

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN A BROKEN WORLD

A Statement on Peace Building by the Participants of the Seminar
“Religions: Instruments of Peace or Causes of Conflicts?”

World Council of Churches – Ecumenical Institute Bossey – 11-16 May 2008

What Brings Us Together: Stories of Pain and Hope

The Bossey International Seminar on “Religions: Instruments of Peace or Causes of Conflicts?” brought together participants from various countries and regions of the globe, representing contexts in which violence has sadly become a daily reality. It is through listening to the narratives of pain caused by these violent conflicts among the civil populations that a particularly rich learning process was initiated.

We learned from our Sudanese brothers how the loss of millions of people due to violent clashes, internal displacement, uneven distribution of resources and power, as well as the marginalisation of people on ethnical grounds, affected the most vulnerable, namely people of African descent, but also the societal tissue of the nation as a whole.

Our fellow participant from Palestine raised our awareness for the human tragedy behind the ongoing demolition of hundreds of Palestinian homes by the Israeli military. He stressed the importance of underlining the disastrous effects of these actions that put people’s lives, especially those of the children, the old and the sick, and the cohesion of the entire society at risk. However, in the midst of the destruction, demolished houses become not only a sign of pain and suffering but also of experienced solidarity and hope, when some of the brave Israeli citizens stand up against the occupation and show their compassion with the Palestinians, or when Ecumenical Accompaniers help the affected families in many practical ways to rebuild their homes.

In Rwanda and Burundi, two African countries that have encountered similar painful experiences in a longstanding period of genocide, the traumas of the past can be felt until the present day. The atrocities perpetrated along ethnic divides which have been utilized to fuel contemporary conflicts have left people with wounds that refuse to heal easily. Families have been destroyed: mothers, fathers, and children severely injured, raped or murdered. Millions of people were either killed or forced into exile or internally displaced. The bereavement over the loss of dear ones through human brutality, the loss of land as well as the difficulties resulting from the displacement - access to education, health structures, etc. - and, above all, the loss of mutual trust constitute continuous challenges for the national healing and reconstruction process, in which the implementation of the Peace Agreement and the contribution of all forces of good will to a good governance represent glimpses of hope.

The situation of Dalits, as members of the lowest social strata in India, is marked by the immense physical and structural violence in their daily lives. It is an undeniable fact that the religious traditions in which the caste system is embedded inculcate images of cultic impurity and social inferiority which remain deeply enrooted in people’s minds contributing to denigrating notions of and views on others. Against the internalization of these images and a

not infrequent perpetuation of these even within Christian communities, the Gospel sets the liberating message of Christ and empowers the Dalits to overcome social indifference and political irresponsibility, as well as to deconstruct religion in the way it has been utilized as an instrument to dominate and violently oppress people.

Many other stories have been told from Botswana, Peru, Belarus, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada and other parts of the world represented at the seminar. Some of these reflected unspeakable atrocities and human degradation. Others remained untold. It is in this space between the outspoken and the muteness of what makes our life at times unbearable that we discover a rich potentiality – small seeds of hope – which sustains us in our search for the construction of less violent and more just, peaceful and reconciled communities. Within such a spirit of hope we focus on the following issues:

1. The Life of Discipleship

1.1. Ubuntu

We are drawn to the African concept of *Ubuntu* (humanness), which Desmond Tutu has described in the following terms:

“A person with **ubuntu** is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole, and is diminished when others are humiliated, or when others are tortured or oppressed.”

That means seeing life through the eyes of others – which leads to tolerance and understanding – and being aware that we are fully ourselves only in relation to other people. We are indeed ‘bound together in the bundle of life’.

Ubuntu, and the particular experience of humanness to which it refers, belongs to a fast disappearing traditional way of life which is not easy to be recaptured. We therefore need to discover appropriate forms of community which will serve the needs of people living in the modern world. Christians, in particular, will want to build small reconciling and healing communities, where people are valued and accepted as they are, but where each member is encouraged to achieve his/her full potential: to become ‘what they have it within them to become’.

As people of faith, we further believe, with George Fox, that there is ‘that of God in every person’. The likeness may be distorted, or marred, but the family resemblance remains – in *every* human being. We believe that Fox’s insight must have a profound effect on the way we treat other people, especially the marginalised. With Jacob, reconciled to his long-lost brother Esau, we want to say to our brothers and sisters: ‘to see your face, is like seeing the face of God’ (Genesis 33:10). We affirm the Biblical tradition which sees God drawing near to people in and through other people, especially people in need. We think in particular of the story of Abraham, who offered hospitality to passing strangers and, who in doing so, ‘entertained angels unawares’ (Hebrews 13:2).

1.2. Christian Discipleship

We see Christian discipleship primarily as a matter of following in the footsteps of Jesus. In our troubled and violent times, that means following Jesus’ example of non-violent symbolic

and - sometimes – direct action, as we name and shame the principalities and powers which hold human life in thrall, stand in solidarity with the oppressed, refuse to allow our differences to become divisions, and bear witness in our life together to the possibility of peace and reconciliation among disparate people.

