

Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace.

Introduction

The Theological College of Lanka

The Anglican, Methodist and Baptist churches of Sri Lanka inaugurated the Theological College of Lanka in 1963. Later the Presbyterian Church (Presbytery of Lanka) joined the federation to educate new clergy in the environment of Sri Lanka and their own languages; Sinhalese and Tamil. It is believed that language is a vehicle of culture and when Christians begin to think, speak, preach, pray and write in their own languages, they soon become familiar with their cultural values and begin to appreciate them in the practice of their Christian faith. All the churches foresaw this new step as an attempt to produce indigenous theology by people who are being educated in Sri Lanka.¹In 1964 the TCL was accredited by the Senate of Serampore College (University) of India. Over 90% of the active clergy in the constituent churches in Sri Lanka today have received their theological and pastoral education at TCL.²TCL is the only accredited Theological College among the Protestant churches of Sri Lanka, which not only maintains its ecumenical foundation, but also brings together the Sinhalese and Tamil students, who are both men and women, in a fellowship both at work and at leisure. This is an integral aspect of the personal and spiritual formation of the future ministers of a country which is torn apart by ethnic divisions. The chapel and the Library play significant roles in this formation.³

Student Community.

The current population of the student community is forty-nine. The students represent different churches, ethnic groups, age groups, and social locations, and speak different languages. They are also exposed into different realities within the socio, political and religio-cultural aspects of Sri Lankan pluralistic society.

The Background To This Paper.

The Theological College of Lanka, in coordination with Reverend Johnston McMaster, who is a Methodist minister and now a lecturer at the Irish School of Ecumenics from the Belfast Campus of Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, organised a 2-week seminar from June 18th to 29th 2007, at the Theological College under theme “Conflict Transformation and Peace Building”. It was within this context the initiative was taken to articulate this paper.

Purpose

The purpose was not to just to create an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace, purely through an academic exercise but also arrive at the same through the experiences of the student community through a participatory approach.

¹ See WWW.TCL.Com

² See Ibid

³ See Ibid

Methodology

Stage 1.

1. Student community came out with eight major issues that are essential within the Sri Lankan Ethnic Conflict context for articulating theological perspectives. The issues are as follows.
 - a) The Land Issues.
 - b) Social And Economic Inequalities.
 - c) The Religious Sources Of Conflict
 - d) Right To Resolve The Conflict Without Outside Interference.
 - e) Dealing With the Past vs. Healing Through Remembering.
 - f) A Formal Council Of Religions.
 - g) A Worldwide Network To Confront Violence.
 - h) Biblical Reflections.
2. These topics were discussed within small groups. Small groups consisted students from 1st Year to 4th Year. The groups were organised with a gender/ ethnic balance as much as possible. A Secretary was appointed in each group to co-ordinate and take notes.
3. The discussions were on related issues to the topics with spontaneous responses.

Stage 2

1. The 7 secretaries and Reverend Rosemary reflected on the papers and discussed the different issues, which related to the experiences and biblical reflections.
2. These are stated under the critical analysis.

Limitations

The paper is a work of the student community, which consists of a wide range of ages ranging from 19-47 years, male and female in gender, mixed in ethnic composition i.e. Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher, and from different denominations and from different geographical locations. The Community was divided into eight groups during the Seminar and discussed eight important themes, which the whole community agreed. Hence the case studies have been reported according to the knowledge of the participants at the small group levels. They may contain factual errors. Hence the emphasis is not on the reported incidents but to identify spontaneous responses through a dialogical method to identify felt communal needs in conflict transformation. As each group worked independently, there maybe some contradictions in the statements. These have been sought to have been rectified by the critical reflections.

Background of the Conflict.

Sri Lankan nation is torn apart in its all spheres of life due to the war and violence which has continued over 25 years. The Nation is pluralistic in nature and is a unitary state. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam has resorted to an arms struggle with the Government of Sri Lanka with the objective of political liberation. The ongoing war has neither given any political freedom to the Tamil people nor reduced their desperation. This has escalated the poverty and the sense of hopelessness about the future. In such a context what are the possibilities of regaining hope about peace?

