age? Surely in these schools the commitment and the learning curve is as steep for the parents as it is for the children.

While in Jerusalem we also stopped for lunch at the Van Leer Institute, a center founded on a vision of Israel as a democratic society based on justice, equality, and fairness for all. The Van Leer staff member who participated in the 2002 Ireland

Intensive is now directing a project in Jaffa, an ancient Arab port city that became part of the Tel Aviv-Jaffa municipality in 1950. The project has been funded as a way to bring Jews and Arabs living in the same area together to work on a project in their inner-city neighborhood. For the first six months, the group will get to know each other, then they will decide on a project and go to work.

While that sounds simple enough, it is anything but easy. The two groups are naturally wary of each other. What many of them would prefer to do is split the project money and work separately. Since that isn't possible, each group is focusing on getting themselves in order and putting off the time when they must work together. At the same time, the project director and the Jewish and Arab facilitators are struggling to find ways to bring the groups together into one group. Now they are exploring with the Mastery Foundation the possibility of offering a Community Empowerment Program for the combined group as a way of building relationship and trust between the groups before they begin to work together.

The Community Empowerment Program was also of great interest to a number of groups and organizations in Haifa. Haifa is the third largest city (after Jerusalem and Tel Aviv) and the largest port in Israel. Located in the north on a beautiful Mediterranean bay, the city works its way in terraces up to the top of Mount Carmel.

At the top of the mountain is Haifa University, where we attended a seminar on National and Local Politics and Identities in Israeli Society organized by one of last year's Ireland participants. For three Americans, it was a wealth of information about the demographics of Israel today and the implications the presenters saw for the future. The overriding message was that in Israel today, identity is a more central issue than either economic or social concerns.

We also had an opportunity to spend half an hour with the new mayor of Haifa, Yona Yahav, who was just elected at the beginning of June, succeeding his well-known predecessor and former Labor Party candidate for Prime Minister, Amram Mitzna. An energetic lawyer who has served in Israel's parliament, Mr. Yahav is both optimistic and



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enthusiastic about the future of his native city.

Haifa is known in Israel as a model of co-existence and pluralism. While the largest demographic category is secular Jews, its population of 275,000 citizens includes (approximately) 25% immigrants from the former Soviet Union, 12% Israeli Arabs (Muslim, Christian, and Druze) and 10% Ultra Orthodox Jews. Haifa is also one of the major centers of the Bahai faith. Among this diversity of people, not only were we made to feel welcome and at home, but there was also a great interest from all those we met in the possibility of working together in the future to convene cross-community groups.

Offering the first Mastery Foundation program in Israel

One of the highlights of the trip for Allan, Debbie, and me was the opportunity to deliver the Mastery Foundation's first program in Israel for the Rabin Center. It was a day-and-a-half course called Power, Listening, and Community for some of the staff and program leaders of the Rabin Center in Tel Aviv. Most of the 25 participants work with Handshake, a program designed for school principals and teachers from diverse sectors of Israeli society with a goal of developing joint programs that eventually bring together students, parents, and teachers. Other participants lead four-hour diversity or sensitivity-training workshops for the Israeli border police, who are generally from poorer, less-educated backgrounds.

Like most of those working on cross-community and coexistence programs in Israel, the Rabin Center participants are highly skilled professionals with extensive training and education in the techniques of mediation, dialogue, and conflict resolution. So they arrived with some degree of skepticism about three Americans from an organization they never heard of having anything new to offer. But their skepticism was soon displaced by their generosity and friendliness toward us and their genuine interest and delight in discovering new tools that could make their work more effective.

With the help of two volunteer translators, over the 12 hours of the course, we gave them new distinctions of power that is creative rather

than forceful, of listening that reveals new worlds of possibility within ourselves and in those around us rather simply confirming old beliefs, and of community as that which engages and unleashes people rather than tries to control them. In particular, the conversation about community, which is very matter of fact in most of our courses, had these participants leaping out of their chairs with excitement and new insights.

In the end, the Rabin Center managers who had asked us to lead the program told us we had far exceeded their expectations. Not only had we seamlessly connected participants who had never met and who came in with different levels of experience, we had given them the tools and the enthusiasm to go back to their work and their communities and create new possibilities and new conversations.

For those of us leading the program, it was an experience that reinforced our commitment to working in Israel. It also moved us to enroll in a new frequent flyer program, to begin to learn Hebrew and Arabic, and to buy our own Israeli cell phones for future trips – all sure signs of a future for the Mastery Foundation in Israel.

Creating new possibilities and a new future

Over the next month, we will invite from those we met 15 to 20 new participants for this year's Ireland Intensive. And based on the great interest in offering the Community Empowerment Program in Israel, we are working to raise the funds to bring representatives from several organizations to Mississippi when we offer it there in August.

Someone on our visit told us there are 250 organizations in Israel working on coexistence and peace. The Mastery Foundation has no interest or intention in being the 251st, but we are committed to empowering those already at work creating a new future. We are excited about the opportunities we found to support the process of peace and reconciliation in Israel, and we are confident that what we have to offer can make a difference. You can count on us to continue in our commitment to exploring and offering our work there over the coming years.

