

Stewards of Reconciliation

Bridget Crisp *explains that patience, engagement and persistence are needed for us to be reconcilers of trust in the world.*

We are called to be “stewards of reconciliation” yet the phrase itself is intriguing. It can sound like a sound bite, a management role, or something requiring responsibility. As a way to unpack the phrase, I am beginning with an analogy of a rose bush. Picture a rose bush that has been neglected for years. It’s almost smothered in weeds. It’s completely overlooked in a corner of the garden. Then, for some reason, I suddenly become aware of the plant and realise that it needs help, or it will die. So, I begin pulling the weeds away to reveal the stunted bush and in doing so, provide it with space and light that it needs to flourish. I will return to the care of the rose later.

Change in Attitudes to Conflict & Peace

At this time in our world, violence and conflict dominate the global news. Even at home the levels of violence in our local areas, schools and institutions is alarming. This emphasises the precarious nature of the current climate of relationships in our world. We live in a time of brutality, in a climate of misinformation, sectarianism and racism.

Conflict has become a commodity, and peace is being treated as an economic game. The 28 June 2025 issue of *The Economist* was titled “How to Win Peace.” The cover image was a white dove in the shape of a missile. This adversarial outlook – that violence is necessary for peace - treats conflict resolution as a game, taking the human equation out. We do not see the cost to humanity; the faces of babies, children, women and men in the middle of the conflict blur and become indistinct; steps to resolve a conflict become a linear tick-box exercise with a “carrot or stick” mentality. The scary aspect of this game is that we are beginning to normalise it as reality. The processes of peacemaking — listening to, engaging with, understanding, respecting another’s viewpoint and beliefs, and being willing to find space to explore mutual beliefs or common ground — can seem more like a utopian dream than essential for the art of living together in everyday life.

Network of Relationships at the heart of Peace

Our relationships are shaped by the art and experience of living together. Relationships can be messy and at times painful, but if we persist with them, they can become resilient and enduring. A resilient, enduring relationship is generally balanced because the parties in relationship are respectful and appreciative of one another. When conflict or tension arises and skews the balance, it won’t last long. The balance will return to equilibrium because all parties have in place and engage in peace processes consistently through dialogue and listening. Over time this active engagement has

helped to build trust and make the relationship robust. In other words, all parties have practised and are practising reconciliation.

But balance needs to be worked on. The longer relationships remain asymmetric or unbalanced without correction or effort to restore the equilibrium, the more complex or tangled they become, because trust begins to fracture and diminish. That one party dominates in a relationship can become the norm. Narratives that helped explain the original relationship are at a risk of disappearing or being deliberately repressed by one party building an environment of control and power over other parties. The reconciliatory aspect of the relationship collapses. We see this happening in our world now, and in some instances, distrust has been festering for a long time. We can no longer deny the breaking down of relationships in global, national and local politics, as well as in institutions.

We are not immune to relationship breakdowns in New Zealand. I can see that our relationship with tangata whenua throughout Aotearoa is neither reconciliatory, appreciative nor balanced. Trust was first broken not long after the signing of Te Tiriti, when war and conflict broke out, and as we know, lives were lost and land was seized from iwi. The effort to repair trust and tend to the relationship has, at times, been inconsistent due to the asymmetric power of one party (i.e., the Crown) throughout the process. For trust and relationships to grow among all parties again, we need to foster dignity, respect and a willingness to work together as equals for the good of all (not just one party's perception of good).

How do we restore relationship?

What should we focus on to build a relationship?

The well-known prayer attributed to St Francis of Assisi but probably not written by him, provides a starting point:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon.

Where there is error, truth.

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console.

To be understood, as to understand.

To be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Every intent in this prayer is a framework for building and restoring relationships. Each is an action we can practise daily. Imagine how relationships would reconcile if everyone around the world pledged to practise these intentions! However, it is critical we acknowledge that the change we hope for will take time. There will be times when we think reconciliation is going backwards and if we look at a relationship from a macro level, this may be the reality. But if we view reconciliatory relationships as



small, incremental steps in which we persist, then trust and togetherness will over time, take root and grow. Patience, perseverance and hope, are the ingredients for reconciling relationships so that we move together into our future.

Stewarding relationships

Coming back to my rose plant. Clearing away the smothering weeds is hard work. It's painful at times, and the thorns and prickles can scratch me until I bleed — but I persevere. I want to see the whole plant and to provide not only space for the rose but care because it has been stunted for so long. I need to wait, to continue with weed management and water and fertiliser every now and again. Importantly, I need patience, and with care, hopefully the rose will reveal its full potential.

To be stewards of reconciliation, is the invitation and responsibility to persevere in the work of reconciliation, regardless of the cost to ourselves because of the good of the whole world. At a prayer vigil for peace in April, Pope Leo said “We must not allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the pace of the world that does not know what it is chasing. Rather, we must return to serving the rhythm of life, the harmony of creation and healing its wounds.”

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