

Article 15: Following the Lead of Young People

Who leads?

I hadn't particularly been drawn to working with young people. Yet in 2009 I found myself with a request to support a group who were organizing an international conference in Caux, Switzerland. This was part of the conference season of 'Initiatives of Change' (IofC) – a global not-for-profit organization and community dedicated to forging peace between communities in conflict. IofC's philosophy and deeply held principles have enabled it to make a leading contribution in healing and reconciliation, for example between Jews and Germans after the 2nd world war, and now across many parts of the warring world. The efficacy of its work has earned it special consultative status with the UN. Leaders indeed.

The conference I was supporting was called 'Leading Change for a Sustainable World' and it was only once I arrived in Caux that I realized that the organizing group was, bar one, constituted entirely of young people. This vibrant, passionate team came from countries across the northern and southern hemispheres and through the theme of our conference, they brought a significant challenge to IofC: raising questions about the environmental impact of all its conferences and also for how the Mountain House (the conference venue) is run. It's green credentials, were found wanting. So here, young people were showing leadership by bringing into focus a critical global concern that their elders had not yet fully acknowledged nor embraced. This young team raised a new standard: for IofC to embrace and demonstrate a commitment to minimizing its ecological footprint and to bring this attention into the mainstream agenda. It can be seen as a mark of progress that our theme from last year has been integrated into one of IofC's main 2011 conferences: 'Trust and Integrity in a Global Economy'.

Who teaches? Who learns?

As so often happens, what we think we are getting into doesn't always unfold in the ways we either anticipate or expect. I went to Caux last year having been invited to hold a daily 20-30min session throughout the 6-day conference. I was invited by a young woman who had heard about my work with community leaders in an ethnically diverse community in Trafford. She believed there was something I could bring about personal leadership. And I have to admit (rather shamefacedly) to having gone with a slightly self-congratulatory stance about having been invited. Ah the battles with ego!

From the moment I arrived in Caux, I realized I had a bucket-load of learning to do; tuning into all that IofC stands for; what the conference really was about; who these young people were; how to communicate effectively and sensitively with many who did not have English as a first language. Their leadership became an invitation for me to learn!

As the days progressed I became ever more touched and impressed by the commitment, dedication and passion of the leading team. I began to see that my role and contribution needed to adapt to what I was bearing witness to. These young people had moments of struggle that intensified the longer the conference went on. For me it was a real lesson in paying attention and sensing when or indeed if I should bring something else into the mix. There were two occasions when I stepped strongly into advocating on their behalf. When working with others, moments like this are tricky because there is always a balancing act - wanting to maintain a context in which they recognize and grow in their power and capacity and yet also seeing that at times, they might need someone else to step in when their struggle becomes too much and they are in danger of tipping over the edge. In one instance, my timing was true; and in another I realized that I had missed earlier warning signals and so my intervention came, possibly too late – I became their advocate and champion when someone judged them harshly and in my view, unfairly about some things that did not go so well in the conference. In that moment, I knew that I wanted to continue working with them. I became a convert not only to working with young people but also to IofC.

It is a year on and I have played a different role over the last 12 months in the lead up to this year's event. From 1st-10th August I'll be back in Caux continuing the journey I began with them all last year – following their lead; supporting where I can and learning from them along the way.

To find out more about IofC: <http://www.iofc.org/iofc-international>

<http://www.caux.iofc.org/en/2011-programme>

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