

Chapter 2

In the Name of Christ: The Churches as Communities and Agents of Peace building

“O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will, but also those of ill will. But do not remember all the suffering they have inflicted on us; remember the fruits we have brought, thanks to this suffering - our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, our courage, our generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of all this, and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits which we have borne be their forgiveness.”

This prayer by an unknown prisoner in the concentration camp near Ravensbruck/Germany was left beside the body of a dead child.

The Nature and Mission of the Church

“The Church is the communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God, who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response; it is the communion of the faithful“(§10).¹

46. The Church is a gift from God, who has sent the Son and the Spirit among us. As such, it is a divine reality, a creation of both the Word and the Spirit (§11, §13). Made up of finite persons who are sinful and redeemed, it is a human reality as well. The New Testament does not give us a systematic theology of the Church, but offers up a host of metaphors and images that try to evoke the reality of the Church, at once both earthly and transcendent. Among the most striking images are the Church as the People of God, the “People of the Way” on the move through history toward history’s consummation of all things in Christ; as the Body of Christ, the living presence of the Word among us; as the Temple of the Holy Spirit, where the holiness of God dwells on earth; and as communion, mirroring the communion of the Persons in the Holy Trinity (§19-24).

47. As a creation of the Word and the Spirit, the Church participates in their mission to bring all creation into communion with the Triune God. “The Church exists...to serve the reconciliation of humankind” (§33). “The Church is called to heal and reconcile broken relationships and to be God’s instrument in the reconciliation of human division in the world” (§40).

48. The Church is “sign and instrument of God’s intention and plan for the whole world” (§43). It is meant to be a prophetic sign, pointing beyond itself to the *missio Dei*, to what God is doing in the world. As an instrument of God, the Church exercises a ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to it by God in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:18). At the same time the Church is also *mysterion* or sacrament—a sacrament of the world in holding up the eschatological hope that manifests God’s reconciling design for the world, and a sacrament of the divine presence and mission in the world as the Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit.

49. We saw in Chapter 1 that the Church is also the house or *oikos* of God, where the harmonious relations between the Persons of the Trinity are to be mirrored in the relations that should prevail among all members of the Church. Christians are keenly aware how far they often are from realizing this communion with one another and with the Trinity. Yet that acute awareness of how they have fallen short should lead them to repentance and to seeking anew God’s energizing grace to draw closer to that destiny to which they are called.

The Vocation and Ministry of Peace-building in the Churches

50. Peace is a gift of God. The churches’ responding to that gift reveals their vocation to be peace-builders in the *missio Dei*. As sign, instrument and sacrament of God’s intention and plan for the world, one can see different dimensions of the peace-building vocation of the churches.

¹ Faith and Order Commission, “The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement” (Faith and Order Papers no. 198; published in 2005). Paragraph references hereafter in this section are to this document.

51. At the same time, the churches have often mistaken their participation in the reconciling *missio Dei* for a narrow ecclesiocentric agenda of aggressive proselytizing and an arrogant destruction of cultures. Arrogance here needs to be replaced with repentance, and with a refocusing upon what God is doing in the world rather than on what the immediate benefit to the churches might appear to be.

The Church as Sacrament of Peace

52. At its most fundamental level, the Church is a sacrament. That sacramental character is centred in its being a sacrament of the Trinity: the Creator's sending the Word and the Spirit into the World, and God's reconciling the world through Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit. This fundamental fact is represented and re-presented in the liturgy, especially the celebration of the Eucharist. The liturgy is an act of memory of what God has already done for us in Christ's Incarnation, life, death and resurrection. It is also the window on the eschatological hope of the bringing together of all things in Christ that has been promised to us. This ritual act - where sin is confessed and forgiven, where God's Word is once again heard, where praise of God recalls God's great works, where the needs and the suffering of the present are commended to God, and where the Great Thanksgiving is enacted and shared in the banquet of Christ's presence in our midst - this ritual action draws us back into the Trinitarian life itself, that Life which is the beginning and end of true peace. In the Divine Liturgy as celebrated by the Orthodox churches, peace is named („the peace from on high“, „peace for the whole world“) and extended to one another again and again. The sharing or passing of the peace is a common ritual feature in many of the Churches. And the injunction to go forth from the Eucharist in the peace of God is a mandate to carry God's peace into the world. So the Eucharistic benediction of the Syrian Orthodox Church says: "Go in peace, our brethren and our beloved ones, as we commend you to the grace and mercy of the Holy and glorious Trinity, with the provisions and blessings which you have received from the altar of the Lord." This carrying forth of God's peace into the world is what Orthodox theologians have called „the liturgy after the liturgy“ and Roman Catholic theologians „the liturgy of the world“. Such expressions remind us that the liturgy and the world are not separate entities. They are both enfolded in God's design for creation.

