

Rotary and Peace

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On 30 September 1938, then-Prime Minister of England Neville Chamberlain arrived in London with a document in his hand, signed in Munich, Germany, that Mr. Chamberlain believed meant “peace in our time.” Unfortunately, this was not true, and eventually World War II was a reality.

After the war, Winston Churchill gave a speech in Zurich, Switzerland, with several suggestions about how to create peace in Europe, one of which was to control the coal and steel industry, the major components in the production of weapons. In 1950, the French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman proposed a coal and steel community, with one of the reasons being that he felt such a community could hinder future wars between France and Germany, and in 1952 this community was in force. Robert Schuman was convinced that Europe needed to be unified, and he is considered one of the architects behind the European Parliament and the shaping of the European Union.

In 1957, the European Economic Union was founded in Rome, Italy, [through what is] known as the Rome Treaty. The four cornerstones of the treaty were free flow of people, merchandise, services, and finance. Six countries signed the treaty — Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, West Germany, and Italy. A few years later, in 1960, the European Free Trade Association, known as EFTA, was formed by seven other European countries — Austria, Denmark, Great Britain, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, and Switzerland — and eventually these two associations merged into what is today known as the European Union, or the EU.

It is interesting to note that after joining the European Union, no member country has been at war with another member country. One could say that Mr. Churchill reached this goal of peace in Europe, but probably in a totally different scenario than the original plan.

We often talk only about peace versus war, but there is another peace that I would like to name: civilian peace. In my opinion, the meaning of civilian peace is well documented in the criteria for the Nobel Peace Prize that states that the peace prize should be awarded to the person who “shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses.” This opens up a wide range of possibilities for civilian peace.

You may recall that in 2006 Muhammad Yunus of Bangladesh and his Grameen Bank received the Nobel Peace Prize for his microcredit loans, most of them to women. What you may not remember is that seven years earlier, in 1999 at the Rotary International Convention in Singapore, Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank were awarded the Rotary Award for World Understanding and Peace. We saw the benefit of Mr. Yunus’s efforts for civilian peace earlier than the Nobel Peace Prize committee. We shall always be very proud of having beaten the Nobel Prize committee!

Another example of civilian peace can be found on the island of Cyprus, split between two countries, Greece and Turkey. The 18 Rotary clubs there have been assigned to two different districts, one district for the Turkish sector and one for the Greek sector of the island. For a couple of years, we were working on changing this — much through the efforts of Past RI President Luis Giay — and during the Rotary year 2005-06, in January 2006, we had an intercity meeting in Nicosia, Cyprus, with all the 18 clubs of Cyprus, celebrating that these clubs were now assigned to the same district. A civilian peace event that we are all proud of.

In Israel, there is a small hospital called Save a Child’s Heart for little children with life-threatening heart diseases. This hospital is run by Israeli Rotarian doctors, and in the waiting room I

found mothers and their children from the Arab world, from Israel, from Palestine. These women had no problem with religion, politics, language; they were there to help their children to a good life — in my opinion, an excellent example of civilian peace.

During our polio eradication campaigns in Africa, we have been helped by Days of Tranquility, when fighting armies have laid down their weapons, allowing us to immunize children in those areas. Again, an example of civilian peace.

Every year, we have almost 8,000 students in our Youth Exchange program. In my opinion, this is one of the best examples of civilian peace. Teenage students live for various lengths of time in a foreign country. Basically everything is new — new language, new culture, new religion, new school, new currency and, most of all, new friends. The visiting students as well as the host students have one thing in common: They want to make the best out of life. Their interest is not to go to war. They want peace. I have said it before, and I like to state it again: If all 17-year-old students could become exchange students, we would have no war. We are not the only organization working with youth exchange, but we feel that we are one of the best. But I see no competition with other organizations. I see a possibility of cooperation. Youth exchange for everybody is a giant puzzle that has to be played by many. Every organization needs to play its piece, and we shall see to it that our piece shall be as large as possible.

All of our youth programs are actually civilian peace programs. Interact, Rotaract, Ambassadorial Scholars — you name them, and they are all part of building peace.

Of course, the flagship of all our peace programs is our Rotary Centers for International Studies in peace and conflict resolution. In 2002, it started with a two-year course in peace and conflict resolution at eight universities throughout the world. Some changes have been made in the number, and we have added one university with a three-month course for students already working in the field of peace and conflict resolution. We are now in partnership with a total of seven universities. There are over 400 alumni of the program working around the world in a range of areas, including grassroots and local nongovernmental organizations, national governments, law enforcement, and bilateral and international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank. In a minute, you shall hear from one of our fellows, and I leave it to you to judge the quality of this program from what you are about to hear.

Our Foundation's emphases of education, health, hunger, and water are all the same as some of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Water is the basis of all life. How can anyone harvest a crop if there has been no water during the growing period? What would your garden at home look like if there was no water? Many young people wake up in the morning without a job to go to, very often because they are illiterate. If you don't have a job to go to, you have no income. Without an income, you have no food on the table. If so, these people will go out and fight for food. Wouldn't you? I would. Therefore, we must not forget our emphases of education, health, hunger, and water. Supporting these emphases is working for civilian peace.

Finally, Rotary itself is an organization dedicated to civilian peace. Let us continue to promote this idea to our clubs and communities and across the globe. It is through Service Above Self that Rotarians can continue to work towards peace in the world.