

# Committed to peace

6

Funding of 2016 summer retreat marks 25 years of Quaker support for peacebuilders in former Yugoslavia.

Ann Pfeiffer, Grants Programme Officer

How can we foster peace in a post-conflict environment? How can people be supported to transcend war and violence, and rebuild communities made up of individuals who were previously on opposing sides? These are questions that Quaker Peace & Social Witness (QPSW) peaceworkers in the former Yugoslavia sought to answer following the conflict in the region.

It's been over 25 years since QPSW began supporting peace work in this area. Initially this was just solidarity and small amounts of funding for local peace groups, but in 2002 the Dealing with the Past Programme was launched, with the aim of building a regional network of activists and groups committed to working towards truth and reconciliation. In 2008 we began a devolution process to gradually step back, and the Post Yugoslav Peace Link (PYPL) informal group was established as a means of continuing the Quaker connection with the now-independent peace organisations.

During the Dealing with the Past Programme an annual Summer Peace Retreat for peaceworkers from the different countries of former Yugoslavia was established. These local volunteers – who were working in an environment of trauma, grief and danger, often in very isolated circumstances – carried a heavy burden. They had not only experienced war, but were now working to transform the conflict that remained. The retreats give the peaceworkers the opportunity to gather together and engage with each other for internal renewal and spiritual replenishment. We have funded nine retreats since 2004, latterly through two QPSW Relief Grants.

Many of the people who have attended the peace retreats come from Bosnia Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, and are unpaid peace activists working for the healing of their communities in addition to any paid work that they might have. They come from a variety of religious backgrounds, cultures and conflict experience, which can

lead to challenging exchanges. As one participant commented: "It was a problem for me to get into discussions on issues with war veterans' points of view. That part drained my energy." But the value of this opportunity to recuperate is evident from many other comments: "[the] retreat brought me back to myself and has reminded me of the deepest values of my life, how important it is to look after myself so I could help others."

PYPL has helped local peacebuilders to keep the retreats going since Dealing with the Past was laid down, and more recently has embarked upon a training-the-trainer programme. Running alongside retreats, experienced facilitators will provide coaching and mentoring to help less-experienced colleagues develop the skills and knowledge required to deliver the retreats themselves.

Britain Yearly Meeting's support for the peace process has evolved over the years, with a reduction in direct involvement in favour of helping create a more sustainable, autonomous model, which will hopefully be able to continue as long as necessary. We know that our efforts have been valued by the participants. As one put it, "Thank you Quakers for supporting this project, thanks to God they haven't given up on retreats. There are still more people who need this."

*You can find out more about Quaker peace work in the former Yugoslavia by reading To trust a spark by Anne Bennett, available from the Quaker Centre Bookshop (020 7663 1030; [quakercentre@quaker.org.uk](mailto:quakercentre@quaker.org.uk)).*



Grožnjan in Croatia has been a location for peace retreats. Painting by Penny Robbins. Photo: Melissa Atkinson for BYM