Issues that contribute to the conversations about the connections between religion, peace, and conflict are clearly complex. The majority of discussions on this topic have been conducted at the theoretical, meta-level as scholars debate the "concept" of peace and the roles religion can play in conflict and the search for peace. The paper suggests it may be more rewarding to study specific communities where conflict has been resolved and community has been enabled than to engage in yet another theoretical construction of the nature of peace. Using a "postmodern hermeneutical theology" as the form of analysis, the paper investigates ways the arts have been used in three very diverse international communities as a means of giving voice, identity, and value to those who have traditionally been at the "margins" of society. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program has engaged in community organization as well as artistic activity to transform gang-ridden and graffiti-spoiled neighborhoods with expressive, meaning-filled murals. The "Mother's Clubs" of Lima, Peru's slum area known as the Pamplona Alta have transformed incredibly poor, voiceless women into persons of worth and dignity through the production of colorful three-dimensional fabric art called cuadros and arpilleras. And a non-scripted, improvisational approach to theatre called "Playback Theatre" has given attention to the stories brought by members of the audience as means of experiencing truth, grace, and redemption around the world. These three examples each illustrate the claims of postmodern hermeneutical theology that it is in the small, local, personal experience of peacemaking and the practices of redemption that peace can overcome conflict.
My experience with the arts has convinced me that the arts have a power to transform persons and communities in ways our more typical scientific and assessment-centered approaches to problem-solving cannot. As Jo Salas, one of the founders of "Playback Theatre," has said, "The arts weave our lives with others, not only our contemporaries but our forebears. Through the arts we find and communicate meaning, reassurance, healing, vision: we move toward fulfilling ourselves, individually and as a society." (Salas 2007, 10).