2. Living as Peacemakers in the World

We live in a violent and stressful world. A lot of violence is generated when people are not able to control their thoughts and actions and recognize their fragility and weak spots. Violence also arises from weak inter-personal relations in the family and community and due to the inability to communicate carefully with each other. It also comes from a lack of awareness on the causes of violence and on account of the complicity with those few who hold the power.

To live as peacemakers requires the strengthening of the spiritual lives by prayer, bible study, and worship in order to connect with Jesus Christ who is the giver of peace and to realize that apart from Christ we can do nothing. Our ethical principle is derived from the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ to love one another, even one's enemies. Every human being is our neighbour who deserves respect and equal dignity. To love our neighbour also means identifying commonalities in our various religious traditions and being bold to name principalities and powers that promote arms sales, aggressive development and destruction of creation.

There are many examples from our churches and throughout the world where peacemaking is happening. The Executive Committee of the National Council of Churches of **Australia** recently supported the statement of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches and the United Nations' campaign for a legally binding international treaty to ban the production and use of cluster munitions. These weapons have wounded and killed a lot of innocent people causing untold suffering, loss and hardship in more than 35 countries and subsequently continue to drastically destroy the lives of many for years as a result of lethal contamination.

In the **Philippines**, the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform, composed of leaders from the Roman Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical Churches, is working together with the Norwegian Ecumenical Peace Platform of the Council of Churches of Norway to encourage the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the National Democratic Front to return to the negotiating table to talk peace and to stop extrajudicial killings.

The Church of **Norway**, in partnership with the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in **Brazil**, is investigating the aggressive development promoted by Norwegian companies engaged in papermaking that uproots a rich variety of trees in order to grow eucalyptus trees in indigenous peoples' areas.

The Protestant community of deaconesses in **Rwanda** is contributing to make peace through the care of orphans of the genocide and the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda continues to contribute in their own way in this effort of peace building through the formation of pastors, their spouses, and members of the community to learn to live together in peace.

There are also other churches that are actively denouncing injustice through peace marches like the example of the Roman Catholic Church in **Peru**. These initiatives need to be supported and participated actively by all the churches.

3. The Peace* Imperative

*Taling** is a blessing. *Mup** is a gift from God (Numbers 6). But *milembe** is not necessarily only the absence of diseases, hostility or harm. *Amani** requires not simply the absence of violence but it also includes the presence of justice and the rule of love.

Our personal experiences influence our understanding of *kagiso**, but nevertheless we attempt, through dialogue and good will, to reach a common ground of understanding. At the same time that we confess *zereda** as something given by God on the existential level, we can also talk about internal *paz**, which could be described as the absence of anguishes.

On the other hand, we recognize that many tend to choose a path of omission in the face of the challenges of this world and convince themselves to accept the realities that surround them as something not only given but also impossible to change. We recognize individualism as one of the expressions that block the way to *vrede**.

We also talk about external *Friede** as the utopian horizon we all aim to achieve, but it also means an achievable instance, since our mutual commitment pushes us to construct a different situation.

* Clarification note: We have used the word *peace* in different native languages of the participants of the seminar. Other words for peace include: *Kapayapaan, kalilintad, kalinaw, ñsañ, Frieden, shalom, taling, zereda, nutifafa, shante, irene, salam, samadhanam.*

3.1. Reconciliation and Healing

To heal is the first step inside. Love is the centre of our body energy and the true ruler of how we experience life, what we think and what we do. All major human emotions are cries from the heart: joy, love, as well as sorrow, pain, anger, and fear.

We affirm reconciliation as an essential part in the process of forgiveness. Reconciliation requires mutual awareness and the willingness to repair, in which justice is the framework. It is a dynamics marked by mutual commitment.

3.2. Communities

We identify ourselves as peacemakers. Our communities are not only an expression of our willingness of being together, but also a consequence of the Gospel itself.

For many people, communities work as a first step for healing. People in our communities are not necessarily healed and reconciled, but they come to the church for that very purpose. We have the capacity to provide support, deliverance and service. The Christian community is a space of trust building, not only based on physical presence, but also of spiritual belonging.

Our Hope: Fragile Seeds of Peace in a Broken World

We have been enriched by the encounter with Christians from different regions of the world who have informed us about their suffering and their aspirations in a world full of violence. In emphasising the networks which emerge out of the sharing of our stories, we are able to see common bonds of experience and responsibility.

It is in the respect of the other, those of different religion and different ethnicity or class, but of common human origin, that we wish to formulate our genuine Christian concern and responsibility for the building of communities in which we experience and forge peace. We affirm that we cannot have a purely external view on violence, but will have to include a critique of our own religious system, its theologies and historical manifestations.

This critical introspection will enable us to foster the strong thread of peace in our religion, marked by inclusiveness, the embrace of the other, the awareness for the needs of others in terms of self-determination, and the common responsibility for the transformation of the world in which healing and reconciliation become recognizable signs of what we can already discover now as fragile seeds of peace in our broken world.

Bossey, May 2008