

Iain Brennan, 10.10-11am

Evaluation of Building Bridges

There are a great many things that I could discuss as part of the evaluation of the Building Bridges project. However, in the context of the talks that have preceded me and will follow, and given that this week the European Directive on Victims' Rights was enacted, I think it is fitting to discuss the role of victims in the Building Bridges programmes and the lessons we have learned about victim recruitment for the future. The talk begins pessimistically with some concerns for the future but hopefully ends on an uplifting note about the potential for partnership and development that the Building Bridges initiative presents.

The project recruited 66 victims across 13 programmes in 7 countries. This is a wonderful achievement for a totally new intervention. 66 victims across 13 programmes is an average of 5 victims per programme. One the evidence so far, this creates a problem

If the restorative component of Building Bridges is to truly extend to victims and to act as a healing process for victims as much as it can be for offenders, then there should be new victims in each programme. After all, we would not re-use offenders.

Recruiting victims was one of the most difficult tasks overcome by the Building Bridges partners. Partner wrote letters to newspapers, they wrote articles for magazines, they advertised in the local press and they gave interviews about the programme on radio. The most widely used and most successful technique came by appealing at local churches, through word-of-mouth and through victims who had previously participated in Sycamore Tree.

While this is a sufficient recruitment strategy for pilot programmes such as the ones we are discussing today, the net must be cast wider in the future. My Building Bridges colleagues have told me that their existing networks developed through churches, word-of-mouth and previous Sycamore Tree participants are close to exhausted. Therefore, finding new victims to participate in future programmes will become increasingly difficult with each new programme.

In addition, this two year project allowed much greater lengths of time to recruit victims. In the future, partners will have much less time if programmes start to run regularly.

My second concern with the current techniques of victim recruitment is about the lack of diversity in victims that such strategies will create. Inevitably, the existing strategies will over-recruit from the church-going, newspaper-reading, radio-listening middle-classes who look more like Prison Fellowship staff than the offenders the programme tries to reach. Not only will this limit a potentially helpful intervention to a select few, these people rarely reflect the characteristics of the prisoners they meet. Furthermore, the programme will stagnate if the same types of people continue to recount the same types of experiences. Who knows what we could learn about forgiveness and reconciliation by opening up this opportunity to all groups in society.

Finally, I feel that when you have a small population of willing participants to choose from, the pressure to create a group so that a programme can be run can also create pressure to assign a victim to the group who may not be emotionally ready to participate. Such pressures to reduce the quality of victim screening can put all the participants of a programme at risk.

Facing this reality, and with a view towards sustainability of the existing programmes and the development of Building Bridges in other countries, it is imperative that Prison Fellowships devise sustainable strategies for the recruitment of suitable victims that are independent of local and personal networks and church congregations.

Fortunately, our evaluation has had this issue in mind from the beginning and we can discuss some of our findings relating to this. As two countries who were at opposite ends of the development spectrum two years, Portugal – with no previous Sycamore Tree experience – and the Netherlands – with extensive experience and well-developed networks in the Dutch criminal justice system – are a useful pair of countries to use as examples in discussing how to engage a sustainable source of victims.

The most obvious source of victims to participate in Building Bridges is that of victim support organisations. In both the Netherland and Portugal there are several well-organised and nationally-coordinated victims support organisations.

I am aware that this is not the case in all the countries represented here today. For example, in Italy, while local victim support agencies exist, there is no nationally-coordinated organisation.

Victim support agencies are an obvious choice because they have ready access to a large number of victims that – unfortunately – is always being refreshed, they often have ongoing engagement with these victims and so gain their trust and they have insight into the mental state of the victims. These features of victim support agencies make them an ideal partner for Prison Fellowships who wish to run Building Bridges.

To quote a representation of a victim support agency when asked if he recommends a personal approach to recruiting victims, he said:

“Not only personal but I think it can help to attract the collaboration of victim support associations...I believe that if the first contact is made by someone who is associated with working with crime victims, they will...feel a little more trust”.

Later in the interview, when discussing victim participation, he said:

“Victim support services can play a key role in people selection processes, in the information on the first approach with the victims, and then in providing support during and after the process”

Despite victim support agencies being perfect partners in the Building Bridges endeavour, the relationships between the two types of organisations has not always harmonious. The attitudes of victim support agencies towards Building Bridges in the Netherlands have been largely resistant. This has resulted from two misconceptions of Building Bridges and Gewangenenzorg.

Firstly, Victim Support agencies have viewed Gewangenezorg as being solely an offender-focused organisation. This has created an 'us vs. them' relationship between the two organisations. This bias has prevented Victim Support from engaging with Building Bridges and recognising the importance of the victim in this new programme. I am pleased to say that recent efforts to re-engage with victims support organisations have been more fruitful.

One further obstacle to a stable relationship between victims' agencies and PF appears to have been the perception of the Sycamore Tree project as using victims as instruments to achieve a goal for offenders. As I'm sure you can understand such a possibility is highly undesirable for an organisation primarily concerned with helping victims.

A final obstacle that has emerged from the interviews with victims has been the potential conflict caused for the victims who decide to participate – to help offenders as well as themselves. Our interviews have revealed conflict with family members but also between victims. Family members – most likely who are keen to prevent their family member from secondary victimisation – have occasionally struggled to understand what a victim can gain from talking to an offender. Interestingly, some victim participants who also engage with victim support agencies, have reported that by engaging with offenders, they sometimes feel that they are betraying their fellow victims and the victim support organisation.

The finding that some victims feel they are betraying other victims suggests an interesting conflict between the worldviews of the victim support organisations and Building Bridges and has important implications for the wider Building Bridges project and for future victim recruitment. The Victim Support agencies place the victim at the centre of their world with the 'evil' offender as a non-entity to be vilified or ignored, while Building Bridges places the interaction between the victim and the offender at its centre. Even if these worldviews do not change, it seems that it will be necessary for the two groups to at least recognise each others' perspectives if there are to be productive future relationships. Victim support agencies will need to recognise that forgiveness, the sharing of experience and seeking explanations may be part of the road to recovery for some victims. Building Bridges will need to recognise that, for some victims, avoidance and moving on from a traumatic past may also feature on that road.

The experience of Portugal seems to be different. Whereas in the Netherlands, Victim Support agencies were sceptical of the programme and did not wish to learn about its victim focus, APAV – Portugal's main victim support organisation - embraced the programme with open arms and, in fact, has worked with Confiar for several years. To quote an interviewee from APAV: "Our attitude is completely open as long as the basic rules – which guarantee that there won't be victimization in these processes – are respected. It is our only concern".

The differences between the two countries appears to be over communication and dialogue about the goals of the other.

I will end with a suggestion that Prison Fellowships seek to form partnerships with victim support agencies wherever possible. The example of Portugal illustrates that this is possible when lines of communication remain open and there is a shared understanding of the goals of Building Bridges.