Summaries of The Group Discussions

Group 1-The Land Issues in Sri Lanka

“God is revealed in the works of God. We are all aware that the exodus is the event on which the faith of the Jewish people is based. This faith springs from historical experience of the action of Yahweh in the deliverance from Egyptian slavery and the journey toward the collective take over of the Promised Land.” Gustavo Gutierrez.⁴

Group Discussion

The land aspect has been central to many national conflicts in the globe including Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka was mainly under three colonial regimes, accordingly the Portuguese, The Dutch and the British, for over four centuries (1505-1948). These imperials exploited the wealth of the nation, and brought antagonism among the communities. They were Christianising and propagating the Western culture into our part of the World. The land was exploited in order to maximize profits. This is still evident by the land which is still owned by the church in certain parts of the country and by the few rich aristocrats who still possess massive amounts of land. There are many landless people still living under desperate conditions irrespective of their ethnicity, cast, creed or religion. This unjustifiable substantial possession of land and unequal distribution has been the root cause for many conflicts among the people and communities as well. Another major reason for the ethnic conflict is colonisation of Sinhala people in North and East, for which the majority Tamils in the North as well as in the East were very opposed to that decision.

The ministry of land under the legislation in Sri Lanka could reclaim such land and appropriate them equally and justly because this has been acknowledged as a basic human right in the constitutions of 1972 and 1978 and in the 18th amendment. In other words the land is a resource that belongs to all citizens of a country that should be shared equally. The Bible is clear that the earth belongs to God (Psalm 24). He gave the land to use and replenish it. Humanity’s main duty is to care and protect it for the future generations: (1 Chronicles 28:8). The land is also an inheritance from God for humankind. (Judges 1:3) It is the common duty of all humankind to always see to the needs of themselves while thinking of others as well.

We need to strive hard for a reasonable settlement to this crucial problem in finding a lasting solution. The participation of all communities is very necessary to implement such a just distribution mechanism. Jesus too emphasised this when he spoke about the release in the Year of Jubilee proclaiming the Nazareth Manifesto.(Luke 4:18). This was a demonstration of his stand against the exploiters of the poor and the oppressed. To bring healing to the marginalised he sacrificed his life.

This land belongs to you
This land belongs to me
This land belongs to all of us
To live in harmony “Let this be our Motto”⁵

Critical reflections

-The land concept has only been looked through the Christian perspectives. This is detrimental to harmony in a pluralistic society. In any peace building and conflict transformation approach within a pluralistic society there should be an move toward looking at the issues from different angles e.g. using the sacred texts from other religions.

⁴ See Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life, Britain: SCM Press, 1991, 3.*

⁵ Quoted from a famous Sri Lankan song: This Land Belongs to You by Sunil Perera

- The group has made a very hasty statement about an “unjustifiable substantial possession of land” which needs to be supported by statistics.
- Has the colonisation of Sinhalese people only take place by the government in the north and east? Aren’t there any other occasions? Why did this take place? A direct conclusion drawn from this statement could be bias towards one party and as such maybe be a reason for conflict.
- The Indian communities who were brought to work on the plantations during the colonial era have inadvertently contributed to increasing the land problem. They have little or no land rights themselves. Hence in the conflict there are hidden issues underneath the surface problems.
- How people felt in that era will be different from what people perceive today. Hence it is not correct to ascertain today’s claim on the land deficit without understanding the history. Today’s problems can be a result of certain requests, demands, and decisions made at some early occasions by the same communities. Therefore rather than blaming one group, each situation has to be understood in its context. Each side needs to have a responsible attitude in order to resolve the conflict.
- Since 1948 successive Governments have not addressed the issue e.g. land rights of the Plantation Tamils

Group 2- The Social And Economic Inequalities.

“Never has the number of poor has been so great .The World has been disturbed by this prospect over the last fifteen years. Never have the inequalities been so pronouncedIf the least we can say about the economy is that it should assure all human beings of basic materials essential for sustaining life and culture, the system in place now is distinguished by its inefficiency. “

Francois Houtart⁶

Group Discussion

Unequal economic and social conditions are a threat to life in the Sri Lankan context. Most of the economic development at present is taking place in the southern region of Sri Lanka or around Colombo. The cost of living fluctuates from one region to another due to obvious reasons in a war context. The Sri Lankan economy currently based on the import economy should be transformed into an export economy and there should be more priority to develop the local market. The lack of security in the context of war affects the distribution of products. This causes an economic recession in goods and services especially in the effected areas.

