

The role of the library in promoting peace

Bob McKee
Chief Executive
The Library Association (UK)

I am, by family origin, part English and part Irish. A few months ago I was in Northern Ireland at the opening of a new public library.

Everyone knows that Northern Ireland is a place of “troubles” – a place where social and economic and religious and political factors have combined over many years to create a deep and violent sectarian divide between people who inhabit the same country, the same community.

At the opening of the library in Northern Ireland I spoke about the role of libraries in a troubled society: about how libraries, by giving access to knowledge, can encourage better understanding between people of different origins and different opinions; about how libraries, by giving access to learning, can build up the capacity of people and communities and so can be a positive force for equality of opportunity, for personal development, for economic advancement, for social transformation – for those factors which form the preconditions for peace.

The United Nations understands these preconditions, these aspirations, which are set out in the UN Charter; and libraries – whether they are public libraries or libraries in schools and universities or libraries in corporations and institutions – can contribute to all of these aspirations.

In Britain we in the librarianship profession are working with government to promote the role of libraries in seeking to create a more inclusive society – a society which addresses the problems which cause people to feel excluded and alienated: problems like the lack of access to good educational opportunities and lack of access to meaningful employment; problems like poverty, illiteracy, poor health, poor standards of living.

Britain today is a nation uneasy with itself. The sectarian violence in Northern Ireland; the racial tension just below the surface of life in many communities which flares up into sporadic violence and disorder; the sense of being two nations, one relatively affluent and comfortable, and the other disaffected, disadvantaged, dangerous.

Britain is a developed nation; but it is also a divided society with a deep and widening division between those who have access to all the opportunities and advantages of life; and those who struggle against disadvantage and deprivation and despair.

Libraries have a role – in Britain and across the world – in bridging this divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged in our local and our global communities.

And a library can promote peace not just through the knowledge it contains, not just through the understanding it promotes, not just through the opportunities it provides – but also through the principles and processes it embodies.

The ethics of the profession of librarianship are built on those principles of integrity, impartiality and independence which were so important to Dag Hammarskjöld. He believed in seeking out “full and objective information”. We believe in providing access to full and objective information. We stand as librarians for freedom of access to information and freedom of expression - fundamental human rights espoused by the United Nations.

The Dag Hammarskjöld Library is an institutional member of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, and one of the core activities of IFLA is work to promote freedom of access to information and freedom of expression. Last year, after the events of September 11, IFLA issued a statement reaffirming the importance of free access to information in the context of the current troubled world situation. “A vital strategy in the campaign against terrorism,” states IFLA “is to safeguard the best access to information. Barriers to the free flow of information should be removed, especially those that promote inequality, poverty and despair.” Dag Hammarskjöld would have understood the importance of that statement because there cannot be genuine tolerance and coexistence between people – genuine social justice and equality – without the free flow of information and ideas. So it is entirely appropriate that the legacy of Dag Hammarskjöld is being carried forward through a library.

Just as our profession of librarianship stands for those principles of integrity, impartiality and independence, so our processes of librarianship embody the principles of equality and mutuality and interdependence. Libraries exist by sharing resources between people, between members of a community, for mutual benefit. Libraries are essentially communal, mutual, in their mission, their methods and their meaning. They foster independence of thought, and interdependence of action.

Later this year, in August, the annual IFLA Conference will mark the 75th Anniversary of IFLA and at the Conference IFLA will proclaim the *Glasgow Declaration on Libraries, Information Services and Intellectual Freedom*. I hope that a number of you will be there with me to hear that proclamation. Because it is through our commitment to intellectual freedom, through our processes of sharing resources and giving access to full and objective information, through our principles of integrity, mutuality, equality that librarians and libraries make a positive contribution to the preconditions for peace and understanding between people and between nations.

We must not overstate our case, and we must not underestimate our task. We celebrate today the 40th anniversary of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library and in Glasgow in August the 75th Anniversary of IFLA: but in Britain we also marked last month the 30th anniversary of Bloody Sunday when in 1972 British soldiers shot dead British civil rights marchers in the streets of Derry in Northern Ireland.

Across the world in all our nations and between our nations there is division, there is disadvantage, there is despair. Libraries and librarians will not, of themselves, achieve greater equality, reduce poverty, protect the environment, promote human rights, engender mutual respect between people of different views and backgrounds. But we can make our contribution – and it can be, I believe, a significant contribution.

The events of September 11 have changed our world in ways that we do not yet understand. In the context of September 11 and its aftermath we need more than ever greater understanding between peoples, greater understanding of what divides us and what binds us

together in our common humanity. In the context of September 11 we need a global investment in knowledge, in understanding, in dialogue, in the free flow of information; an investment in genuine internationalism and multilateral partnership, not an investment in unilateral power and new forms of imperialist supremacy. Winning the war against terrorism, countering the inequities of imperialism, delivering social justice and human rights, is much more to do with building libraries than with building military bases.

That is why it is so important that the UNESCO *Information for All* programme delivers real outcomes rather than simply developing well meaning policy statements. That is why it is so important that the British Council recognises the value of the library service it provides in many developing countries. That is why we must use opportunities like today to speak out for the importance of investment in library service.

As we honour Dag Hammarskjöld and his legacy today we must as librarians be as steadfast as Dag Hammarskjöld himself would be in our commitment to intellectual freedom, to democratic values, to universal civil rights as we work to bridge the divisions in our society, to promote equality and opportunity and understanding in our society and – by doing so – to make our contribution to the preconditions for peace in our society. Thank you.