

Building Sustainable Peace with Shalom Center's Father Patrick Devine

Candace Dellacona: Welcome to the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide. I am your host, Candace Dellacona. This is a very special edition of the Sandwich Generation Survival Guide because we are participating in the fourth annual edition of Podcastthon, for one week, thousands of podcasts like mine are highlighting a charity of their choice, and today my choice, I am welcoming father Patrick Devine.

Father Patrick is a friend. He is a priest, an author, a world renowned speaker on peace and conflict resolution, who's taught at the Harvard's Kennedy School, and most importantly, Father Patrick is the Executive International Chairman and Founder of the Shalom Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, which is an organization working across Eastern Africa to bring peace to communities affected by conflict. Through dialogue and mediation, grassroots peace building, educational development projects, Shalom has helped transform relationships between groups that have experienced deep and significant division and violence for hundreds of years. Father Patrick has dedicated decades for building sustainable reconciliation by training local leaders, empowering communities and creating systems that help prevent conflict before it begins, such as schools and shelters. And his work has impacted hundreds of thousands of people across the region. He has impacted my life and he impacts most people that he meets. He offers powerful lessons about the possibilities of dialogue and dignity, and of course blasting peace.

How is that for an intro? Welcome, Father Patrick.

Father Partick Devine: Thank you, Candace. That is some intro.

Candace Dellacona: I am sure I embarrassed you. You are a person who, is certainly not immune to flattery as a human like the rest of us. But your work is such good work and you take such pride in the good work that you're doing. So I'm really happy to welcome you today.

Father Partick Devine: Thank you very much and I appreciate the welcome and the invitation to be here with you and your viewers today.

Candace Dellacona: Wonderful. So let's get right into it. I want to highlight Shalom, and I want for you, the founder of the organization to tell us everything we need to know about this amazing organization. So let's start at the beginning. Let's start at what inspired you to find Shalom Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation.

Father Partick Devine: Well, I grew up in Ireland as you can hear from my accent. And in 1979, I joined a group called The Society of African Missions, and you made a lifetime commitment to Africa and its people. And I was ordained in 1988 and assigned to Western Tanzania. Then I encountered the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 with the refugees pouring into Tanzania. So I got involved in pastoral care for them because over a million and a half crossed the border at that time. It was a terrible, terrible genocide as are all genocides. Then I ended up in quite a bit of administration for our missionary work in Tanzania and Kenya.

Our main drive in terms of development was of course oriented around peace then development schools, hospitals, and so on. And my work as my career developed in terms of administration I encountered a lot of interacting conflict going on in northern Kenya, South Sudan, Southwest Ethiopia, and there's no doubt and heavily influenced by the violence in the Eastern Congo.

Since 1996 there's estimates that there's between seven and 10 million people killed alone over there. And so it was from my interaction with these environments and watching well-intentioned NGOs and

church people and various other groups who are very well intentioned, addressing mainly the symptoms that I thought there had to be a better way to address the underlying root causes.

So I was inspired as opposed to set up a group of men and women inter-faith. And to get everybody qualified with a minimum of a master's degree in peace studies. And on top of all that, I wanted people who are willing to go behind the front line into the conflict zones and commit to live among the people there.

So that was the origin in terms of the idea of Shalom. So in 2009, Shalom was registered in Kenya as the Shalom Center for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, and we began our first works in Northern Kenya, along the border with Ethiopia and South Sudan.

Candace Dellacona: Which is so remarkable. Where you put faith and you're moved to action in such a beautiful way, and rallying those personally impacted by it to be part of the change. And I love the fact that you call it Shalom. As many of our listeners know, the word shalom means peace, but it also means wholeness and reconciliation.

So, Father, how would you say the word shalom and those concepts of wholeness and reconciliation shape the work of the organization on a daily basis, on a day in, day out basis.

