

# FORUM

## Healing in Our Land: Jamaica Hosts International Conference on Restorative Justice

BY JOSHUA WACHTEL

Jamaica is a beautiful country, but it is deeply troubled by poverty and violence. "Anyone who has followed Jamaica over the past 10 to 20 years can see our country has suffered from the loss of communal relationships that once existed. The issue of crime and violence is dominant at present," noted Dr. Teran Milford, dean of the College of Teacher Education and Behavioural Sciences at Northern Caribbean University (NCU), in Mandeville. "One way to rebuild structures and rebuild relationships is through restorative justice," he added. "Rather than just punishing a perpetrator of crime, we want to find ways to reinstate the perpetrator back in the community."

This core principle of restorative justice (RJ), along with its focus on repairing the harm done to people and empowering those affected by crime, has found a ready recipient in Jamaica, where the government is now engaged in a program to promote the use of RJ throughout many areas of society to redress past harms and begin making enduring changes in the culture.

RJ was mandated by the Jamaican government in response to violent conflicts in 2001 between police and citizens in inner-city areas, on the recommendation of Jennifer Llewelyn, of Dalhousie Law School, Nova Scotia, an expert witness on restorative justice for the 2002 Jamaican Commission of Enquiry.

Carol Palmer, permanent secretary of the Jamaican Ministry of Justice, is leading implementation of RJ in Jamaica. "We have had mediation in Jamaica for over 10 years," said Palmer, "but we see restorative justice as a way to widen and deepen the process." Since RJ was mandated, Palmer

has made it her mission to inform herself about RJ. To that end, she undertook a 21-day study tour of Ontario, Canada, and attended the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Summer Training Institute.

Jamaica's commitment to RJ was heralded in January and February, 2007, with a 21-day period of "national grieving, atonement, healing, restoration and reconciliation," declared by the governor general, Hon. Professor Kenneth O. Hall. Events included a series of church services held around the country and culminated in a two-day training and two-day international conference.

The training and conference were initiated by the Department of Behavioural Sciences at NCU, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, and were cosponsored by the United Nations Development Program and the Canadian International Development Agency.

Dr. Grace Kelly, chair of the Department of Behavioural Sciences at NCU, was key in organizing the conference, which was also supported by Chief Justice Hon. Lensley Wolfe, Attorney General Senator Hon. A.J. Nicholson, Q.C., the Jamaica Constabulary Force and the Dispute Resolution Foundation.

Nearly 300 people from across Jamaica—social workers, probation officers, lawyers, teachers, guidance counselors, victim support and children's service workers, government officials, members of the church community and university students—heard trainers and presenters from Canada, the United States, South Africa and Hungary. (See [http://news.ncu.edu.jm/news\\_item.asp?NewsID=571](http://news.ncu.edu.jm/news_item.asp?NewsID=571).)

The IIRP conducted the two-day pre-conference "Sensitization Training" for about 60 participants and helped organize the conference. The goal of both events was to familiarize participants with RJ and to demonstrate how it can extend beyond criminal justice.

IIRP president Ted Wachtel explained how restorative practices apply to daily life in families, schools and workplaces. Rejecting the inappropriate deed but not the doer, allowing all parties to express their feelings about an incident, and doing things "with people, rather than to them or for them" are critical elements of the restorative approach.

Rev. Dr. Pierre Allard, a prison chaplain and administrator in Canadian corrections for over 30 years, began the conference each day. Allard's first keynote,



Participants at the Restorative Justice Training, at Northern Caribbean University, in Mandeville, Jamaica

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"Restorative Justice: The Lost Treasure," placed RJ in a biblical context, which is especially relevant in Jamaica, where there are more churches per capita than any country in the world. He argued that adoption of the Greco-Roman law code, a penitentiary system based on monastic isolation, and the infiltration of punitive philosophy into the church all worked against restorative ideals.

On day two Allard presented "A Need for Vision" and discussed how RJ might help Jamaica, saying, "Restorative Justice is not a formula program; it is a way of life. It gives us a vision that replaces the need for scapegoating and vengeance."