Identified solutions

- 1) There should be some mechanism to protect the interests of the innocent civilians within a war context.
- 2) Every citizen should possess within himself/herself an interest on the economic development of the country and should actively participate for it.
- 3) There should be programmes that bring awareness and care for victims.
- 4) There should be a mechanism which controls the prices of goods based on the principle of equality.
- 5) The people who are marginalised in the accepted economic structure should be liberated.

Critical reflections

-It should be understood that there is a local market. It should be developed.

⁶ See Francios Houtart, Compassion, Love of Neighbor and the Social Predicament, in Robert Cruzs, Marshal Fernando, Asanga Tilakaratne, eds., Encounters with the Word, Sri Lanka, Piyasiri Printing, 2004, 587-296.

- The war has a direct and major impact on the economic recession of the country. E.g. it is a cause of inflation
- There should be more awareness made among the community about the reasons for economic crisis after a thorough analysis.
- How to develop a fair economic system is a challenge that we should take into our mission objectives.

Group 3- The Religious Sources of Conflict

Group Discussion

“It is too easy in an apologetic concern to claim that the content of the religions is non-violent and that it is human beings who whether individually or collectively divert them from their meaning. In fact the roots of violence can be found right back in the religions and that is why the religions can also easily serve as vehicles for violent tendencies”
Francois Hourtart⁷

Sri Lanka is a pluralistic nation in which Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are living faiths. The religious experience and the recorded history reveal to us that these very religions that were a result of human liberation have become a source and a means of oppression. How could we transform religious practices in our context to be more meaningful?

Case study: Muttur is situated in the Trincomalee District in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka. Muttur has a mixed population of Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese people. There was an incident of massacring of Tamils by Muslim revolutionary groups.

The Tamils retaliated. There had been occasions where the army cadres had joined with the revolutionary groups and led attacks against Tamils. Frequent raids by Army have taken place following these incidents. The view of such revolutionary movement is to destroy all those who oppose their views. They call it a holy action and believe God’s blessings are with them. On the other hand Christians too have been, in certain occasions, labelled as a supporting group for the LTTE. The Christian Church consists of Sinhalese, Tamils and Burghers. Sometimes it maybe due to Christians actively participated in the peace and medication processes in a firm and fair way that is the reason for such an identity. It is widely discussed that calling Sri Lanka a Sinhala Buddhist Nation by the extreme nationalistic and patriotic movements has aggravated these divisions. All forms of extremist fractions should collaborate with the Peace process. The Christians have the potential to initiate the healing process among the LTTE who would more consider them if they visit the abducted and the oppressed and mediate in such cases. The Church also participates in dialogue among the civil society in the North and South of Sri Lanka, which is also another possibility where we could better understand the situation. The small groups can be organised within church communities and beyond to meet “the other” in dialogical forums, so that it will lead to an understanding and harmonious relationships at the grass root levels. The Heads/ higher authorities of the Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu, Christian, religious organisations also should initiate dialogue in peace building. Eradicating language barriers through education and teaching the Religious values at the primary and secondary education level will create mutual understanding in the Society. Encouraging mixed marriages would also be one possible way to practically bring relationships among different Ethnicities. Carrying out of awareness and counseling programmes to help the oppressed in order to heal their traumatized and depressed internalized situations can also be addressed through the Religious Organizations.

⁷ Francis Houtart, The Cult of Violence in the Name of Religion: A Panorama Dialogue. EIBD: Colombo Vol XXIX, 2002,1-10.

Critical reflections

-The case study contains certain biased statements by the group members that show feelings of bitterness and antagonism. Even if such statements are correct they lack sufficient proof through sources and need a better way of presentation in a peace building process. Hence in a conflict context one party making statements about the other party could become biased. We all need to realise how the other parties in a conflict feel (i.e. “They call it a Holy action”.) Even our vocabulary can be a reason for conflict.

-What mechanisms are available within and outside the church to bring the various parties into the peace process together?

Group 4:- Right To Resolve The Conflict Without Outside Interference.