53. The liturgy, then, is the source and font of peace from which the Church lives, and which it in turn seeks to extend into the world. Indeed, the only peace that it can offer is that peace that has been given to it in trust by God. The mystery of peace - in both senses of the term „mystery“ as at once surpassing our understanding (Phil 4:7) and a *mysterion* that leads us along a pathway of transformation and illumination - is what the Church is enjoined to transmit to the world, despite all the Church's shortcomings and failures to do this adequately.

54. The sacramental character of that peace - a manifestation of peace that points not to itself, but to the peace that emanates from the loving relationships of the Persons of the Trinity - is to be lived out in the lives of individuals, in families, and in communities. Its manifestation in all those places is always limited and subject to the perversities of the human heart but, as imperfect as it may be, it is offered to others and to the world as an invitation to enter into the peace of God.

55. That the Church is a sacrament of God's peace is the source of its being able to be a prophetic sign and instrument of God's peace in the world.

The Churches as Prophetic Sign in Peace-building

56. As a prophetic sign, the churches are called to speak out against injustice and to advocate peace. In the denunciation of injustice, in the solidarity with those who are oppressed, and in the accompaniment of victims, the churches participate in the *missio Dei* of mending the world and bringing it toward the "new creation" of the reconciled (cf. 2 Cor 5:17). By preaching Christ crucified and risen, they show the pathway through rejection and suffering to transformation in the newness of life. How the churches choose to live in the world, and where they draw the line in the face of violence is part of that prophetic witness. Here the historic peace churches play a particularly important role. Refusing to condone violence, and following a way of non-violence indicate how

Christians are to respond to a world replete with violence. Jesus met his own violent death with non-violence, and his way remains the model for Christians to follow in overcoming violence.

57. To be a prophetic sign of peace in a violent world takes commitment, courage and consistency. These are virtues that the churches have not always displayed in the face of violence. Here the churches must confess their sin if they are to be credible vessels of the prophetic message of peace. Churches have at times allied themselves so closely with violent policies that they have legitimated them. When the churches have embraced the banner of nationalism or ethnicity and have blessed the oppression and extermination of “enemies”, they have wandered away from their true purposes. When they have adopted violent apocalyptic beliefs that legitimate violence as a way of cleansing the world or as a purported instrument of the wrath of God, they have betrayed the vocation God has given them. When they have casually turned away from suffering, either to seek or protect their own prosperity or not to get “involved”, they are like those who left the wounded man in the ditch (Lk 10:31-32). And the very disunity on central elements of identity within the churches themselves - such as witness to the sacraments - has undermined the churches’ credibility to others as true signs of peace. Churches must be ready constantly to examine their actions - and their inaction - in the vocation of peace-building to see if they can serve as credible voices for God’s work in the world. They must repent and seek forgiveness, not only to make themselves worthy vessels of God’s work but also, as a prophetic sign, of what wrongdoers must come to do as well if they are to enter God’s Reign. To that end, the service or *diakonia* of the churches must show the disinterestedness in self, the willingness to embrace vulnerability, and the unwavering commitment to the poor and marginalized that marked the ministry of Christ. It is in such *diakonia* that the churches’ witness as prophetic sign of the peace of God gains credibility.