Conference presenters fleshed out this vision by sharing personal examples of restorative practices around the world.

Vidia Negrea, director of Community Service Foundation Hungary, an IIRP affiliate, discussed a restorative circle involving parents of a pre-school class in a village where cultural tensions between Hungarians and Gypsies (or Roma) were spilling over into the school. The circle process cut through the conflict and produced a friendly and cooperative group.

Dr. Frida Rundell, IIRP Graduate School professor, discussed her work in South Africa with family group decision making, a restorative process that involves extended family in making decisions for their children. Rundell argued that service agencies must help build "multiple supports" for a child to be really effective.

Finally Bruce Schenk, chaplain of Brookside Youth Centre in Ontario and RJ advisor to the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board, discussed how the 2003 Canadian Youth Criminal Justice Act has helped legitimize the use of restorative practices across Canada. While national legislation is not essential, said Schenk, Canada's national law has opened doors for more RJ at different levels.

Before the conference, a "National Day of Atonement" service was held at

Portmore Seventh-Day Adventist church. Participants wrote a hurt they wanted to forgive or be forgiven on a piece of paper and put it in a box. The following week, in a ceremony in Mandeville, participants formed a big circle outdoors around the box, which had traveled to churches around the country and was now full of paper. The box was then burned.

One student participant commented on the symbolic link between the burning papers and Burning Bridges, a documentary shown during the conference about a restorative justice conference that helped heal wounds in a small Pennsylvania town after a group of young men burned down a historic covered bridge ([http://www.iirp.org/books\\_n\\_videos\\_info/burning-bridges.php](http://www.iirp.org/books_n_videos_info/burning-bridges.php)). The student saw restorative practices as offering a promising new way to heal Jamaica's hurts.

Dr. Milford, referring to the last afternoon of the conference, when participants broke into vocational groups to discuss ideas for applying RJ in their work, suggested how RJ might be implemented in Jamaica: "In education, restorative justice could become part of the curriculum in schools, to help disseminate the whole concept. The church could play a role. There is a sense that ministries should naturally be restorative. Police forces could be trained. There is also talk of starting a bachelor's program to prepare people for this type of work."

Conference participants are eager to put what they learned into practice. Claudine Atkinson, counselor and instructor at the NCU Counseling and Psychology Services Center, said she'd used restorative questions (What happened? Who has been affected by what you have done and how? What do you need to do to make things right?) during a counseling session to help a young couple in conflict see how their actions affected one another.

Charmaine Holness, director of health services at NCU, said that the restorative

questions were useful in her role as chair of the Citizens Committee. The committee asked two brothers who had hacked into the administrative computer network to explain what happened and how they felt they could fix the problem.

After the conference, Governor General Hall declared an annual National Restorative Justice Week to be held each January.

Said Secretary Palmer, "We want to make RJ available nationally through a network of different support services." Jamaica's Peace and Justice Centres offer mediation, but Palmer wants to open more centers offering more services, such as conferences and other restorative processes. "We want people in communities to have the opportunity to call someone when in need," said Palmer, "but we also hope to create an environment which will minimize conflict overall."

Ted Wachtel returned to Jamaica to deliver another training, "Restorative Circles for Serious Offenses," on April 30-May 1, 2007. The training was extremely well received by 80 participants from a wide range of professions: magistrates, prosecutors, clergy and community activists.

Since then, said Palmer, the Ministry of Justice has begun work on a restorative justice policy, scheduled to be completed November 2007. "And, as we speak, [June 21, 2007]" added Palmer, "the Department of Correctional Services is holding a Restorative Justice Forum, in Kingston, on management and rehabilitation of offenders."

Asked what her hopes were for the future of RJ in Jamaica, Palmer said, "We hope to restore the more positive, socially acceptable behavior of the past, which has been consistently eroded, so now there's a high level of indiscipline and crime." The Jamaica she envisions is "a more forgiving and peaceful society that fully integrates the rule of law." ☉