

*(SINGING)*

**(Scott):** The singing you just heard were peace club members at a female maximum security prison in Zambia.

What do you think when you hear the word “peace”?

On this episode, we're going to explore how peacemaking is a verb, how it's active, and it takes dedication and work.

We'll hear about restored relationships, and about the long-term hard work of peacebuilding.

Engaging in peacemaking is more than blowing out birthday candles, more than catching a glimpse of a shooting star. For MCC, peace is more than a wish. It's our work.

I'm Scott Campbell, and you're listening to Relief, Development and Podcast. A production of Mennonite Central Committee

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN AGAIN)*

**(Scott):** Zebron Mwale was turned into the authorities by his neighbor, Mary Mweemba for growing marijuana.

Growing cannabis is illegal in Zambia.

He spent a year and a half in Choma prison, where he was introduced to peace clubs. Peace clubs in prisons meet weekly for discussions on topics like conflict, violence, trauma, healing, and the long journey towards reconciliation.

**(Zebron):** My first entry into the prison, it was like I would come into another world which I never knew before. I was pushed inside, and the smell inside, I could just smell human feces. I found a bunch of countless people making noise, like a bunch of bees, for lack of a better example. The noise made me to wonder whether they are able to listen to each other. The environment itself was like, hell.

**(Elizabeth):** Zebron began noticing badges some of the other inmates wore, small white squares, with the outline of the baobab tree on the left. And on the right, the words “peace club member.”

**(Zebron):** I got interested and wondered how there could be such things like peace club in prison. And this really prompted me to find out more. And prompted me to quickly join the Peace club.

Before joining this club, I had intensions like I would ever find those who sold me out to the law enforcement, I would fight to end my life. But after the message of peace club, anchored well in my heart, I quickly learned about the need to break the chain of revenge or to break the cycle of violence.

But the moment I'd learned about peace club, that was the moment when my neighbor also accompanied my family to come one day to visit me at the prison.

**(Elizabeth):** That neighbor was Mary, the woman who reported him to the police.

**(Zebron):** I seized that rare opportunity to utter words of reconciliation. I talked about the need to end the quarrels which we're having, to put them to an end and live in harmony so that we can be able to help each other and we can be able to play the role of security to each other since we are staying in a farming community.

I became the chairperson and I started also to teach the new inmates who did not know about the peace club.

I was included among the people to be pardoned because of my transformed behavior in the prison. And when I was released, I find out that I was missing something that was very important, which was the peace clubs. That prompted me to think about a Peace Club in the community, so that we can continue talking about restoring peace and justice within our communities.

I talked to my good neighbor, sharing with her the same message, and together, we agreed that we can come up with such a club.

**(Mary):** Zilachitika.

**(Elizabeth):** That was Mary, Zebron's neighbor, they worked together to organize a peace club in their neighborhood.

**(Issa):** What does it mean to those who don't understand?

**(Mary):** It just happens. We are neighbors. It will never end if we are neighbors. We go forward.

**(Elizabeth):** The “it” Mary mentioned is conflict. The saying is similar to the French *c’est la vie*.” It happens. Conflict happens. But they are choosing to work together and to move forward.

**(Scott):** That was Zebron Mwale. He serves as chairperson of the peace club he founded in his neighborhood and works closely with his neighbor Mary, who serves as vice chairperson.

Today, I'm speaking with Issa Ebombolo. Issa is MCC's national peacebuilding coordinator in Zambia and Malawi, and he is the founder of peace clubs. He has spearheaded the restorative justice program we just heard about in Zambia's correctional facilities.

Welcome Issa. I'm so glad you could join us.

**(Issa):** It's my pleasure to be here.

**(Scott):** You founded peace clubs out of your own life experience. Can you tell us where you were at when you were thinking this concept into reality? How did you come up with the idea of peace clubs, Issa?

**(Issa):** Scott, I should tell you that I'm from Democratic Republic of Congo. Now, I'm living in Zambia, as a resident. Congo has experienced conflict and violence for many, many years and I came to Zambia, for my safety. And because of my past experience of violence, I was inspired to come up with a concept that is called the peace club.