International actors encourage others to adhere to macro norms through a process of socialisation and peer pressure that combines discursive strategies of praise for appropriative behaviour and denunciation for violation of norms with material strategies of reward for good behaviour and sanctions against those who do not adhere to the relevant norms” (Decency and Stanley)⁸

Group Discussion

In the context of ethnic conflict, the parties who are in conflict should build up mutual understanding. It is important to receive mediation at the initial stage in order to confront the disputes and lack of solidarity for negotiation due to the obvious circumstances around a conflict situation. An impartial Sri Lankan body should facilitate the mediation process and as much as possible the resources of this country should be utilised for this purpose. The media can be the best bridge for peace negotiations.

The people are unable to meet the responsible officials to communicate their problems and difficulties due to the existing defense measures. There should be regular forums where such possibilities are created for the public. The people need proper forums to communicate their problems. A defence and national security should be based on impartiality and Justice. The education system also should be a moderate one which creates understanding about the “other” or our neighbour. To enhance understanding it is important that people of south and north and east migrate to each other’s areas, and obtaining a living experience in those areas. We need to build a mind set that we are able to solve our “internal conflict”. For this the political and accountable leaders should be committed, impartial and positive participants of the transforming process. In such a context we would not necessarily need a third party intervention. Treating every person as a human being, and building up harmonious relationship with the “other” with a linguistic difference is the key to achieve transformation. The ultimate motive of mediation should be to build up solidarity among one another. Unemployment and economic problems should be addressed as a part of the mediation process. All these can and should be done without interference of a third party outside the country. Therefore this process will need a lot of commitment and it will consume much time.

“Blessed are the peace makers”. We as a people who believe in God have a mandate to intervene into Peace making. We have a responsibility to communicate this to God and participate in this mission.

⁸ Jayadera Nyangoda: Beyond Mediation, Negotiation and Negative Peace, Towards Transformative Peace in Sri Lanka. Colombo:SSA,2006. 30

Critical reflections

- The media too must be impartial
- Need more reflections on insecurity complex within the group
- Using a 3rd party from outside the country can be both positive and negative
- Experience to date in Sri Lanka is that 3rd party involvement has not been successful (India, Norway, Japan)
- Ideas for mediation should come from the grass roots levels

Group 5 Dealing with the Past - Healing Through Remembering

“He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to Love.....Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. It is the lifting of a burden or the canceling of a debt....Forgiveness means reconciliation, a coming together again. Without this no man can love his enemies. The degree to which we are able to forgive determines the degree to which we are able to love our enemies.”

Martin Luther King⁹

The bitter experiences of the past and unforgiveness are a major barrier for any peace building process. Nevertheless this sensitive but most important aspect should be addressed in the peace process at some juncture.

Group Discussion

A Case Study: In 1990 Muslims were forcibly sent out from Jaffna. They were suspected of organizing the community to revolt. The prior notice given was 2 days. Large numbers of people had to leave behind everything they earned and owned. This has created bitterness in the hearts of Muslims up to this because of this action of the LTTE.

One way for healing through remembering is for both these parties to meet with the rest (Sinhala/Government.) and to come into consensus about the injustice taken place against the Muslim. Muslims were the victims caught up by the war between Army and LTTE. The acceptance of their faults will be the best consolation for the Muslims.

Comments: Resettlement of Muslims with a considerable grant of land will be a just compensation. The compensation can also be a step towards restorative Justice within an Ethnic Conflict. As an action team may be set up to continually to look in to the problem of ‘get along’ of the Muslims by the other ethnicities. Restoration of property should be done by the extensive knowledge of Human Rights since infringements of it would have occurred. The importance of relationship building and halting of conflict should be stressed. (Biblical references:

Romans 12 v 14-21,

The Jacob – Esau story – rivalry is forgotten and reconciliation takes place,

The woman from Samaria – Jesus accepts Samaritans as equal although when previous friction has occurred.

The Good Samaritan – Helping another labelled as an enemy

Critical reflections

-There can be various bitter experiences that differ from one another’s depending on ethnicity.

-The conflict has aggravated the bitterness

⁹ See Rodger Pooley and Phillip Siddon, The Lord of the Journey, Scotland: Wm Collins and Sons, 1987, 267.

Group 6: A Formal Council Of Religions

“If we need a new peace culture, what can religions contribute to it? For many peace activists religions may seem irrelevant or more of a hindrance than a help. Yet the different faiths continue to provide spiritual explanations of human existence and a vision of what ought to be; they offer systems of beliefs and practices which nourish and strengthen life and help to build community.”

