

Peace tools: Caritas provides nuts and bolts of conflict resolution

VATICAN CITY – The object of this arm-wrestling game is to get as many points as possible by pushing your partner's fist down on the table – but it doesn't matter how many points your partner gets.

Will players figure out they can amass more points by cooperating and simply make quick, alternating wins rather than by competing and duking it out through brute force?

The game, called Popeye, is one of scores of activities that make up a new Web tool kit created by Caritas Internationalis, the Vatican-based umbrella organization for 162 national Catholic charities around the world.

The tool kit is an online resource for peace-building workshops aimed at helping individuals and local communities overcome prejudice, trauma, fear and hatred bred by episodes of violence or years of conflict.

The "Peacebuilding: Web Toolkit for Trainers" is located online at <https://peacebuilding.caritas.org> and is dedicated to slain Archbishop Oscar A. Romero of San Salvador. Caritas Internationalis launched the site on the anniversary of his assassination March 24.

The archbishop was an "outspoken champion of peace, justice and human rights in El Salvador. His life and martyrdom (have) been an inspiration to the work of Caritas and beyond," the organization said in a written press release on the eve of the launch.

The more than 200-page Web tool kit is culled from "the best peace-building materials published" and was edited to be Web-friendly and hosted on an interactive Wiki platform, said Patrick Nicholson, head of communications for Caritas Internationalis.

Users can pick and choose from a large selection of activities, handouts, case studies

and resources for teaching skills in nonviolence, negotiation and peacefully integrating people from diverse religious, ethnic or other backgrounds.

The tool kit was designed for people involved in grass-roots peace-building, although aid workers in zones of conflict may find the materials helpful, too.

Users can craft their own training workshops and build their own Web sites, as well as “upload new resources, share and rate content, and take part in online discussions,” Nicholson said.

“It’s the most comprehensive tool available on the Web for designing peace-building workshops” and should be an invaluable resource not just for Caritas members, but all local, governmental and international organizations working for peace, he said.

The peace-building concept has become crucial in an age in which the nature of war and conflict has changed.

Almost two-thirds of all current conflicts are “identity conflicts,” Caritas says in “Peace-building: A Caritas Training Manual” – a veritable bible for peace-builders first published in 2002.

In the past, most major conflicts were triggered by territorial ambitions and fought in contained theaters of war. Today it’s more likely the enemy isn’t a far-away, foreign army but a fellow citizen or neighbor.

The shocking slaughters seen in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the 1991-2001 Balkan wars, and 20th-century paramilitary operations in Latin America are examples of how wars can be fought by fellow citizens clashing over divergent ethnic, religious or political identities.

The new reality of war means two things. First, civilians become the primary targets and actors in armed conflicts. And second, traditional methods of high-level diplomatic talks, cease-fires and peace agreements are no longer sufficient for tackling the root causes of conflict and creating lasting peace.

“It is becoming clear that peace settlements reached through negotiation do not necessarily bring about the required change of heart, which is the crux of peace,

particularly in complex internal conflicts,” Caritas says in its peace-building training manual.

The Rwandan and the Balkan cleansing campaigns were alarming signs that peace-building had to become a priority, it says.

When outward hostilities have ended, the roots of war will remain unless the broken relationships between groups and among individuals are restored, it added.

People need help to come to terms with a tragic and painful past, accept shared responsibility and forge a new mutual understanding, the manual says.

Caritas and its partners, in fact, work on both levels – healing hearts and minds while providing emergency and development aid.

For example, in Rwanda the local Caritas agency provided psychological counseling for women raped during the genocide campaign and helped them build new homes.

If the women were to heal from their trauma, they also needed to improve their living conditions and change the setting of where that trauma took place, Caritas says on its Web site.

Besides causing unfathomable psychological damage, war is also the mortal enemy of development, it says, citing a Swahili proverb: “When the elephants fight, it’s the grass that gets trampled.”

That is why Caritas and the church have found ways to ground their development projects on a foundation of building peace, justice and reconciliation.