Another piece of my background is that I used to be a Muslim. And when I decided to move from Islam to Christianity, I also experienced conflict within my family. And they were not happy with me with the decision I took. And I spent close to six years in hiding, for my safety, and all that contributed to my bad experience of conflict in the past. And these issues that inspired me to come up with a concept of peace. And that's why peace is a very important concept in my life.

**(Scott):** Can you share a little bit of the history of peace clubs in Zambia? When did it begin? When did you start working with peacemakers in the country?

**(Issa):** The concept of peace club was started in 2006. It started in schools. And we started with the three schools and other schools saw and they heard the impact that peace club was making. And this is how peace club expanded from three schools to 33 schools.

And now we have been we have extended peace club into southern part of Zambia. And it has just gone beyond Zambia. And right now, we are operating in more than 14 African countries, and beyond even African countries. Peace club has been implemented in the

South America and parts of Europe as well. Peace club now is being implemented in Canada, in Ontario with the Meeting House.

**(Scott):** So from some work in Zambia that you were leading to 14 countries in Africa and now around the world, starting peace clubs in Ontario, that's a pretty remarkable multiplying of the concept. And so much so that someone in the Zambian government requested that you bring peace clubs into their correctional system. Can you tell us how that partnership came about?

**(Issa):** Because of the impact that peace club has made in different countries, Zambia correctional service in January 2016, decided to shift from prison approach into correctional approach. It was a statement and it was a shift of philosophy. But Zambia correctional services had difficulties. How does it look like into a prison system? And that's when now they approached MCC to share their dreams, "We want to move from punitive system into correctional system; want to move from punishment into correction; how do we do this?"

Commissioner Mwanza who is commissioner for, for correction and extension he's experienced in Canada and the USA, he attended many workshops in restorative justice. So he knows MCC as a peace organization. And therefore, he discovered that this is the common ground, we have a common ground about peace, and he came to share his dreams. And they asked, "How can we make this happen? How can we convince the community that we are now moving away from violence into peace? We are moving away from punishment into corrections? Because so far, we have just changed only terminologies and the vocabularies where we have, we have deleted the word prison on the walls, and we have written correction service, but the department is still getting questions from the communities, What does it change?"

Because when they visit prisons, they still see violence happening, they still see the same activities happening. So, the department of correctional service had the difficulties to convince members of the community about this shift.

That when my bosses, country reps, asked me to design a project that will translate the word "correction" into practical peace. This is how we came up with the creation of restorative justice and peacebuilding into Zambia correctional service department.

This project has two components. One component is about restorative justice. This is all about bringing victims and offenders and the community members together to restore the relationships that have been broken. And the second component is peacebuilding. In peacebuilding that's how we see peace club. And peace club is all about building peace in the prisons, in correctional facilities, building peace between inmates and between inmates and officers and between officers.

**(Scott):** Can you say a little bit more about how peace clubs in the prison system may be different than peace clubs that are in the broader community? Is there a difference? Or are they quite similar?

**(Issa):** They have some similarities and some differences. And why differences? Because of the context. So we have a peace club with schools. We have peace clubs in the community. And we have peace clubs, in places of work and we have peace clubs, in refugee camps. We have peace clubs in the prisons. And because of the differences in terms of context, inmates, they live in a prison, this is their home, this is their place. So they have a lot of time. And therefore, they learn a lot of lessons compared to these other peace clubs in other contexts.

And then secondly, prison has layers of social groups. In prison, we have correctional service officers, junior and senior officers, we have inmates who are leaders and the intimate who are followers. And therefore, in one prison, we can have two or three different peace clubs. Because in a prison, the population is big. The approach is that we select only 30 inmates as peace club members. And these thirty intimates, they come from different cells, and each cell may have maybe 50 individuals or intimates. So we selected two inmates per cell to join peace club group. So when they learn in peace club session, the 30 people in the evening when they are locked in their cells, those two peace club members from each cells, they become leaders in their cells. Peace leaders or peacemakers. So they continue the same teaching into the cells because they have all the time.

