

All of a peace: Don Rowe on nonviolence training in Zimbabwe

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'Violence is endemic, but I see clear signs that cultural change is occurring.'



'We were delighted with the enthusiastic response from the schools.' | Photo: Members of Mzilikazi High School Peace Club, Bulawayo

In 2015, when Friends of Hlekweni (FoH) developed a new five-year plan, we decided to try to introduce a peace-building strand into the schools we were supporting. I've had a long-standing professional interest in values education, including various forms of peace education, and although I wasn't clear about the direction it would take, this felt like something we had to do.

I discovered that a common approach across Southern and Eastern Africa is to run peace clubs in schools. We already knew of the peace clubs in Pietermaritzburg led by Marie Odendaal of AVP KwaZulu-Natal. Students join the clubs as volunteers, learn about peace and conflict, and are taught conflict resolution skills. They become ambassadors for peace in school, at home and in the community. The importance of providing opportunities to learn about and 'do' peace during the formative teenage years can't be underestimated. By no means all students in Zimbabwe go on to secondary education, however, so, to reach all children, primary school peace clubs are equally important.

Our first step was to broach the proposal with Samathonga Primary School, on the site of the former Hlekweni Rural Training Centre – our original school. The suggestion was greeted enthusiastically and a pilot peace club was successfully started.

The following year, 2016, I travelled with Lee Taylor, clerk of FoH, to Zimbabwe. One of our objectives was to try to establish peace clubs more widely. We found we were pushing at an open door: there were already some schools who had agreed in principle to set up peace clubs, though we were told they were struggling because of lack of funding and support. These were schools run by the Brethren in Christ Church (BICC), which is closely allied to the Mennonites and who, like Quakers, strongly identify as Peace Churches.

We were able to establish an active network of eight primary schools, led locally by a member of BICC's social agency. We funded the network and supplied a textbook to all these schools called

Creating the Peaceable School. Very importantly, in our view, we paid for the teachers running the clubs to be trained in conflict resolution skills by Alternatives to Violence Zimbabwe (AVPZ). AVPZ had only recently been set up by Bulawayo Quakers, also with financial help from Friends of Hlekweni.

We were delighted with the enthusiastic response from the schools. At a peace clubs conference the next year, a head teacher said the children in her peace club had taught her a valuable lesson: 'They have developed communication skills which have made them able to approach me with their views, concerns and queries. All of them know me for my black rod with which I would step out of my office and brandish to threaten for discipline. Now I have stopped that after they made me see that I was being violent.'

In another school, a senior teacher reported that 'transformation of bullies who joined the peace club has been a major win. This was one of our biggest problems. We now have many teachers who would like some training so that they are more confident as facilitators.'

In 2018, the opportunity arose to induct some secondary schools into running peace clubs in a district south of Bulawayo. Working with a group called Matabeleland Peace Advocacy Trust, set up following our visit, we inducted five schools and then, with grants from Quaker Peace and Service, we inducted twenty more schools. The appetite among Zimbabwean teachers has been huge. The AVP training has been welcomed and some teachers have come back for more and have progressed through the three levels to become fully fledged AVP trainers.

None of this would have been possible without the permission of the education authorities. There is always a district inspector at induction days. One of them wrote about the value of peace clubs as he saw it: 'I have been monitoring school children's positive behavior in the pilot schools compared to those that have not been inducted. There is a huge difference. There is need to induct more schools, so as to inculcate positive peace and friendship value to our future generations.'

Since its early days, AVPZ has greatly strengthened its team of facilitators. Some of these have graduated from the Peace and Conflict Studies programme at Durban University, which is led by Geoff Harris, a Quaker. AVPZ is steadily increasing its capacity and reach. In the last year or so, courses have been run for young people, for NGO personnel, for community groups, for penal officers, and gender-related courses provided for women and men. Some are now being offered at a distance from Bulawayo.

Violence is endemic in Zimbabwe, but I see clear signs that cultural change is occurring. In 2013, the main political parties agreed on a new constitution, which guarantees political and civil rights and limits the power of government. It is closely modelled on the UN Convention of Human Rights and when voted on in a referendum, was approved by around ninety-five per cent of those who voted. Under the constitution, 'cruel and degrading punishments' are unlawful – but, in the teaching profession, old habits die hard. In 2016, a mother took a teacher to court for cruelly beating her grade one daughter, with a length of rubber hose, for something that was the mother's fault. The High Court ruled such punishment was against the constitution and, in 2018, an act of parliament made it a criminal offence. (Similarly, corporal punishment of juveniles in the justice system was banned in 2019.) This, as I see it, represents a hugely-important cultural shift. Peace clubs and AVP are reinforcing this by providing teachers with new skills and non-violent disciplinary methods, as well as empowering students to work for better, more humane and more peaceful communities. The opportunities which each teacher has to train many members of the next generation, make them very important 'multipliers'.

Working with two colleagues in Zimbabwe, I have spent the last year developing a peace clubs manual specifically aimed at Zimbabwe teachers and pupils. It includes localised material which is now standard in conflict resolution and mediation courses but it goes beyond that and includes a chapter on human rights and the importance of the constitution in protecting civil rights. Dorothy

Moyo, a co-author of the manual and a member of AVPZ, is also deputy chairperson of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission.

All this is why, when Friends of Hlekweni reluctantly took the decision to close its operations, my feeling was that we needed to find some way to maintain these two peace-building projects. There are several strands coming together here: the establishment of AVPZ; the growth of the peace clubs network; and the new constitution, which is accelerating the shift away from institutional violence. So, from January 2022, when FoH ceases to fundraise, our new committee 'Peace Works Zimbabwe' will begin to make the case for supporting them. We are very grateful to Milton Keynes Friends for agreeing to handle the monies before passing them on to AVPZ. We hope other Friends will consider their response.

For more information on Peace Works Zimbabwe, visit www.peaceworkszimbabwe.net.

Email: peaceworkszim@gmail.com