

**Mid-Term of the
Decade to Overcome Violence 2001-2010:
Churches Seeking Reconciliation and Peace**

This is a back-ground document shared for information and for continued work in shaping the Decade to Overcome Violence. It raises questions that may allow an interim assessment and points to the course that might be followed during the remaining five-year period, so as to carry the effort of overcoming violence beyond the Decade.

Five years have passed since the ecumenical Decade to Overcome Violence was launched in February 2001 in Berlin. The assembly at Porto Alegre, therefore, marks the mid-term of the Decade and offers a welcome opportunity to share experiences, make an interim assessment, and refocus the course to be followed during the second five-year period.

I

It is encouraging that the impulse of the Decade has been taken up in an ever-growing number of churches and regions. The annual thematic and geographic foci on the challenges facing the churches in certain conflict areas and on their witness for peace have helped to forge bonds of ecumenical solidarity in the search for reconciliation and peace.

During the second half of the Decade the task will be to develop these efforts in the direction of firmer alliances and more effective links between churches, networks and movements. The “ecumenical space” that is being offered by the Decade needs to be shaped and filled through mutual visits, by identifying more exemplary initiatives, and by a deliberate focus on the basic elements of the Christian witness for peace, in order to strengthen the unity and the common voice of the churches. Only in this way can the overall goal of the Decade be reached, i.e. to move the search for reconciliation and peace “from the periphery to the centre of the life and witness of the church”.

II

With the Decade the churches in the fellowship of the World Council have entered a course which requires persistence and endurance. The goals of overcoming violence and building a culture of peace

imply spiritual, theological and practical challenges for the churches which touch them in the centre of what it means to be church.

At the opening of the Decade the following goals were formulated:

- Addressing holistically the *wide varieties of violence*, both direct and structural, in homes, communities, and in international arenas, and learning from the local and regional analyses of violence and ways to overcome violence.
- Challenging the churches to *overcome the spirit, logic and practice of violence*; to relinquish any theological justification of violence; and to affirm anew the spirituality of reconciliation and active non-violence.
- Creating a *new understanding of security* in terms of cooperation and community, instead of in terms of domination and competition.
- Learning from the *spirituality and resources for peace-building of other faiths* to work with communities of other faiths in the pursuit of peace and to challenge the churches to reflect on the misuse of religious and ethnic identities in pluralistic societies.
- Challenging the *growing militarization* of our world, especially the proliferation of small arms and light weapons.

Looking back on the first five years of the Decade, what can be said in terms of an interim assessment?

III

1. It is encouraging that many congregations, initiatives and Christian peace services have begun during the first half of the Decade to develop various grassroot projects in order to address the different forms of violence that we experience today in families, in schools, in streets and in civil conflicts. In view of the very diversity of the projects it is necessary, however, to identify places(?) and persons in the churches who accept the responsibility for coordination, networking, advice and improvement of such efforts and for stimulating the sharing of experiences. In a fair number of churches encouraging steps have been taken in this direction. Such efforts are all the more important that only in this way the different projects of non-violent action can achieve relevance in society.

The Decade to Overcome Violence runs parallel to the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-Violence for the Children of the World. In the context of the analysis of violence worldwide, conducted by the World Health Organization, violence prevention is declared as a public health priority (*World*

Health Assembly Resolution WHA 49.25). The Violence Prevention Alliance offers the churches both opportunities and challenges to act as responsive and responsible actors of civil society, in conjunction with governments and non-governmental partners. These collaborations need further strengthening.

At the same time it should be noted that there are churches which so far have made little room in their life and praxis for non-violent ways of thinking and acting. In these cases little has been done to provide resources and structures for activities in the framework of the Decade, and most often there is no responsible accompaniment and coordination of such activities. As a consequence, the Decade is hardly known in some regions, especially by other social forces which are themselves engaged in efforts to prevent violence, and its social and political impact is very limited. Since the Decade is an ecumenical initiative of the community of churches worldwide, members of this community who are engaged in processes of reconciliation will need to share their convictions and their energy with those who have not yet reacted to the strong and clear call: peace-building in non-violent ways is a Christian core virtue and imperative of the gospel message itself.

