



How to break the cycle of conflict

Summary keywords

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Speakers

Jake Lloyd, David Couzens

Episode 21: How to break cycles of conflict

Jake Lloyd 0:10

A quick warning before we start this episode: My interview today contains references to violence that some listeners may find upsetting.

How does a longstanding conflict turn into peace? Whether it's a grudge between two individuals, or a violent conflict between two groups, what can people within that conflict, or outside of it, do to break that cycle and start to move towards a peaceful coexistence?

David Couzens 0:33

The first step is really to recognise your own complicity, because it's very rare for a conflict to be down purely to one side. And then, recognising that that person on the other side of the wall is also a flawed person. They're not perfect. They've done things wrong as well, but they are a fellow human being.

Jake Lloyd 0:54

I'm Jake Lloyd. You're listening to the *How to build community* show and that's the voice of David Couzens, who is the Peacebuilding Lead at Tearfund. His job is to identify, support and train people around the world to be peacebuilders in the communities where they live. In this episode, he talks me through some of the steps that need to be taken to break the cycle of conflict and to forge a lasting peace.

David began by telling me about the surprising route he took into his current role.

David Couzens 1:28

My background, somewhat weirdly perhaps, is in the military. I spent almost 30 years working in the British Army, during which time I had a couple of deployments to Afghanistan. I found I was watching what we were doing in Afghanistan and despite huge resources, despite genuinely good intentions and a desire to do the best for Afghanistan, I could just see how little impact we were having.

And it just became clear to me that this sort of militarised attempt to impose peace or to create peace through violence just doesn't work. At the time, I was reading a load of stuff from John Paul Lederach, who is a conflict transformation expert. And it just made so much more sense.

So I left the military, joined Tearfund, and then we created a small peacebuilding team, very much guided by Isaiah 61, that well-known passage that Jesus himself quotes. It talks about binding up the broken-hearted, claiming freedom for the prisoners and supporting those who mourn, those who grieve. And that's the first part of that Isaiah 61 chapter. But it then goes on to say 'they will be oaks of righteousness', and 'they will be the ones that rebuild, restore and renew'.

And so we very much see our role at Tearfund, really as sort of looking for those people who are those oaks of righteousness, those people who are trying to build peace in their communities, people who've experienced all those things, the reality of conflict. I think they are the best people to bring peace. They've experienced it. They know it. They're there on the ground. And so really our role is to try and encourage, support them in whichever way that we can.

Jake Lloyd 3:17

So what does this role involve?

David Couzens 3:20

We train people up in a whole load of tools, and it's a sort of experiential training process which draws on their own experiences and provides them some sort of tools to think about what they've experienced and how they might navigate a way through that. So we train up those people, and they then hold these sorts of conversations back in their communities, which takes their communities through a process of thinking about how they think about violent conflict, how they think about the traumas that they've experienced, how they can find ways to navigate that and sort of find a way to resolve those conflicts and really re-establish relationships.

And so that's very much what we're trying to encourage, trying to connect people and trying to restore those relationships between people that may be living in fear and suspicion of each other, and often for very good reasons as well.

Jake Lloyd 4:15

David recently wrote an article for *Footsteps* magazine about breaking the cycle of violence. In it, he identified the critical importance of bringing what he calls 'people's hidden hurts' out into the open. So I asked him to explain what he means by hidden hurts, and he told me this story.

David Couzens 4:36

One of our Tearfund staff in Nigeria has just recounted this story to me of her own experience. We were doing some training with her and sharing one of the tools, and she came up to me in the coffee break and said 'I've done this, I've done this, I've used this, and it works!' She was a Christian woman from northern Nigeria, and the village where she lived had been attacked by a Muslim group, and she had had to flee. She and her family were unhurt, but their home and all their possessions were sort of burnt to the ground.

And not surprisingly, she was harbouring a lot of fear, a lot of hurt, a lot of trauma and a lot of hatred of the group that had attacked her. And so she was hugely suspicious of Muslims in general and blamed them for what had happened, as a group, as to what had happened to her. And she was then enrolled in this training course run by a different organisation, was going through this tool we were talking about, and she was paired with a Muslim woman. And as part of this training, they each had to share their experiences.