Father Partick Devine: Well of course it's important to know the root meaning of shalom because some people just take it as a greeting, but shalom means peace, but it's not just a peace in the sense of the absence of violence. When we go back into Judaism and the scriptures, and it's about. Whereas the absence of violence, I consider it only negative peace.

Where we're really interested in positive peace. We're all also mutually committed to the wellbeing and development and the security of each other. And I'd like to say that at the outset, 'cause that is our total orientation as a group, as we encounter conflict in Eastern Africa. Shalom itself, of course means about having a rife relationship with God, with your neighbor, with yourself, and indeed with creation.

It's about holistically integrating peace and truth and justice and mercy, and they are really the pillars of reconciliation.

Candace Dellacona: Which is remarkable. And taking the organization to a place where it's interfaith because for those who are not familiar with the region, there are so many faiths in that particular region. So broadening the scope as you have successfully done to engage people so that everyone feels that they can be included in that process is remarkable.

For the listeners who are not familiar with the region, as you point out. Father, the residents and the citizens of those countries deal with such significant conflict and have for generations. So what does Shalom in particular deal with in terms of the type of conflict that you're hoping to resolve in the region?

Father Partick Devine: Well, at the moment we're addressing inter ethnic conflict up in northern Kenya, as I said, in that area where the Kenya interfaces with South Sudan and Ethiopia. Down at the coast then you have the issues of religious ideological extremism where you have Al-Shabaab and ISIS and Al Qaeda and they're doing a lot of recruiting in the slums as well of the major urban centers in Eastern Africa.

And then on the issue of the urban slums, like for example, there are two and a half million people across. I mean, it's debatable, but definitely over 2 million people living in those slums. And there was a lot of violence being done to women and children. So we set up the Shalom Empowerment Center to address violence against women and children.

So there are two and a half thousand women at the moment being trained with conflict transformation skills and peace building techniques. And it widens out into the encountering radicalization and countering human trafficking and organ trafficking and really enabling the people in all the conflict environments where we work to be the architects of their own future.

Now, in the threaten conflicts Candace, we go in among the various tribes and we identify the key influential opinion shapers because you really have to get them into the room. And we spend about 18 months to two years training them, first of all on the analytics, what's causing the conflict from a paradigm perspective of the role of power, of the lack of institutions, which comes under structuralism and how the society can be positively manipulated and the environment 'cause an awful lot of the time conflict is contingent on the environment, communication, leadership and so on. Then we move them to conflict transformation training. And that is dealing, first of all with the personal 'cause, you have to begin to look at yourself and that's dealing with spiritual, emotional, psychological, then relational.

The second phase is on the behavior stereotype and communication issues. Thirdly is to look at the lack of institutions in those environments to enable people to meet their basic human needs and to be able to actualize their potential. What institutions are lacking, such as law and order, legal redress, medical education.

And fourthly, is to look at the issue of where is culture legitimizing violence? Where are human rights being undermined and so on? Where is the dignity of life not being respected? And we do that with both sides for about 18 months before we bring them together. We have them trained also on negotiation, pre negotiation, negotiation and post negotiation skills. And then we bring them together because now they're speaking the same conceptual language.

And may I say, in all my time, I have never met a parent who doesn't want a better future for their children. They're all interested in getting peace. But we have to remember also that these countries, there are only a hundred years you can say into modernization, development as we know it in the west.

And there are huge areas, yes, semi-arid desert territories that do not have enough institutions developed by the governments. And it's not that the governments aren't trying, they are trying, of course, like every government, we all can do better. But that's the idea.

Candace Dellacona: You know what was so great about that Father, is that you gave us the blow by blow of the architecture of the peace building process that Shalom has developed over time. And I think that the listeners now have a practical idea of what that looks like and the runway is long.

Father Partick Devine: Yeah, Candice and I normally, just to give it a, rationale, like you don't need to be a theological genius or a sociological expert to realize that in conflict environments where people are killed, maimed and displaced persistently, it's extremely difficult for social and religious values, such as peace, truth, justice and mercy to take deep communal root for people to live normal lives and experience through peace.