The Churches as Instruments of Peace-building

58. The churches are also called to be instruments of God’s purposes in the world. That calls them to very concrete actions in the service of peace-building. In the medieval Western church, the just war theory was developed as a way of trying to curb the predatory activity of a warrior class. Proclaiming the “Peace of God” (“*Treuga Dei*”) as days on which fighting could not take place was another way of containing violence. The understanding of the church building as sanctuary, where violence could not be perpetrated is yet another.

59. A common way of speaking about peace-building today is to see specific tasks in pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict situations. These tasks can be seen in the light of the vocation to peace-building as well. The meaning of conflict here focuses upon armed and violent conflict. There are social conflicts - such as those that arise between individuals and within or among communities - that are nodes of tension that may form around deeply held values. Such conflict is not something that needs to be avoided or repressed, but is rather an invitation to grow in one’s humanity and in human relationships. These kinds of conflict must be engaged. What follows here will focus rather on armed, violent conflicts.

60. In the pre-conflict situation, the tasks of peace-building are especially aimed at preventing violent conflict and at making peace education possible. The churches have important roles in both of these. Violent conflict can be prevented if attention is drawn in a timely and consistent fashion to oppressive and unjust structures and practices that build the resentment that leads to violent confrontation. Religious leaders must also draw attention to and deflate ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and the demonization of outsiders as ways of fuelling passion against those different from the people they serve. In that process rumour control and dampening inflammatory rhetoric in the media and on the streets are of crucial importance. Debunking ideological twisting of Christian teachings (such as: suicide bombers claiming to be “martyrs” or erroneous claims to have discerned “God’s will”), and the use of Christian faith to legitimate aggression against those of other faiths must be confronted head on.

61. Education for peace is more than mere instruction in the strategies of work for peace. It is a profoundly spiritual formation of character that happens over a long period of time. Growth in the biblical understanding of peace, learning about the temptations that lead people away from peace into violence, examining our narratives about how we describe to ourselves those who may be our

potential enemies, learning to engage in practices of peace (especially for children and adolescents), learning to care for the earth as a way of cultivating peace, and making prayer for peace a prominent part of our worship: all of these things promote peace. Peace education is not simply acquiring certain items of knowledge; it is about formation of character and building reflexes into behaviour that will respond non-violently in the face of provocation.

62. Peace education needs to be part of religious instruction in the churches at all levels. It needs to begin with children, but must be extended to adolescents and adults as well. The formation to be agents of peace begins by looking to models of those already engaged in peace-building. For children, parents must be the first agents of peace they encounter, who serve as signs of peace not only in what they say, but in what they do. As children grow and mature into themselves being agents of peace, the churches must provide space, encouragement, and active support in this formation. That involves introspection of all members of the church, into how their choices, their actions, and their lifestyles do or do not make them servants of peace. It means also giving special support to those who have special gifts for promoting specific pathways of peace - for these are gifts of the Spirit of Peace within the churches and for the sake of the world. Some will have distinct capacities for accompanying victims of violence; others, for settling disputes; still others, for caring for the earth.

63. When people find themselves in the midst of violent conflict itself, peace-building has two tasks: protection and mediation. The responsibility to protect those directly endangered by conflict has begun to receive greater attention than in the past. It is something that women in conflict situations have known for a long time, since it usually falls to them to protect the young, the aged, and the ill. Churches need to explore how networks of congregations can become havens of protection in the face of violence. This needs to involve not only armed violence or urban violence, but must include domestic violence as well. Churches that sponsor emergency relief agencies must be prepared especially to engage in the work of protecting most openly those exposed to harm and abuse.

64. Mediation of armed conflict is an important and often delicate task that can fall to the churches. It can take place at various levels. At the grassroots levels local leaders, both lay and ordained, are called upon to interpret the insights and perceptions of their congregations to those involved in the mediation process. Regional and national leadership of churches may be called upon to serve in mediating roles, especially in settings where Christians are in the majority or effective interfaith councils are in place. Here respect for the spiritual and moral integrity of the churches, focused now in their leadership, can be a significant player in ending conflict. Such positioning is often delicate, a balance between gaining and maintaining the trust of the parties on the one hand, and maintaining the perceived disinterestedness that makes mediation possible on the other. Especially in civil conflicts when all other social institutions have been discredited or destroyed, churches may be called upon as the sole surviving institution with enough credibility to be able to speak on behalf of the people.

