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(142) African Churches, Conflict Resolution, Reconciliation and Peace-Building on the Continent

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Introduction

The idea of conflict resolution and reconciliation in the international community gained greater currency in the last decade of the twentieth century and into the beginning of 21st century. But it can be correctly argued that reconciliation is not a new concept for the church. A gospel imperative, reconciliation is intrinsic to the ministry of the church. Nevertheless we shall start this article by describing a simple theoretical framework against which the involvement of the African churches in conflict resolution, reconciliation and peace-building is to be considered. Then we shall look at a theological basis for the churches' involvement in which some imperatives will be spelt out. Given that conflicts occur within specific socio-cultural contexts, it will be shown that there is also a cultural imperative that informs, however indirectly, the churches' work in conflict resolution and reconciliation. Before highlighting a selection of actual situations in which African churches have been involved, we shall consider three types of conflicts to which churches have responded. The conclusion identifies key challenges to the churches' ministry of reconciliation.

Theoretical Framework

A major finding of researchers on socio-political determinants is that conflicts are prevalent in poor and weakly-institutionalized countries. Given its weak economic performance in the post-independence period and her high conflict prevalence, determinants of conflict in Africa are of particular interest. According to the Armed Conflict Database (ACD) measure of civil conflict (based on a threshold of 1,000 battle deaths) findings suggest that about 8.5% of country/years in Africa since 1950 are conflict years compared to around 5% of country/years in the rest of the world over the same period.

Suggestions offered in trying to explain this situation include: conflict in Africa is viewed as a reflection of its poverty, thus lowering the cost of fighting; conflict is the product of rent-seeking for natural resources; conflict is a reflection of polities that are ethnically polarized with weak institutions for conflict resolution. The last argument is based on the observation that Africa's modern political geography reflects a rather arbitrary division of territory by colonial powers, thus creating a particular challenge for nation-building and effective peaceful states.

The standard economic approach to political violence looks for factors that explain the costs and benefits of using violence to achieve specific ends, particularly in the form of either remaining in power or mounting an insurgency. Benefits from using violence are frequently couched in terms of capturing resources either directly, as in the capture of territory, or through winning political power. Conflicts can also be the product of long-standing grievances between groups. Moreover, ethnic polarization can be said to be positively correlated with conflict.

In 1992, the then UN Secretary General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, defined peace-building as 'action to identify and support structures, which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict'.[1] In effect then, peace-building is a term that describes interventions that are designed to

[1] UNSG, 1992 report, An Agenda for Peace, paragraph 21.

prevent the start or resumption of violent conflict by creating an atmosphere of sustainable peace, and puts in place processes that ensure peace is maintained at all times. Peace-building activities address the root causes or potential causes of violence, create a societal expectation for peaceful conflict resolution and stabilize society politically and socio-economically.

The Theological Basis for the Church's Involvement in Conflict Resolution, Reconciliation, and Peace-Building

Conflict resolution is conceptualized as the methods and processes involved in facilitating the peaceful ending of conflict and retribution. In most instances, the church would be interested in peace-making, which usually takes place when there is already conflict or symptoms of conflict and thus used to bring the conflicting parties to a state of inaction. Peace-making is practical conflict transformation focused upon establishing equitable power relationships robust enough to forestall future conflict, often including the establishment of means of agreeing on ethical decisions within a community, or among parties that had previously engaged in inappropriate (i.e. violent) responses to conflict.

The involvement of the church in conflict resolution, reconciliation, healing and peace-building is founded on the gospel imperative in that according to Jesus, Blessed are the peace-makers, for they will be called children of God' (Matt. 5:9). This is reaffirmed by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. '... All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation…'; and in Hebrews 12:14, 'Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord'. James also emphasizes that, '… a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace' (James 3:18).

The biblical basis of peace-making, peace-building and reconciliation is not limited to the New Testament. We are entreated to 'seek peace and pursue it' (Psalm 34:14). And Isaiah foresees the eschaton when 'nation shall not lift sword against nation… neither shall they learn war any more' (Isaiah 2:4). The African churches' work on peace and reconciliation is complimented by the cultural imperative for peace.

In Africa, traditional conflict resolution processes are part of a well-structured, time-proven social system that is geared towards reconciliation, and improvement of social relations. The methods, processes and regulations are deeply rooted in the customs and traditions of the African people. The processes strive to restore a balance, to settle conflict, to eliminate disputes and to anticipate and stop or pre-empt conflict. Localized dispute resolution processes remain a key tradition within the African community. The church in Africa, being an integral part of modern African society, embraces these processes and is recognized as a mediator of conflicts and a peace-builder who is admonished to always be truthful.

Mapping of Conflicts in Africa

There are two types of conflicts in Africa: those that are to do with historical injustices, and those to do with contemporary issues and trends.

These conflicts can be classified as open or latent.

Open conflicts

Open conflicts involve open struggle or clashes between opposing forces. These can end up in prolonged fighting, battle or war. Examples include Libya (2009 to the present), Egypt (2010), Nigeria (2009 to the present), Mali (2009 to the present), Chad (2006), Central Africa Republic (2010 to the present), Democratic Republic of Congo (1996 to the present), South Sudan (1959-1972;1973-2005; 2013 to the present), Sudan (1959-1972; 1973-2005), Somalia (1992 to the present) and Northern Uganda (1987-2006).

Latent conflicts

Latent conflicts are conflicts in their own right, or the first phase of an open conflict. Latent conflict exists whenever individuals, groups, organizations, or nations have mistrusts that develop to differences that bother one or the other. However, these differences are not great enough to cause one side to act to alter the situation but could easily lead to an open conflict at the slightest of provocations. These include: Morocco-Western Sahara (1970s to the present); Algeria (2010); Kenya (1992-2014), Eritrea (1987 to the present) and Ethiopia (1987 to the present); Burundi (1994 to the present), Rwanda (1994 to the present); Madagascar (2004 to the present); Mozambique (2000 to the present) and South Africa (1994 to the present).