Secondly, it's extremely difficult to have any sustainable development in those environments because periodically schools, hospitals, et cetera, either become inoperable or destroyed. So it's very important that we really empower the people to be the architects. Out of our peace processes, the first thing that they all, both sides began to agree on was the setting up of inter ethnic and interreligious schools.

So Shalom has done a huge amount of school. We have implemented over 800 projects, school educational development projects in 450 plus institutions since we started. And they, these developments when we do medical as well and water projects and equip these schools with books and desks and solar energy.

But these projects help to stabilize the peace process. And since we started and many students from these schools that would never have got a chance have even gone on some of them to university and become lawyers and doctors. And it's not that they forget their people. They are always there to come back and help them.

Candace Dellacona: I mean if that is not an endorsement of the good work of Shalom, I don't know what is. I think you know, what is so remarkable about the organization is that you're able with your infrastructure of the organization and the training that you do that is so involved and really meticulous, bringing together groups who historically saw each other as enemies and the power of dialogue and that human connection in resolving conflict is so inspiring, especially as you point out, Father, that these are people that are doing their best to survive. So things like justice and peace and mercy have a hard time sort of seeping in when you are literally trying to survive. So I just think that's such a remarkable testament of Shalom and all of the amazing people that are committed to Shalom to make peace in the region. What I would like to know is, why do you see as someone who is from Ireland, it's so important to you that the solutions for peace come from within the community as opposed to from outside. Can you talk a little bit about why you're sort of tapping the shoulder of Tanzanians and Kenyans and Sudanese people to come up with the solutions?

Father Partick Devine: Well, you see at best, outside intervention, any war can only create a ceasefire. And it's important that maybe within a, to explain that a little bit. When you have manifest direct violent conflict. The first thing of course you want to do, and usually international intervention lead to creating a ceasefire, but a ceasefire can easily revert back into violence again, into manifest violence unless you really understand the root causes what's causing the and address them.

And you have to move that ceasefire through interventions, development interventions, further conflict transformation, you have to begin to move it through towards positive peace. And if you're going to get the positive peace you really have to have the people on board and they have to commit to it.

And so often around the world to today, we see interventions in major conflicts, right? I'm talking about international conflicts. And the peace is there and it can easily revert back. But from once the people own the piece on the ground and are committed, both sides are committed.

And I think to add here as well, what I have found working among the people, they want to create environments to where they can experience the divine spirit because everybody is yearning to experience that spirit as well. And where people are killed and maimed in this place, that's nearly impossible. I would say like Candice, that, in terms of addressing the issue of religious ideological extremism, it's very important that people are aware of the terminology and that along a continuum from radicalization to fundamentalism, then on to nonviolent extremism, and then further on to manifest violent extremism operationalized in terroristic acts.

And I use that term, nonviolent extremism. I remember giving a lecture in in Chicago and the people, what do you mean by nonviolent extremism? And I said, you could even have it in a western democracy where you have side, so polarized. So polarized, whether it be in politics or the media or some other form that they don't even want to listen to each other, talk to each other, and they don't want the other side to be heard even. And they want to try and wipe them off the social political narrative. So I don't think I need to explain that to too many people.

Candace Dellacona: No, I don't think you do. Not this day and age here in the United States.

Father Partick Devine: It's bringing all that awareness to the people that you're empowering them, really empowering them with the analytical skills and the conflict transformation peace building techniques that are needed.

Candace Dellacona: It's really remarkable and I love the term that you use, owning the peace. Because when you have people that have a vested interest in the peace and they see the possibility of living a life without pain of war and conflict, it really does provide an alternative that perhaps didn't exist for them before.

You're doing such amazing work in Eastern Africa and spreading the sort of good work that you're doing. Obviously we're in a place of conflict here in the world right now. We know what's going on, places like Iran and Gaza and Ukraine, and I think a lot of us as families, we worry about conflict even in our own lives.