Ursula King.¹⁰

In the Sri Lankan experience religion and culture are interwoven. The majority Buddhists have a special place and power within the cultural framework of Sri Lanka. The Tamil Hindus too have a unique culture. Though the Muslims speak Tamil they too have a unique culture which is based on their Islamic religious values. There are Christians who belong to Sinhalese, Tamil and Burgher ethnicities and some converts with Muslim backgrounds. Hence it is difficult to determine to which ethnic group the Christians belong. Usually they profess the cultures of their locality. There is also a tendency that on occasion they would re-interpret the culture according to their convictions.

- Generally the dominant culture in the south is the Buddhist Sinhalese culture.
- In the North and East the majority are Tamil Hindus.
- Muslims are dispersed throughout the whole country.
- Among the Sinhalese there are Buddhists and Christians.
- Among the Tamil-speaking people there are Hindus, Muslims and Christians.
- Though historical monuments of Buddhism exist in the North and East the population of Buddhists is small, except in the Trincomolee area.

In Sri Lanka Buddhism is given the foremost place and the State is expected to protect and foster Buddha Sasana. This implies that other religions are considered less significant. Likewise Buddhism receives its recognition through the legislative and constitutional position. In such a context certain bodies are promoting Inter Religious Harmony in and outside the boundaries of the church. However, exchanging cultural values and building solidarity is less common.

Suggestions.

- To establish a body of religious leaders with state patronage.
- To develop a structure of area based committees.
- To promote exchange of positive cultural values could be promoted through such structures.
- To create facilities to learn linguistic skills and to include these in the school syllabus.
- This suggestion should be made to an available implementing body.
- Religious leaders should visit the communities to build solidarity. (e.g. Christian pastoral visits)

Critical reflections

-A religious minority and a majority consciousness are present in the group discussion. This can be one of the reasons for the Ethnic conflict.

-Are there any other pluralistic countries that have been able to achieve peace? (i.e. India) What mechanisms do they use? We could learn from other contexts that are similar to ours

- Will the structural effort for peace building be, once again, a failure? How can you minimize evil in such a structure?

¹⁰ See Ursula King, Seeds for Peace-World Faiths As Resources For Peace Education , in Robert Crusz, Marshal Fernando, Asanga Tilakaratne, eds., Encounters with the Word, Sri Lanka, Piyasiri Printing, 2004, 587-296.

Group 7: A World Wide Network To Confront Violence.

“Everyone who struggles for justice, everyone who makes just claims in unjust surroundings, is working for God’s reign even though not a Christian. The church does not comprise all of God’s reign; God’s reign goes beyond church boundaries.”

Bishop Oscar Romero ¹¹

The Parliament of World Religions is a fine example of how the worldwide movement could counteract evil within different social structures. Social evil is inevitable in a context of war and violence.

Case Study: India has claimed the right on Kashmir for a long time, while Pakistani Muslims support the rebellions against India. The issue developed to such a violent state that the ancient “Babar Masur Masoodi” and the other religious places were attacked. This conflict has affected other countries in the South Asian region because of following reasons.

1. India and Pakistan are multi religious countries;
2. Two dynamic religious communities are entangled in to this conflict;
3. India, the regional superpower is one of the parties involved in this conflict;
4. Due to the assistance of many countries on the grounds of religion or any other basis it has become a regional problem and even escalated to an international conflict.

Identified solutions to confront violence:

1. International communities should bring pressure to stop the violence so that countries can build harmony with each other. There should be measures against arms exporting countries providing weapons to these countries.
2. The religious leaders of different countries should come to one table and should take relevant actions to solve such problems.
3. A body of religious leaders and politicians should be formed to study and educate people about the religious causes to a conflict.
4. International sanctions should be imposed to stop the income generation for violent activities especially through smuggling.
5. Neighbouring countries should facilitate the warring parties to come to negotiations.
6. An unbiased trustworthy country could act the role of the third party.

The Israelites were exiled to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. But they longed for liberation. Israelites had to face more difficulties because of the war the Babylonians were fighting with other countries. In such a period they received the messianic revelations through the prophets which brought them hope. A worldwide network to confront violence will give hope to people who are in fear, anxiety and frustration due to war and conflict.

Critical reflections

- Is this group proposing a structural solution out of the same evil structures?
- Need to deconstruct the present structures and propose an alternative

¹¹ See Maris Denis et al., Oscar Romero, Maryknoll : Orbis ,2000,7.