2. The debate about the whole spectrum of violence has started. Much critical attention has of course been focused on analyzing the different experiences of violence. It has to be noted that individual and interpersonal violence are prevalent, constituting eighty percent of the world's casualties in terms of physical violence. During the second half of the Decade emphasis should now be placed more deliberately on the search for concrete and realistic ways of "overcoming the spirit, logic and practice of violence".

It should be acknowledged, however, that the first half of the Decade was overshadowed by brutal acts of international terrorism and the reactions to it, especially in the form of military interventions in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Seldom before have the spirit, logic and practice of violence manifested themselves so openly. The challenge to the churches to relinquish any theological and ethical justification of violence calls for the exercise of spiritual discernment that draws its strength from a spirituality of active non-violence. Here the churches are in need of mutual support and encouragement. The efforts of the churches in the context of the Decade should be marked even more decisively by profound common ethical-theological reflection and advocacy for non-violent conflict prevention, for civilian forms of conflict-management and peace consolidation, as well as for a "just peace".

3. The concern for security has become the dominant motif for individual as well as social and political decisions. More and more, traditional approaches based on the notion of national security and its defence by military means seem to be gaining the upper hand once again and tend to supplant the

insight that the main objective should be security for people and not only for the state. Human security is the fruit of just relationships in community and of respect for human rights. In light of the recent findings on physical violence, the notion of human security as being safe at home and in the community deserves more attention and education. At the same time, today security is increasingly being threatened through the effects of economic globalization. Therefore, the search for an “Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth” has to be understood as a decisive contribution to the continuation of the Decade.

4. All religious communities and traditions are facing the expectation and the challenge to show the way towards peace and overcoming violence. Often, religious loyalties connected with ethnic identity are being used for purposes of legitimizing and mobilizing in situations of violent power conflicts. For this very reason inter-religious dialogue on the hidden connections between religion and violence has become one of the foci of the Decade. This is true in particular for dialogue between Christians and Muslims. To be sure, “by its very nature, inter-religious dialogue is not an instrument to resolve problems instantly in emergency situations”. However, the trust that has been built through patient dialogue and practical cooperation for the common good “may in times of conflict prevent religion from being used as a weapon”.¹

5. The massive efforts for strengthening security in the context of the so-called “fight against terrorism” have led to noticeable arms proliferation and a growth in the general militarization of the world, following upon a period of actual disarmament in all categories of weapons from anti-personnel mines to nuclear arms. In their activities during the second half of the Decade, the churches should pay more attention to the challenges arising from this situation. While churches are beginning to discern in more depth the ethical demand of the responsibility to protect those who cannot protect themselves, they are pointing out in particular that international terrorism is not being overcome with military means, i.e. by war; it is rather being encouraged and strengthened. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that an increasing number of people become victims of violence in civil and local conflicts which are being fought with light and small weapons. This remains a strong challenge to all the churches.

IV

In the long-term the Decade to Overcome Violence will be judged by whether it will have led to a change of consciousness and to deepened insights into the theological, ethical and spiritual

¹ *Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions*, WCC, 2003, no. 29, p.12.

foundations of Christian action for peace. During the first half of the Decade the struggle with the question of violence received priority attention. For the remaining five years the search for reconciliation and building a culture of peace should be the main focus. This should be linked with a critical re-reception and further development of the discussion about the ethics of peace in the ecumenical movement.

1. In recent times the notion of a “just peace” has appeared more and more frequently in ecumenical discussion, especially in contrast to that of a “just war”. However, no convincing foundation or action-oriented practical implementation has so far been developed. The insight of biblical wisdom that peace and justice are linked inseparably (Ps. 85) has always been part of basic ecumenical convictions. Interest should therefore be directed to the question of how to overcome the structures of injustice which continue to provoke new violent conflicts. What are the minimal requirements that must be fulfilled with regard to human security and the respect for the rights and dignity of people in order to be able to speak of peace? The respect for human dignity and the active promotion of the common good are imperatives of the gospel of Jesus Christ, i.e. persons, men and women, are created in the image of God and justified by grace. Human rights should therefore be emphasized as a basic element of a praxis of preventing violence and of shaping a just peace. In addition, the effort to build and develop an obligatory rule of law on the national as well as the international level is one of the conditions for a just peace. But there is also the need to review critically the understanding of justice and to develop it in the direction of “restorative” or “transformative” justice with the aim of establishing viable and just relationships in community.