And each cell has a specific day that they call “peace day” into the cell. That's where they learn a lot of knowledge and the skills of peace. They learn songs, proverbs in peace, and they also identify the conflict that affected them in the cell. And they learn how do they respond to this conflict. How can they make their cells to be a peaceful place to stay, to live.

**(Scott):** That's wonderful if, if I was to participate in a peace club, what would I do? What would my time with a peace club look like?

**(Issa):** When you participate in a peace club session, number one, you are going to learn first, the skills and the knowledge on conflict resolutions, peacemaking, and when you learn these skills, you will be asked now to identify some conflicts that you have experienced into your life, into your family, into your neighborhood. And when you identify these conflict, then you will be asked how do you use the skills, the concept and the theories that you have learned in peace club in resolving the conflict that affect you, affect your neighbors, your friends, and so on. Then you'll be asked to apply those skills into your own life and report back to the gathering and that is the next session and now peace club members are asked now to report how these skills and the concept have worked into their everyday life.

They also share their experiences, what has worked well, what hasn't worked well. You build capacity each other, you learn from each other on how to go about those conflicts that have not worked well, based on what you have learned. So peace club is about a platform that brings adults, young people together to learn these skills, and to apply these skills in their everyday life.

**(Scott):** What do you think the peace club model has been so effective?

**(Issa):** Number one, the learning methodology is a little bit differently from Zambian or African learning methodology. Peace club, it's about learner centered approach. So we don't just lecture like preachers who just stand the pulpit and just preach, preach, preach, and you don't have time to questions, you don't have time to challenge the preacher, and just say "Amen". And everyone say, "Amen", it ends there. Peace club helps learners to think critically. So the approach is that the teacher or facilitator will pick a topic or a lesson and introduce the concept and ask now the learners what they think. And when, when they respond to that question, then they will be asked to relate what they have understood to their life experience. So that methodology has been one of the aspects that has helped peace club to be more effective. But we have acknowledged that learners they know a lot, they have some knowledge. And therefore, peace club provide a platform where learners provide their knowledge, they also learn from each other, and they teach each other, and this makes them to empower each other.

So the second reason why I think peace club has been effective, because we ask learners now to apply the knowledge, the skills, the concept, the theories in their everyday life experience. And when they apply, they see the changes, and they're the beneficiaries of the changes, and they become the change that they want to see. And people are able to see the impact that peace club is making in their communities and in their environment.

**(Scott):** What lessons have you learned Issa, in the many, many years that you've been doing peace work? What are some of those things that are wisdom that you would pass along to someone that you didn't, you didn't know, you didn't understand before peace clubs?

**(Issa):** You know when you have a bottle of water, and you tie the bottle top, tightly. In physics, they believe that any person who wants to untie that bottle top needed to apply a force and amount of energy that is equal to the energy you used in tying that bottle top. So what I'm trying to say here is that what I've learned in peace work is that when people have been involved or exposed to the teaching of violence for many years, they believe that the best way of solving a conflict is through violence. And I've seen this in families like especially in our society where some families believe you can only change the character of a child by beating, you can change the character of your spouse by beating or fighting. This is the best way. So people have learnt this philosophy of violence for many years. And I've

learned that a workshop of one week is not enough to change the attitude of a human being. So it takes time for someone to believe, to change the attitude and to change their behavior from violence to peace. And it requires a lot of patience. Without patience, you can give up. The reason is, is that it's not concrete, you can't preach or teach peace today and then tomorrow, you see, you see the fruits. It takes time behavior change, it's not something that you should expect in one week, two weeks, one month, it takes, it's a process.

**(Scott):** Peacebuilding is long term work. How do you stay motivated?

**(Issa):** So what motivates me, Scott, is that, number one, I'm able to see change in my life, in my family, I'm able to see change in my neighborhood, I'm able to see change into the lives of my project participants. And this brings a lot of motivation. In addition to that, I'm able to see the multiplication of the outcome or the fruits of this club, from one country to many countries. And the feedback I receive, this motivates me so much. Though, it takes a while to see the tangible change.

