

WFWP Birmingham, UK: The Healing Power of Forgiveness

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Theme: "The Healing Power of Forgiveness"

Just before Christmas, 125 women met in a packed house for our last Peace Meeting of 2014 on the topic of 'Forgiveness'.

After briefly introducing ourselves, and realising that we were coming together representing more than 40 different nationalities (!), we watched a very moving documentary film from South Africa entitled "Beyond Forgiving".

It details the story of 2 people, both of them victims in different ways, and both of them people of incredible courage, who meet each other and embark on a journey of forgiveness, and beyond.



Letlapa Mphahlele was the director of operations for the military wing of the Pan-African Congress during the Apartheid regime in South Africa. He gave the order for reprisal killings in response to the murder of several black school children. Ginn Fourie was the mother of a young woman who was a victim in one of these revenge killings. Subsequently, in post-Apartheid South Africa, Ginn wanted to meet the person who gave the order which resulted in her daughter's death. The film shows their meeting, her forgiveness of Letlapa, and the journey on which they embarked together, somehow managing to go beyond forgiveness to work together for peace and reconciliation in South African society, and then travelling to

other nations to share their profound story.

The film created a deep, reflective atmosphere amongst us all, which continued as Diana Lampen, founder with her husband, John, of The Hope Project, spoke of her work for peace and reconciliation, particularly in Northern Ireland during 'the Troubles'. She spoke of the Buddhist monk, Laka, who escaped with the Dalai Lama from Tibet, and who had to meditate and search deeply inside himself to find a 'place of peace' from which he could change his attitude towards the Chinese, and overcome the 'cancer of bitterness'. She spoke of Bishop Desmond Tutu, well known throughout the world for his authentic voice, and for whom



"..forgiveness is the journey we take towards healing the broken parts ... it's how we become whole again." She strongly recommended his most recent book, written with his daughter, Mpho, 'The Book of Forgiving'. Diana's words, and the way in which they were spoken, had a profound impact on all of us.



"...if you cannot forgive there is a real danger of 'victimhood'..."
"...victimhood is not a profession. You need to put it behind you and move on..."
"...don't ever tell someone to forgive .. some can and some can't..."

"...forgiveness is not easy.. I can't stress that enough..."

"...forgiveness can free both people.. If you can find it in yourself to forgive, you are no longer chained to the perpetrator..."



Describing her, and her husband's, own dramatic personal experience in Northern Ireland, when her husband John could have been killed, she said "... it's when the understanding shifts...and you can see the 'other' not as a monster but as a fellow human being..."

She concluded with the suggestion that there are many opportunities to practice forgiveness, both in our families and in day-to-day life, in order that our heart can remain open towards 'the other'.



Sandy, one of 5 young women who had driven all the way up from the Asha Centre in Gloucestershire to attend the meeting, picked up on this point during the subsequent sharing. "How much do I need to forgive? This dramatic story (from South Africa) reminds me to be more forgiving in day-to-day life. We are hosting many young volunteers from around the world, and it's hard sometimes to be an example for them. It's not always easy." All our sharing was quite deep, and personal, and this was an ideal topic for each of us to reflect in a meaningful way as we approached the end of 2014. The intimate atmosphere we are able to create also helps us to share more deeply and freely, as we put our many differences aside and come together with one heart, and our common desire for peace.



We then moved into the quiet time of prayer and reflection which always brings our meetings to a natural conclusion. Women sang beautiful songs from the Sikh, Hindu and Christian faith traditions, and there were several very moving prayers, particularly by our Muslim sisters, expressing our heart of concern for the tragic suffering in Iraq, Syria and the wider Middle East.

Our world is in need of so much forgiveness, and the fact that we can come together like this, to reflect on this topic, is extremely meaningful.

This was a wonderful way to conclude our meetings for 2014, and it was encouraging to see so many new faces, and particularly women of all ages, bringing together wisdom and experience with youthful enthusiasm. We can look forward to 2015 with some optimism.