65. The post-conflict situation serves up a host of tasks for the churches as peace-builders: truth telling, pursuit of various kinds of justice, helping bring about forgiveness, and longer-term reconciliation all figure into the agenda.

66. Getting at the truth about what happened during the conflict and what were its causes is often an important step in the building of peace after overt conflict. The churches have been called upon in a number of instances in recent years to take leadership roles in truth-telling processes. Truth telling is important in the rehabilitation of those who had been deemed enemies by a powerful state, but especially in allowing victims (or their surviving families) to tell their stories and witness to the pain and loss they have endured. Truth telling can be an important part of establishing a new regime of accountability and transparency where oppressive ideologies, arbitrariness and secrecy have prevailed. Truth telling is a many-sided and delicate process that, in deeply wounded societies, may not always be possible or even advisable. But without truth (not just in the sense of veracity, but also in the Biblical sense of trustworthiness and reliability), a new society cannot build on a firm foundation.

67. For the churches to accompany truth-telling processes, they must first be able to tell the truth about themselves. Dietrich Bonhoeffer imposed a discipline of daily confession of sins on the

students in the Confessing Church's seminary at Finkenwalde because, as he said, how can we hope to recognize the lies all around us if we cannot speak the truth about ourselves? The churches, thus, need to exercise a spiritual discipline about and within themselves if they hope to aid others in doing so.

68. Of the different forms of justice in which the churches may engage in the peace-building process, restorative justice and advocacy for structural justice stand out especially. In restorative justice, focus is upon the victims' rehabilitation. (In punitive or retributive justice, focus is upon the wrongdoers; this should be the prerogative of the legitimate state.) Special care for victims is the natural expression of the work of God that focuses upon those who have been marginalized. As its name suggests, restorative justice seeks what has been wrested away from the victim in terms of material goods, but also the restoration of their human dignity.

69. Structural justice, the changing of those structures of society that have contributed to injustice and the conflict that has arisen, is often necessary to assure that conflict does not happen again. As a moral voice, the churches are called upon to advocate for these structural changes and have them embedded in the legal system of the land. Writing new constitutions, developing the policies of political parties and governments, and seeing to enactment of the structural changes are part of the work that will lead to a lasting peace.

70. Promoting forgiveness, at both the personal and the social levels, is a task pre-eminently suited to the churches. The teachings on forgiveness central to Jesus' own preaching and ministry form the basis for this. Forgiveness, as it is also for peace, is a gift of God. Without forgiveness, there is no way of coming free from the past. Christian forgiveness is not cheap forgiveness, but a change of heart and perception that allows for a different kind of future. Forgiveness does not erase the past but remembers the past in a different way. Moreover, forgiveness can help create the social space in which wrongdoers may be able to come to forgiveness. Promoting forgiveness, accompanying people on the long road to forgiveness, and providing a public ritual framework where especially social forgiveness can be enacted are all things that fall especially to the churches. To the extent the churches can live up to the praxis of Jesus, they can be effective instruments of God's forgiveness.

71. Along the path to forgiveness, the healing of memories is of special significance. The healing of memories aims at being able to remember the past in a different way that will make forgiveness especially possible. Here the accompaniment of victims by the churches, of finding a way through their suffering by looking to the sufferings of Christ, is one of the most important ways of serving the *missio Dei* in the reconciliation of all creation.

72. Reconciliation is both a process and a goal. The process is likely to entail exercises of truth telling, the pursuit of justice, the healing of memories, and the extending of forgiveness. Individual forgiveness focuses upon the restoring of the humanity of the victim in the image and likeness of God. Social reconciliation may focus upon healing the memories or building a common future together: it may involve making sure that the deeds of the past cannot happen again, or building an alternate future. Whenever reconciliation is achieved, the experience of it as a gift of free grace from God can be the most moving and effective way of speaking about God's design for the world, of how the world is being drawn back into God, its Creator.

