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Join my quest for peace

By Past District Governor Anton Polsterer, District 1910; Past Chair of Inter-Country Committees worldwide

I want to share my experience in a multi country district afflicted by war, specifically civil war, and how Rotarians and Rotary clubs can help reestablish mutual understanding and goodwill. Our efforts can help heal the wounds caused by political and civil unrest by creating a climate, which renders future conflicts difficult and hopefully impossible.

I joined Rotary in Vienna in 1986 and transferred to the Rotary Club of Moscow while working in Russia from 1989-92. Later, after moving back to Austria, I became District Governor for Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia and Austria. After years of war and totalitarian government rule, these communities longed for freedom and peace.

Our district had 130 clubs with more than 5000 Rotarians. We represented five different nationalities and languages. Croatia and Bosnia were heavily hurt by the Yugoslav civil war in the 1990s: Bosnia and Herzegovina had a pre-war population of 4.5 million people including Orthodox Serbians, Catholic Croatians and Bosnian Moslems. During the war, close to two million people, almost 50% of the population was displaced within their own country to create "ethnic" regions. From the very beginning, we have aimed for ethnic diversity in our clubs, which wasn't easy after all the displacement.

The real breakthrough came with the Rotary Club of Mostar (Bosnia), chartered in 2002. The club started many projects in the spirit of tolerance and ultimately succeeded in reuniting Rotarians from both the Croatian and the Moslem side of a town divided by bloody conflict and physically separated by the Neretva River. The rebuilding of the old stone bridge, which was destroyed during the war in order to separate the town's population into Croatians and Bosnian Moslems became an important symbol of reuniting the two ethnic groups. Rotarians from the Mostar club were instrumental in coordinating and overseeing the project, and eventually organizing the bridge reopening ceremony. In 2004, the opening of the bridge became a symbol of unity and a national symbol of peace.



Experience in our district has shown that inter-country meetings and projects not only lead to better understanding between Rotarians but can also act as a catalyst for clubs within a country with a longstanding history of internal conflict. It became clear to me that I had to work with [Inter-Country Committees \(ICC\)](#) whose vision is peace for all countries in the world. ICCs aim to implement bilateral projects with a focus on peace building. To form an Inter-Country Committee between two countries, clubs and districts partner in each of the countries, to get to know each other better and create an environment of common understanding and mutual empathy.

Empathy is the best vaccine against conflicts and war, and maybe even against terrorism. Today conflicts, terrorism and war continue to plague many parts of the world. Therefore I am asking you, my friends in Rotary and especially in Inter-Country Committees, to refocus our service projects on peace building.

Normal service projects like equipping a clinic or digging wells are fairly straightforward. A peace project is different. You have to invest in exploring project ideas and feasibility for both sides. It has to be acceptable for both countries. In the beginning, results are not obvious. Peace building is a lengthy process requiring time and patience. You get deeply involved without immediate positive feedback. Your highest reward will be long-term success.

To encourage and support this quest for peace, I have launched the 10k USD Challenge and Contest for the Best Bilateral Peace Project. Through the Rotary Foundation, I'm donating USD \$10,000 for the best peace project. I'd like to challenge everyone to implement peace projects, which address specific concerns while incorporating cultural and ethnic values. Successful bilateral projects should create an environment encouraging both sides to remove barriers to build long-lasting peace.

Sometimes the best peace projects don't focus on the conflict itself but rather initiate communication and cooperation between two parties. I also encourage you to go beyond the contest and find opportunities to incorporate peace components into all your service projects.

Related:

- [Presidential Peace Conference explores routes to peace](#)
- Read more stories about Rotary's dedication to Peace and Conflict Prevention/Resolution

This entry was posted in Peace and conflict prevention/resolution and tagged empathy, icc, intercountry committee, pcpr month, Peace and Conflict Prevention/Resolution, peace building, peace challenge, rotary peace month, service projects on 04/02/2016 [<https://rotaryservice.wordpress.com/2016/02/04/join-my-quest-for-peace/>] .

One thought on “Join my quest for peace”



Beth Keck EKglobalgal

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This is an inspiring story and concrete example of how we can promote peace.

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