**(Scott):** Can you tell me a bit more, Issa, about the difference that you've seen peace make in your own life?

**(Issa):** I joined peace education in 2003. This is the first time I attended a workshop on peace. And it was a facilitated by an MCC volunteer, what I started realizing in my life is number one, I was very argumentative. I could not believe that you can resolve any violent conflict peacefully, or what I believed was you can resolve conflict or violence by inflicting violence. So it took me a long time to believe that this is real, and that this can still happen. And the second aspect, Scott, is that even when you are transformed, it's not easy to, to convince others because there are so many aspects in life that contributed to, to where we are today, you know, we behave the way we behave, because of the past experiences. And these include the culture, life experience, and so on. They have made who we are now, and it becomes a part of our behavior. And this is how I was. It took me a lot of initiative to change completely, and to be a peacemaker. And it's just the lessons were not enough. I needed also to practice those lessons, how I used to practice them, not only to resolve other people's conflict but to resolve my own conflict, and it is very hard, very hard, very easy to resolve conflict between two people. But it's very hard to resolve your conflict with another person. And this is something due to reconciliation. So these are the few things that I've learned about myself.

**(Scott):** So what's next for you and the peacebuilding work you're doing? What's your hope? What's your vision for, for the future?

**(Issa):** So far, we have implemented the peace club in 42 correctional service in Zambia. And then in total, we have 65 correctional service in Zambia. So the plan is to meet the needs of

all the facilities by the end of next year. My hope, in this particular project is to see the mind of people. And when I mean the people, I mean, correctional service officers, inmates, and the community at large, that has, have lived in a punitive system for over 40 years, to shift their mind, to shift their understanding to shift their attitude. And to believe that punishment does not correct a human being, instead, it is shame, it makes someone guilty and it creates also the culture of violence and this creates the cycle of violence.

I want people to believe that the best way of changing human mind is through peacebuilding. To, to reach this this dream what I've done so far is I've introduced peacebuilding and the restorative justice model at Zambia correctional service staff training college. And they'll be teaching all the new recruits at the college, including what we call the in-service, meaning these are the officers who are already working in, in the service. They will be going to the college to have refresher courses in peacebuilding in creating peace clubs. And then when they go back to their facilities, they implement this program. We are also planning to open a resources center at the college and the MCC is willing to supply the college with the books in peacebuilding, in restorative justice and some resources for peace club in this resource center. It will be some form of a library, which will be just dedicated for peacebuilding. With these achievements with this strategy, we still believe that our dream will be real, and Zambia will move or shift completely from a punishment approach to correction approach; from violence to peace approach. It is very, very effective when you build from what is already there. People in conflict, people who are in trouble, they always have resources. And if you build from the resources that they have, it becomes very sustainable. Five years from now, even when I will not be around, Zambia correction service is capable to continue with this dream of peace today and forever.

**(Scott):** Issa, thank you so much for speaking with me today. The work you do is so important. Thanks for sharing.

**(Issa):** Thank you so much Scott.

**(Scott):** That was Issa Ebombolo MCC's national peacebuilding coordinator in Zambia and Malawi.

Next month, I'm speaking with Mike and Linda Shantz who were participants in an MCC learning tour to Palestine and Israel in 2019. They'll share how that trip shifted their perspective and understanding of the conflict in the region in profound ways.

If you had a chance to sit down with the Shantz's to ask them a question, what would you want to know? Send us your questions by email at [podcast@mcc.org](mailto:podcast@mcc.org) and we might feature your question on the show.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced by Elizabeth Miller-Derstine. And the head producer is Emily Loewen.

Thank you again to Issa Ebombolo for speaking with me. And a special thanks to Zebron Mwale and Mary Mweemba for sharing their story and Amanda Talstra for recording the interview with them.

If you like this podcast, it would be great if you could subscribe and rate it. And tell your friends to give us a listen!

A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.

Thanks and take good care.

*(MUSIC PLAYS US OUT)*