So what are the lessons, Father, that you could impart upon us about conflict resolution even more locally, even within our own homes? Do you have any advice for our listeners?

Father Partick Devine: Well, like conflict everywhere around the world, and I think this is something we can bring to our homes as well. We should all be aware on issues of conflict. That conflict has a memory it's very robust and it's resilient. It's more than culture. It can be transgenerational. It usually is. Unfortunately it's frequently distorted by erroneous historical narratives and false media reporting at times.

So that even comes down into our local conflicts at home among people. And I mean, communication is so vital to have, and whether it be among family members in marriage or whatever, and sometimes to reach out and to find help and to find people who are interested because this conflict world we are in as well, in terms of NGOs and so on, it can often be abused and used by organizations who use the cause just to feed their own management needs.

So you really need authenticity among people who are engaging with you. To people in family homes, communication is the key and to really begin to get some help so that you do the analytics on yourself as an individual on the relationships in terms of communication, stereotyping, and so on.

And look at your home life. Look at your community life, whether it be a parish or a village. Look at what institutions can be improved, and look at the overall culture that's been fed into the minds and hearts of people.

Candace Dellacona: I love that. That is really a perfect answer, Father Patrick. After all of your many decades now in Africa, and the conflict that you've witnessed, the heartache, the heartbreak and also a lot of positives, the incredible network that Shalom has been able to put together piece by piece, what still gives you hope? Father Patrick, what gives you hope day to day?

Father Partick Devine: I have great hope because of the human spirit. 'Cause I believe in the goodness of the human spirit and I believe in the goodness of the divine spirit, which touches on the entity of life of all of us, regardless of which faith you are. So that's why we're even inter-religious and to always give scope to experience that divine spirit and let it move us for good.

And there are other spirits that move us into negative territory and to do things that we shouldn't be doing, but to have great respect for human rights and the dignity of life and whatever we do, do not close dialogue or shut people out, keep the dialogue going and see how can we make life better as a community?

Because if we just turn in on ourselves, whether it be about our own, just human needs or about faith I think we have missed the joy of life and the richness of each other. It's like you and I here, sitting here talking. We're all part of the mosaic. No one is above or below. And I think that's what makes it work, and we appreciate and care for each other.

Of course, Candace we are registered in Ireland as well. The Shalom is, and we are in the Northern Ireland, UK and here in the USA. And I want to say this because your country gave us a great honor and Colin Powell was the guest in the event down in Washington back a number of years ago. And he had a good impact on me as well, when in terms of speaking about government interference and for peace and for bringing about reconciliation can only do so much. But he said, ultimately the people at the grassroots too have to be really trained, as I said, to be their own architects and to reach and to attain the type of environment that which to live in.

Candace Dellacona: And you know, Father Patrick, that really is a perfect way to end my highlight of the amazing Shalom Institute and to of course, remind our listeners that Shalom does such amazing work. You just heard a fraction of what Shalom has done for the region and as Father Patrick rightly pointed out, you have obtained certification as to charitable status here in the United States, in the United Kingdom, and in Ireland to support all of the work that you're doing in Africa, and donations that you have made to the satellites in the United States, The United Kingdom and Ireland are tax deductible. If you are moved to make a donation, and I hope you have been, we will have all of that information in our show notes.

Father Partick Devine: Candace, I'd just like to say that I want to remember all our people on the front line and all the progress that's being made to thank them and to thank all our donors as well. And just to say this, that of every dollar that's donated from USA out to us in Africa, 95 cents goes directly into the project.

Candace Dellacona: That is remarkable. I wanted to thank Father Patrick Devine from the bottom of my heart for taking part in this special episode of the Podcastthon. And if you've enjoyed it, I would really hope that you'd visit www.postcasthon.org to learn about so many other charities through the voices and the talents of my fellow podcasters. Thank you, Father Patrick.