2. The active struggle against the “spirit, logic and practice of violence” should be directed first of all towards developing and appropriating concrete ways and means for the peaceful and non-violent resolution of conflicts. Those who are engaged in this search in the context of the Decade should realize that at its core this is a moral and spiritual struggle in which the religious communities have to take the lead. They have to begin with a critical reassessment of their own contribution to the emergence of a culture of violence and to strengthen the spiritual resources that can help to transform the destructive energy of violence into a constructive force of promoting life. The praxis of non-violence must be rooted in a spirituality that acknowledges one’s own vulnerability and is able, at the same time, to resist being caught in the mentality of perpetrator and victim; that empowers and encourages the powerless to be able to face up to those who misuse their power; that trusts the active presence of the power of God in human conflicts and therefore is able to transcend the seeming lack of alternatives in situations of violence.

3. In the context of the many “truth commissions”, attention has been drawn to the intimate relationship that exists between reconciliation and the uncovering of truth regarding the processes and structures of violence. The effort in South Africa to come to terms with the long history of violence under the apartheid regime has shown that there is no direct way leading from the uncovering of truth to reconciliation and forgiveness. The gospel is a message of unconditional love, and reconciliation is a process bearing the fruits of love, as Jesus Christ demonstrated. Nevertheless, advocacy for truth and resistance against its distortion have to be considered as an important response to given situations of violence. Most violently fought conflicts are being nourished by distorted mutual perceptions. They live on the projection of enemy images behind which the actual people and their life situation disappear. And yet, no solution of conflict or even a process of reconciliation is possible without the participation of the people concerned. Among all organizations in society the churches are those that are most intimately aware of the true life-situation of the people, because their interpretation of reality in the light of the gospel transcends all political, ethnic and national interests and thus opens the way for a reconciled community in justice. The Decade should strengthen the readiness and courage of the churches “to live in the truth”, even where this places them in opposition to the prevailing political power interests, and thus to open ways towards reconciliation.

4. These basic convictions should be translated into practical action during the second half of the Decade. Throughout the Decade the churches should be encouraged continuously to open themselves even more deliberately in their witness and service to become “ambassadors of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5). This also means that they should offer responsible accompaniment and support for those projects in relation to the Decade that have been initiated by people at the grassroots; this includes providing for coordination – wherever necessary - for advice and possibilities of improvement and the exchange of experiences, as well as financial and material support.

In addition, the churches should be prepared, more than so far has been the case, to affirm publicly and forcefully the concerns and the goals of non-violent projects in the framework of the Decade, and themselves to engage in actions which serve these concerns and goals. In particular, they should actively support all efforts which are aimed at building up structures, instruments, programmes and communities of non-violent, civilian conflict management. In their programmes of education and public information they should promote a civilian and non-violent understanding of security; in their exercise of public responsibility and in dialogue with political partners they should condemn the growing militarization of international politics and the proliferation of small arms. Every attempt to use violence and fear as legitimate tools in politics needs to be rejected.

5. Since its earliest beginnings the ecumenical movement has been a movement for peace and reconciliation. The ecumenical fellowship of churches strongly manifests the conviction that the communion of all saints, which is a gift from God and rooted in God's triune life, can overcome the culture of enmity and exclusion which continuously leads into the vicious circles of violence. It has become in itself an image for the possibilities of reconciled living together while recognizing continuing diversities. If this community becomes an advocate of all people in all places who suffer from violence, and shows the way for active and non-violent forms of resolving conflict, it can indeed become a credible witness for the hope that is within us: a culture of peace and reconciliation for all of creation.

Nothing is so characteristically Christian as being a peace-maker. (St Basil the Great)