Group 8: The Biblical Reflections

“If the Bible is indeed “the word of God”, it is so not as the “last word” on all religious questions, but as the “seminal word” out of which new apprehension of truth springs in the mind of humanity”. **C H Dodd** ¹²

“Scripture to legitimise violence or to build a bridge to solidarity”

Every religion has its sacred scriptures, which followers observe and adhere to. They treat them as holy. Nevertheless, historical experience makes us certain of one thing. The usual human tendency is to use the very scriptures which are acknowledged as the vehicle of revelation of God or the path for liberation has been used to legitimize the violent actions we carry out against our “neighbours”. Can we use scripture out of its context to legitimize violence? This biblical reflection is an effort to highlight the importance of discovering the “peace texts” within the scriptures. The under mentioned texts are some biblical examples for how scripture could become a bridge to build solidarity and transform conflict among pluralistic communities into living relationships.

We have a mandate for mission

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”¹³ **Mathew 5:9**

Christian communities have received a mandate in the word of God for Peace Making. “Peace Making” is central to the Mission of Church. Nevertheless, the experience of the church, this calling is most of the time confounded by its responsibility to parochial needs which are inward concerned. Hence, the Church has given priority to the maintenance of tradition and dogma. In this way the Church has avoided the action / reflection process. The above text urges us to be serious about broken community relationships. In the mission of the church, if we could rightly identify the Dynamics of Christian Mission Objectives, there will be a real transformation. We need to become the children of God who created the whole of humanity.

Peace And Justice Are Within The Humanity “Immanuel”

“For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son is given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” **Isaiah 9:5-6**

Peace and Justice are possible results of human action. Jesus’ role to bring peace caused him to sacrifice his life. Therefore, Peace and Justice are a result of pain and suffering. The above is a Messianic passage. Deutero-Isaiah predicts how the Messiah would suffer. Media reporters in the war zones, women in the free trade zone, and the hard working estate employees and those who appear in parliament for justice are messianic examples in our context. Though Jesus the Messiah was killed, Peace and Justice cannot be killed. Peace and Justice are within humanity and we need these values as we work towards restoring society. Those who actively worked for this mission have been killed at times. Yet Peace and Justice is still amongst us. Fr. Michael Rodrigo and Rev. Jayarajasingham are two such examples in Sri Lanka. Though they were killed they are still alive through their important contribution to our society.

¹² See C H Dodd , The Authority of the Bible, London: Nisbet and Co Ltd,1928,300.

¹³ NRSV-NT6.

The Grace which creates safe spaces

Romans 12:4

The Apostle Paul emphasized grace. Grace is something that is important to our context because there is strong enmity among the different ethnic groups. The LTTE and Sri Lankan Government should proceed towards peace. Enmity is a barrier to it. “Grace” will be a bridge to build peace in our context. In Sri Lanka each one needs the others because there is so much sorrow. We should be willing to become humble to forgive the “other”. In our context we do not experience the same. Revenge is the stumbling block for Peace Builders. People should be determined to overcome bitterness and revenge against their opponents. It’s not an easy task to forgive unless we prepare safe spaces to create such an atmosphere to enable and motivate people towards the same. The approach should be to help people to accomplish justice apart from violent methods.

The Prophetic Role Of The Church

Amos 5:24¹⁴

The Sri Lankan situation is also similar to the context and the experiences of Amos. Injustice and violence are common in our country. In Manar, Vaharei and Kabithigollawa there were recent incidents of violence reported which destroyed innocent lives. Amos faced similar situations during his period but with a different attitude. When there is injustice we need to confront like Amos. Therefore, the prophetic role of the church is much felt in the Sri Lankan society.

“Let the oppressed go free”.

Isaiah 61:01/02/ Luke 4:18-21

This passage speaks of the poor. They may be poor due to certain adverse socio-political and economic conditions. The intention of the Gospel is to transform lives into fullness, liberating them from oppression and slavery. As we present the Gospel in our context it should address these areas of human experience which is a central aspect of Peace building. The majority of Sri Lankan people need such liberation. Further the text also speaks about the need for the “oppressed go free”. War and Violence has imprisoned communities. What would the Mission of Jesus be at such an hour? We need to reflect on this.