This lady went first and sort of told her story and she recounts saying how she felt: 'Hah! Take that, look what you've done to me. How awful you are.' And then the Muslim woman told her story, and her story was very similar. Very similar. Her village had been attacked, and she hadn't just lost her home, a couple of her family members had actually been killed. And as Caroline heard this story, she realised that they were both suffering very similar things. And this woman had suffered far more - far more - than she had. As Caroline said, you know, 'I lost possessions. I lost assets. She lost family'. And she realised that actually, they were going through very common shared experiences in many ways. And so recognising those hidden hurts and the fact that those hurts were shared, meant that rather than standing on opposite sides with a big wall between them and sort of demonising the other, she began to see her as a fellow human being, a fellow woman who had suffered, who had experienced horrific things and trauma.

And actually, rather than standing on either side of this wall, they were actually both standing on the same side looking, if you like, at the horror. And they realised that actually they weren't enemies, that they were fellow victims, fellow survivors. And from that, they built a relationship. She then began to help in the work that she was doing.

And so I think often, when you see the other person as a person rather than as a group, and those hidden hurts get shared, you begin to see the common humanity with each other and a way through the trauma, the suffering, and the conflict.

Jake Lloyd 7:53

And in this instance, there was presumably a third party, an outsider, if you like, who had arranged this meeting, this event. How important, in your experience, is this third party, this outsider in creating this space for...?

David Couzens 8:12

Yeah, absolutely. I don't know the details of the exact project that she went through, but yeah, you've got to have a space where you feel safe to share. And I think one of the things I've learned is that, you know, I come from a very sort of task-oriented background and so if I'm holding some training or something, I've got a whole series of stuff that we need to get through. And the program becomes packed and, and yeah, I sort of panic if we're sort of 10 minutes behind on the programme or whatever. What I've learned is that actually it's the relationship that matters. And therefore, you've got to spend time upfront, creating a space where you begin to get to know each other.

You can begin to just understand who each other is, where they're coming from, and that you can be real with each other. You can begin to be honest about how you're feeling and that takes time to grow. It doesn't happen immediately. And the time that you invest upfront in building those relationships is absolutely vital, because if you don't do that, you're probably not getting to any depth, and you need to get deep.

So I think, yeah, it's the location. It's a place where both people feel safe. It's a time of day as well, a day of the week where you feel safe. And it's having people that you trust who can hold that space for you.

In our theology of peace building, we build on the work of some of the stuff that a guy called Henry Nouwen wrote. He talks about hospitality and providing a hospitable place. And somewhat weirdly, he says it's a place where you don't impose an agenda. So there are rules about how you interact with each other, but you're not there with an agenda, and therefore you let what comes into that space, come into that space. It's non-judgmental. People bring what they bring and you don't judge. You're not trying to convert or anything else. You're just trying to provide a space where people can share safely about their real feelings.

Jake Lloyd 10:19

There's a previous episode of our podcast about learning from failure, and the instance you described then was a success. But presumably you've seen or been around instances where somebody has tried to set up this space for dialogue, and they have allowed time for it to happen, but it's not gone well. Can you think of examples, and can you think of lessons that you learned from those examples?

David Couzens 10:48

Yeah. I mean, I think 'not gone well' is just sometimes people won't engage. They're not ready to engage. Sometimes I think you have to do work beforehand with each party before you even try and bring them together. So quite often with the training, we might train people from different communities in different venues before we attempt to bring them together, just to sort of get people to a common starting point, I think.

Because yeah, because if you don't, I mean, there is a risk that you can just deepen difficulties. There's a lot in the skill of the facilitator, I think, in thinking through how you manage disagreement when that happens. But it is not easy. And you do need to go sensitively, and you need to do some work in advance in trying to really understand what are the dynamics of this so you can be aware of them as you start. Where are people coming from? Where is the hurt? What is the history of this? How is it seen by different parties beforehand? You'll never have all the knowledge, but you can go in more informed as to what those sorts of conflict dynamics are, what the potential sources of tension are and where people might be coming from. So you're not going in blind or ignorant.