73. As instruments of God's peace, the churches are indeed vessels of clay. When peace does occur, it becomes clear that "the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7). But it is usually also clear that, in most instances of conflict, the churches do not live up to their great and challenging vocation. Particularly in conflicts that happen within countries rather than between them, churches will find themselves to have been complicit in many different ways. At times church leadership will have failed to speak out against injustice or have even blessed the violence that occurred. Members of the churches are likely to find themselves on both sides of the divide. In long-standing oppressive regimes, there will be those in the churches' ranks - both as leaders and as members - who have been hidden accomplices in maintaining the oppression by spying upon others or regularly reporting their actions. Some have done this out of fear; others may have been forced or blackmailed into it. Unless the churches have thrown themselves completely into siding with and abetting the aggression, they may still have some role in the post-conflict peace-building process. At the very least, they can model the repentance that will be needed in the wider society. More often,

especially in the case of protracted conflicts where everyone at one point or another has been both victim and wrongdoer, they mirror the ambivalences that evil and violence create. They might be able both to accept punishment but also advocate forbearance in a situation where no one's hands have been utterly clean.

The Spiritual Practices of Peace

74. Peace is not simply assenting to a set of ideas about God's design for the world. To be agents of God's peace requires putting on the mind that was in Christ Jesus (cf. Phil 2:5): the emptying of self, the embracing of vulnerability, the walking with the wounded which marked the Second Person of the Trinity's entry into our world. It requires being led by the Holy Spirit in the healing and sanctifying of the world. The Incarnation and the sending of the Holy Spirit are an extension of the embrace of the *periochosis* of the Trinity to enfold into itself those who have been broken by sin, oppression, and injustice. In order to have that mind of Christ, peace-building requires entering regularly and deeply into communion with the Triune God, along the ways that Christ has set out for us. It is that presence in God that makes it possible for us to come to discern God's working in our world. It allows us to see those glimmerings of grace that may come to flash forth the love of God that heals and reconciles.

75. Putting on the mind of Christ, being formed in Christ, involves spiritual practices and disciplines that embody peace in our own bodies:

- making prayers of intercession as part of our mindfulness of being formed in Christ;
- seeking and extending forgiveness, so as to create truthfulness in ourselves and to forge the space for others who need to seek repentance;
- washing one another's feet, so as to learn the ways of service;
- engaging in times of fasting, to review our patterns of consumption and relationships to one another and to the earth;
- consistent and sustained acts of caring for others, especially those most in need of healing, liberation, and reconciliation;
- consistent and sustained acts of caring for the earth;
- communal acts of worship in order to be nourished by God's Word and by the Eucharist.

76. Peace is not just a view of life. It is also a way of life. In a world beset by violence and threatened by all kinds of destabilizing forces, it means cultivating a spiritual posture, a spirituality. By spirituality is not meant a pick-and-choose of preferred elements to craft a unique or distinctive lifestyle. Spirituality here means deepening a mind-set and engaging in those spiritual practices, especially communal ones, that lead one deeper into the mystery of Christ.

77. An important task of this spirituality is sustaining hope. Building peace is often an arduous task, marked by disappointments, failures, and setbacks. How do we find the reserves of strength to remain faithful and to keep forging on in the midst of adversity? Hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism is our assessment of how we can change the present and forge the future by dint of our own resources and strengths. Hope, on the other hand, is something that comes from God, who is the author of peace and the One who brings about reconciliation. Hope is something that we discover, drawing us forward into the mystery of peace. It manifests itself at times in unexpected places and in surprising ways. It can be perceived thanks to our communion with God - glimmerings of grace in the midst of adversity, acts of kindness in the face of ruthless self-seeking, moments of gentleness in the hardness of relentless aggression.

78. A spirituality is something that agents of peace share, a web of practices and attitudes that bind a community together. In its own finite way, a spirituality mirrors the relationships of Trinitarian life - sustaining, transforming, and sanctifying a broken world.

Questions:

What are the ways in which your church engages in peace education for all its members, especially the children and young people?

Can you share successful projects and experiences which would be helpful for other churches?

In which ways have you become involved in peace building ministries? Can you give us examples?

In which ways are you expressing the calling of the churches to care for creation? Does it have an impact on the theological training of your ministers and on the management of your buildings?