Conclusion

As we have seen from the above, Sri Lanka is a country that is pluralistic by nature. It has been torn apart by ethnic conflict that has resulted in violence and war. This a paper is a result of the Seminar 18-29 June as stated above in response to the request to write an “Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace ” for the World Council of Churches Decade to Overcome Violence.

This paper comes from the student community and is an initial attempt to analyse possible important aspects that should be included in The aspects identified are discussed below.

- The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has many phases and there are diverse opinions about how one should look at the problem. This situation is even felt in our local context. Hence it is felt that in an ecumenical declaration there will be elements that are agreeable to all communities and elements that cannot.

¹⁴ Reflection by Grace Sebamani

- There is also the possibility of one view dominating the others. What is heard may not be the only voice. Hence there maybe the “voiceless” or the “silenced” within a community. There should be discernment to understand this.
- Unfair wealth distribution has been identified as a very important issue. Colonialism and Post Colonialism and undemocratic means of governance have endorsed the unequal distribution of wealth. A fair mechanism to distribute wealth / resources will support the process of building a Just Peace. In a multi-religious context people’s perceptions of wealth / income distribution will differ. This complicates the process of building a Just Peace and those involved in the process should be aware of it. Wealth distribution has many factors (e.g. national, international), and there may be surface problems and root causes that have to be clearly sorted out. The issues related to wealth and contextual and have to be understood accordingly.
- The war and its wider affects are very much felt among the victims and innocent civilians of the country. The cost of the war should not be only calculated in economic terms but also in terms of stunted aspirations, diminished self-worth and the feelings of hopelessness. There should be a mechanism that aims to safeguard the rights and essential needs of civilians and victims. This could create peace and give hope to the people. Mechanisms to combat economic recession and bring awareness among the common people of the disadvantages of war and violence are very important. Christian mission aims should expand to include such objectives.
- Religion can be used as a destructive or a peace-making instrument. How people in the past, in the present or in the future use religion is very decisive. Religion that promotes extreme feelings of nationalism to an extent to destroy the “other” is harmful. In a plural context education can play a major role in building solidarity with a community. Language, culture and religion, which often become barriers to such solidarity could be the very instruments to bring harmony in a conflict context. The community should comprise disciples of religion rather than abusers.
- A multi-religious / multi-ethnic context which is torn apart by war and violence can always become dangerous to its neighbour. There can be dehumanisation. In any dialogical effort there should be an understanding of the importance of sensible inclusiveness and friendly speech.
- Mediation is important in Just Peace building. This should be facilitated by an impartial and trustworthy party. Previous failures in mediation and certain anxieties concerning international politics have led to a feeling of distrust about the process of mediation itself. People have to build trust in such a mediation process from the grassroots.
- In a war context people can seek justice in different ways. There can be retributive justice or restorative justice depending on the experiences of people and the perceptions they have. There should be a mechanism to restore justice while reducing feelings of enmity.
- There is a feeling that religion can be used through a structural approach to confront existing structural violence. The idea is to use existing structures positively to help build peace. The problem is that religious and political structures are most of the time complementary. There is a need to innovate a mechanism to promote “liberative religious values” for the common good of the people.

- Politics in the macro context affects the micro situation. Hence it is not sufficient to take measures only at the micro level to combat violence. But once again the popular mindset is that existing religious leaders can bring solidarity. The solution can come from above. This is also a myth.

Then how can a more positive network to combat violence worldwide be organised? There needs to be a genuine commitment to renounce unjust world politics and follow the values of the reign of God, which should transcend all inhuman barriers. There should be a clear and firm undertaking to stand against all social evils that are detrimental to human solidarity and the well being of God's creation.

- The Bible reveals to us new truths about establishing the Kingdom of God.
- Scriptures should not be used to legitimise violence but to build solidarity.
- The Church has a mission mandate to build peace.
- Peace and justice are inherent in our humanity.
- The Bible affirms the grace that can create safe spaces to build human solidarity.
- The prophetic role of the Church is very important in a violent context.
- War and violence have imprisoned people. Jesus says, "Let the oppressed go free." (Luke 4 v 18)

Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace.