Jake Lloyd 12:04

He then told me another story from his work.

David Couzens 12:07

We have one example from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where we were doing this training with groups from a number of villages, and those villages really did not mix. They would not mix. And to the extent that one village in particular would not go near another because if they did there would be violence, and a chance that people would be killed.

But we took people from those communities. We did bring them into one space to do the training. And through that they developed a relationship and a level of trust, just through engaging that and through the exercises. And the result, just after I think about six months, was that not only were they actually going into each other's villages passing through, but they were actually doing business with each other. I think they had even started football matches against each other. And it's just because they began to see each other as fellow human beings suffering very similar things. And therefore the benefits for them were in working together to resolve this. They could see actually it was a win-win for both of them to resolve this. And not addressing those issues was harming both of them. And I think that's a position that they can see much more clearly than we can, the experience of pain and suffering that comes through that.

Jake Lloyd 13:25

Is this process of reconciliation, is it a process that can happen, and then it's complete and then everyone's happy? Or does it need to always be going on?

David Couzens 13:39

I think it's something that always goes on. There are a number of elements to it as well. I mean, we haven't really talked about justice and accountability, and forgiveness comes into that as well. People want justice. They want accountability. That's not necessarily sort of punishing everybody. But there is an element to that and one of the difficulties is, at what point does justice come to play and what form does justice take? You know, sometimes you won't get far unless those who've been aggrieved and hurt have some form of justice. There needs to be some holding to account for actions that are taken. And that's difficult because that can sometimes upset the relationship that you're building.

So the order and timing and the form of that justice and that accountability is really, really complex and is something that I think just has to be worked through. And quite often you may see that justice comes later, or you may just find a form of sort of accountability or truth-telling up front, with some form of justice.

But it's how you bring that into it that I think is really important and one of the hardest bits, because you can't just say to somebody who's seen their family and brutally slaughtered 'they just need to reconcile with that person will be well', because it won't. People need to be held accountable for their actions, but in a way that builds relationship rather than damages it further.

And that's that's not always an easy thing to navigate and is often one of the trickiest parts of any peace process.

Jake Lloyd 15:30

You were talking about justice and people feel the need for justice. And at the same time, you know, your Christian faith is a key driver of what you do and Christianity talks a lot about forgiveness and the importance of forgiveness. Is there a bit of a conflict there between that desire for justice and also forgiveness? Can that sometimes be 'oh we are going to set justice aside, and you can get away with this one?'. Do you know what I mean?

David Couzens 15:55

Yeah, absolutely. And in fact, there's Psalm 85, verse 10. It brings together truth, mercy, justice and peace. And it talks about the mindset of almost human beings and have met and embraced and kissed. And there is that tension between the demand for justice and the cry for mercy.

I think with forgiveness I'm very wary of, particularly within Christian circles, because we have this sort of sense of duty that, 'oh, we must forgive', you know, it's in the Lord's Prayer. But you cannot force forgiveness. Forgiveness has to come in its own time. I've spoken with people who were in the Rwandan genocide, and they've talked about forgiveness.

And what they say is that you can make a conscious decision to forgive as a cerebral academic mindset of 'I'm going to forgive them'. But it's a long time before that becomes part of your heart, if you like, and the journey from head to heart in that. A number of people said this takes about a decade.

Forgiveness is not something that comes necessarily quickly. I think we have to be very wary of trying to cajole people, particularly if we're Christians, in to feeling they have to forgive otherwise they're not a proper Christian. I think forgiveness comes when you're ready to forgive. And as part of forgiveness is also a recognition from the other person that they need to make amends for what they've done in some form and that that may well be in some form of justice.

So it's not sort of totally unconditional forgiveness. There is a sort of expectation that you will put right what you have done as best you can if you are the perpetrator, and you may not always be able to too, but you need to make some effort towards that, I think.

Jake Lloyd 17:51

What would you say to someone who's listening to this, who is perhaps part of some kind of conflicts, large or small, with someone else in the community they live in? What would you advise them? Where should they start, or what should they do?

