The possible long-term consequences of violence must be conveyed to people on all sides of a dispute despite differences in language, faith, ethnicity, or politics. "Because of his rich practical experience in many conflict settings and peace-building processes, John Paul is firmly rooted in both practice and theory," Wachira says. "His ability to commute seamlessly between these two worlds serves him well."

Lederach grew up in Oregon and received a PhD in sociology at the University of Colorado. He founded the conflict transformation program at Eastern Mennonite before moving to Notre Dame. He has written dozens of books and scholarly articles on ending conflicts, including the recent "When Blood and Bones Cry Out: Journeys Through the Soundscape of Healing and Reconciliation" (University of Queensland Press), with his daughter, Angela. "He is a very modest guy, but I've encountered Lederach's writing in academic programs in Central America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East," says Brian Polkinghorn, executive director of the Center for Conflict Resolution at Salisbury (Md.) University. "Works ... that he wrote 15 years ago or more continue to inspire and educate students and practitioners of peace today."

Why humans fight is a complex topic and no one definition of peacemaking has emerged. One thing Lederach has noticed is that societies often expect concrete results—a treaty signed or brutality forgiven—far sooner than is practical. "Quite often, the view of what can be accomplished is on far too short a time frame, by my view," Lederach says. Conflicts that have been going on a decade or a generation may take decades to resolve, he says.

In 2003, he began working in Nepal with the McConnell Foundation of Redding, Calif., as that country struggled toward democracy following violence between Maoist groups and a government organized as a monarchy.

Lederach has developed his emphasis on long-term resolutions in places with deep historical disputes, such as Somalia, Northern Ireland, and the Basque region of Spain. "John Paul examines any given conflict through a lens that allows us to ask: How do we address the torn or absent relationships caused by this conflict? If you ignore the human cost and suffering caused by cycles of deadly violence, they will continue to recur," says Scott Appleby, director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame.

Lederach concedes that some groups are skeptical that nonviolent means will satisfy them. And victims can be frustrated if their former attackers are not held accountable for their acts. Rebel groups often believe that the only path to legitimacy is armed violence. "You can be criticized on one side as being too lenient with armed groups, and you can be criticized by armed groups of having too much of an idealistic viewpoint," Lederach says. "I say it may be idealistic, but peace is the most significant thing that we as a human community have to find a way to create."