Signed by Rev. Rosemary Fletcher: (Faculty Co-ordinator of the Seminar)

Shelton Samadanam (Student Leader)

Dinesh Gomes (Co-ordinator for the Student Groups, and for Group 8)

Group Secretaries:

Ralph Job Solomons
 Sasikumar :
 Saman Kumari :
 Manjuka Nadarajah :
 Rasika :
 Sanath Madagamgoda :
 Harshana :
 :

Details of the Groups

Group 1 - The Land Issues in Sri Lanka

Ralph Job Solomons (Male) Secretary	(Tamil Age 43 4 th Year, Southern)
Chameera Silva (Male)	(Sinhalese Age 36 4 th Year, Southern)
P Arulraj (Male)	(Tamil Age 30 4 th Year, North East)
N Prabakar (Male)	(Tamil Age 31 3 rd Year, North)
Glory Rasanayagam (Female)	(Tamil Age 29 4 th Year, North West)
S Luxsan (Male)	(Tamil Age 24 3 rd Year, North)
Kanthe Dassanayaka (Male)	(Sinhalese Age 47 2 nd Year Central)

Group 2-The Social And Economic Inequalities

Sasikumar (Male) Secretary	(Tamil Age 30 3 rd Year, East)
Pavaharan (Male)	(Tamil Age 28 1 st Year, North)
Rukshi Kajendra (Female)	(Tamil Age 20 1 st Year, East)
Kirupaharan (Male)	(Tamil Age 25 1 st Year, East)
Yerome (Male)	(Sinhala Age 42 1 st Year, West)
Manoj Fernando (Male)	(Sinhala Age 27 4 th Year, West)

Group 3- The Religious Sources of Conflict

Saman Kumari(Female) Secretary (Sinhala Age 22 1st Year Southern)
 Brian Fernando-(Male) (Sinhala Age 28 1st Year Southern)
 Indradevi (Female) (Tamil Age 22 1st Year Upcountry)
 Lalani Jayaratne (Female) (Sinhala Age 23 1st Year Southern)

Group 4- Right To Resolve The Conflict Without Outside Interference

Manjuka Nadarajah (Female) Secretary (Mixed Age 25 4th Year, Upcountry)
 S Devadasan (Male) (Tamil Age 31 ,3rd Year Upcountry)
 Vinoth Sabapathy (Male) (Tamil Age 34 3rd Year, East)
 Sunera Vass (Male) (Sinhala Age 25 2nd Year, Southern)
 Irene Arnold (Female) (Tamil Age 21 2nd year North)
 Richard (Male) (Tamil Age 29 2nd year East)

Group 5: Dealing With The Past - Healing Through Remembering

Rasika (Male) Secretary (Sinhalese Age 27 1st Year, Central)
 Thiruchelvan(Male) (Tamil Age 28 1st Year, East)
 Prinsan Sebamale(Male) (Tamil Age 27 4thYear, North)
 Shehan (Male) (Sinhala Age 27 1st Year, South)
 Nuwan (Male) (Sinhala Age 27 1st Year, South)
 Sasikeran (Male) (Tamil Age 27 Ist Year North)

Group 6: A Formal Council Of Religions

Sanath -(Male) Secretary (Sinhalese Age 26 3rd Year Southern)
 Jayamanne (Male) (Sinhalese Age 33 3rd Year Southern)
 Anuruddha (Male) (Sinhalese Age 26 3rd Years Southern)
 David (Male) (Tamil Age 37 2nd Years -East)
 Michael (Male) (Tamil Age 21 1st Year Upcountry)

Group 7: A Worldwide Network To Confront Violence

Harshana (Male) Secretary (Sinhalese Age 22 1st Year Southern)
 Mahesh(Male) (Sinhalese Age 25 1st Year Southern)
 Arasilarajah (Male) (Tamil Age 4th Year Upcountry)
 Shelton (Male) (Tamil Age 29 4th Year Upcountry)
 Stella (Female) (Tamil 22 2nd Year North)

Group 8: The Biblical Reflections

Dinesh Gomes(Male) Secretary (Sinhalese Age 34 4th Year Southern)
 Valentine Inbarajah (Tamil Age 31 4th Year North)
 Nathan (Tamil Age 28 2nd Year East)
 Grace (Tamil Age 27 2nd Year North)
 Wathsala (Tamil Age 21 2nd Year Upcountry)
 Anuruddha(Male) (Sinhala Age 26 3rd Year Southern)

One student was absent for the Seminar fortnight (Thenendra)