David Couzens 18:08

Somebody once shared with me the idea that when you're in conflict, what tends to happen is it's as if there's two people standing each side of a wall, and both of them are projecting a dehumanised version of the other onto that wall. So you're both seeing each other in some form of dehumanised beast.

And that makes you feel better because, to a certain extent, it justifies your way of thinking and your behaviours. But you don't get anywhere, that just sustains the conflict. So the first step is really to, I think, recognise your own complicity, because it's very rare for a conflict to be down purely to one side. We all will have done something to contribute to that.

And so just reflecting on our own fallibility, our own sort of flaws and our own humanity, basically, and then recognising that that person, the other side of the wall is also a flawed person. They're not perfect. They've done things wrong as well, but they are a fellow human being. And as Christians, they too are created in God's image and therefore beginning to try and see that person as a fellow human being rather than the stories we say about them. I think that's probably one of the most important first steps.

And then as and when you can, try to re-establish direct communications with them, it may be through third parties initially, but try to talk directly and in a safe place and begin to share each other's hurts. And then when you do that, you begin to see them as other human beings, fellow human beings, brothers and sisters, often sharing very similar, very similar experiences.

And from that, you can then begin to navigate a way through it and out of it. But the first bit, I think, is look at yourself and then recognise the shared humanity that you have with those on the other side.

And I think the other thing I'd say is when we do the dehumanising, we immediately group people together and we sort of start saying 'they're all like that. They're all like that. Everyone in that group is like that'. And that's just simply not true. It's never true. There are people in that group who may have done horrific things and may be inclined to do horrific things again. But that's not all of them. And most of those people are probably just much like you try to keep their heads down, trying to survive and not doing horrible things and don't necessarily wish any harm to you.

Look for those people and try and sort of build relationships with them cautiously. But as you do that, you just begin to recreate a shared humanity across those groups.

Jake Lloyd 20:53

Under what circumstance would you say, advise someone, 'when you're ready, go and speak to directly to this person'. And under what circumstances should actually maybe they should seek out that third party who can help mediate?

David Couzens 21:08

I think safety is a key one. You have got to feel you've got to be able to go somewhere where you feel safe, where it is safe for both of you to do that. And so it could be that you have, again, these third party conversations.

I think quite often we found that faith leaders can bridge those gaps. Sometimes they are able to speak to other faith leaders and begin to build those conversations and quite often very quietly behind the scenes as well. Because I think when you start reaching out to people from the other side, your own side can be very

suspicious of you. And, you know, they too, may have suffered terrible trauma, terrible pain, terrible suffering, and they may be very unhappy with you beginning to reach out that way. So, I think you need to go slowly, carefully and, you know, don't rush into things and just be aware of the pain and suffering on all sides and that this is fragile. But keep going. Keep going. Just take it slowly, a step at a time and just keep trying to build that relationship. I think.

Jake Lloyd 22:16

And feel like we're just scratching the surface in some ways of this topic. But if people listening to this want to go deeper. Where would you point and where are the good resources?

David Couzens 22:29

There is the *Footsteps* publication, the latest version coming out talks about some of these issues. On Tearfund Learn we've got virtually all our building resources are available on there, and through that you could also access our Tearfund conflict prevention platform through which we were forming a community practice where people can share experiences and ask us for advice and access resources through that. So that's probably as good a place to start as any, I would suggest.

Jake Lloyd 23:12

That was David Couzens, Peacebuilding lead at Tearfund.

And that's almost it for this episode. Before we go, don't forget, you can catch up on previous episodes of *How to build community* online or in your podcast player. Just search 'How to build a community'.

You can learn more about Arukah Network at arukahnetwork.org, and you can read and download every edition of Tearfund's *Footsteps* magazine at learn.tearfund.org, including a recent edition on Peace and reconciliation.

You can also sign up to receive *Footsteps* via WhatsApp or email free of charge.

But that's it for this episode. Until next time. Bye for now.

Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.
☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ publications@tearfund.org learn.tearfund.org

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