

Westminster working for peace
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In September 2002, Westminster established a partner city program with Paide, Estonia. In the past, Westminster has had several informal sister city relationships, most notably with Westminster, England, and Westminster, Colorado.

However, since the Paide partnership was established, the local efforts of our community have been touted as one of the most successful and productive grassroots, community efforts promoting peace, understanding, economic development and multi-national friendship building in the world.

Westminster's interest in creating a relationship with Paide grew from a program called "Partners for Peace," a former military program that began in 1991 to help Estonia to become a democracy. The program, headed by the Army National Guard, developed into a partner-city program in 1993.

The history of Westminster's current pursuit for lasting peace in the world may be, in part, as a result of the efforts of the Ira and Mary Zepp Center for Nonviolence and Peace Education, a program of Common Ground on the Hill, a nonprofit organization that brings different people together through traditional arts and music at McDaniel College.

The Zepp Center continues the American tradition of nonviolent problem solving associated with Martin Luther King, Jr. Ira and Mary Zepp have had a long association with McDaniel College and with the promotion of justice by peaceful means. The Zepp Center is directed and staffed by Drs. Pam Zappardino and Charlie Collyer.

For those unfamiliar with Estonia, it is one of the Baltic States in Northern Europe, situated on the Baltic Sea, just south of Finland. Adjacent to the east is Russia and Latvia is on the southern border. One reason Estonia was chosen as Maryland's "Partners for Peace" partner in the original 1991 NATO mandate is that it is approximately the same size and has similar geographic diversity as Maryland.

In addition to the Westminster Paide partnership, there are nine other Maryland partner city communities including Annapolis and Tallinn, and Ocean City and Parnu. These municipalities are engaging in a variety of activities to further good relations.

All too often, the business of peace-making and nonviolent approaches to potential conflict is left to "someone else." Protesting for peace is a cherished American right, for which men and women have made the ultimate sacrifice. After armed conflict erupts and the lives of young men and women in uniform

begin to be sacrificed; it is relatively easy to exercise one's rights and freedoms to stand out on a street corner and demonstrate for peace.

The hard part is to go beyond the rhetoric, melodramatic exercises and pithy slogans and put oneself on the front lines of preventing armed conflict by reaching out to former enemies in order to win over their hearts and minds – before violence erupts.

The world must never forget the horrors perpetrated upon humanity by the Soviet empire and World War II Germany. The history of Estonia under hundreds of years of Russian dominance, the twentieth century oppression of the Soviets and the bootjack of Nazi Germany is replete with unimaginable death, destruction and oppression.

How are we going to make a positive influence with former enemies, if we ostracize them? The real secret to lasting world peace is accountability and forgiveness. Unless we all learn to let go of our pain and hurts, and forgive, the world will continue to be a time bomb waiting to explode.

Dr. Zappardino and Dr. Collyer emphasize that nonviolence can be helpful even if it is not done perfectly. The idea that you have to be pure and perfect to be nonviolent is just plain wrong.

As Westminster has come to understand that we are no longer an island; Westminster has stepped up to take a leadership role in the global arena and has taken a stand for freedom, nonviolence, democracy and peace in another country. For this we can all be quite proud.

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