Specific Interventions

The church in Africa has undertaken mediation roles in countries such as Sudan/South Sudan, Mozambique, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, Ghana, S. Africa, and Uganda. For the purposes of this paper, we shall use Sudan/S. Sudan and Kenya as our case studies with a particular focus on interventions by the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and the National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCK) respectively.

Before presenting the case studies, it is important to make a quick mention of three situations where churches have intervened and mediated successfully. In 1994, in South Africa, communities were involved in violent conflicts along political lines: ANC supporters versus Inkatha supporters in Johannesburg. The South African Council of Churches initiated dialogue, but the most effective was the mediation by the then Presiding Bishop of the Methodist Church in Southern Africa, Mvume Dandala. At a high risk to his own safety, Dandala played a mediation role running over many months but eventually his efforts brought together the warring parties and peace was restored.

In Uganda, the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army from 1987 resulted in abductions and killings of hundreds of villagers. The Uganda Joint Christian Council initiated a conflict resolution programme which had a good measure of success. Moreover, the efforts of the Catholic Church, and those of Bishop Okello of the Anglican Church, led in the late 1990s/ 2000s to useful peace talks and the release of many abducted girls and women.

Thirdly, in 1995 a conflict ignited by a dispute over the price of a chicken at a market-place in the northern part of Ghana led to an ethnic war between Konkombas and Nanyumbas. Over several months, fighting between members of the two tribes resulted in the death of scores of innocent citizens. The Ghana Council of Churches, with technical assistance from Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa, established mediation processes that led to signing of a peace pact whose ceremony was attended by the president of the country. Chiefs of the respective communities were also involved. Once peace was restored, the chiefs continued to nurture reconciliation using traditional and cultural approaches. Till now, the two communities have lived in peace and harmony.

Sudan/South Sudan

The 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement brokered by AACC and WCC was the first ever mediated agreement in resolving the Sudanese conflicts. The Agreement was reached between the government of Sudan and Anyanya I[2], the Southern Sudanese liberation movement initiated to fight for freedom, justice and democracy in Sudan. The full account of the process leading to the signing of the Addis Ababa

[2] Anyanya (also Anya-Nya) was a southern Sudanese separatist rebel army formed during the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972)

Agreement has been well documented in the *Mediation of Civil Wars in Africa*,[3] and *Too Many Agreements Dishonoured*.[4]

Following the split in 1990 in the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement and Army (SPLM/A), the churches in Kenya undertook to resolve the conflict between the concomitant factions. The NCCK and the People for Peace of the Catholic Church in Kenya, with technical assistance from Nairobi Peace Initiative – Africa, mediated for eight months. Among the achievements of this process were: the release of prisoners of war held by the two factions; an agreement on the democratization of the movement; the recognition by SPLM/A of the role of traditional leaders in conflict resolution and reconciliation; the acceptance by SPLM/A of the churches' role in monitoring any future human rights violations by the SPLM/A.

In 1995, the WCC and Caritas International formed the Sudan Ecumenical Forum (SEF) which became the main platform and framework through which the major ecumenical partners would accompany the SCC and the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC). The SEF basic ethos was that the Sudan churches should occupy the centre of all that was done in the name of Sudan, and that the Sudan churches, through the SCC and the NSCC, would determine the agenda of SEF.

Through this framework, the Sudan churches embarked on people to people grassroots peace processes which contributed significantly to the eventual signing in 2005 of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in Nairobi, Kenya.

In the run-up to the Sudan Referendum and eventually the Independence of South Sudan, churches in Sudan, with the accompaniment of AACC and WCC, engaged in high-level advocacy and diplomacy to help in securing a peaceful atmosphere for the referendum and independence.

Kenya

Since Kenya experienced the 'ethnic conflicts' or 'land clashes' of 1992 in the Rift Valley in the build-up towards the first multi-party general elections, similar conflicts have occurred in different parts of the country, most notably in the election years of 1997 and 2007. The latter would have far-reaching consequences with many victims left homeless, landless, destitute, injured, abused or dead. The NCCK was among the first organizations to respond to the 1992 violence in the Rift Valley and Western Kenya through a series of interventions under the *Land Clashes Project* later renamed *Relief and Rehabilitation Project*, *the Peace and Reconciliation Project*, *the Community Peace-building and Development Project* and finally, *Community Peace-building and Reconciliation Project*.

The project had a three-stage operation: emergency assistance to the internally displaced families in the camps; addressing the resettlement needs of the 'victims'; thirdly, focusing more on re-integration and healing of the 'clash victims' in which relationship and peace-building among the affected communities took centre stage under 'Good Neighbourliness' seminars.

NCCK's overall goal has remained to have communities in the Rift Valley co-exist harmoniously and to reduce the level of violence in the affected areas. 'Good Neighbourliness' has since become the leitmotif and a connecting point. In this context, a 'neighbour' refers to persons who were members of a community other than one's own. Secondly, kinship developed out of intermarriage became a starting-point to strengthen good neighbourliness. 'Good Neighbourliness' consisted of a series of community-level workshops, conducted in remote villages where conflict had occurred. These have targeted all sectors of the community, across the conflict divide and included a broad range of actors such as women, youth and elders. The guiding philosophy has been that reconciliation would only be achieved through constructive dialogue, mutual co-operation and respect for the rights of individuals and communities.

[3] Hezkias Asefa: Mediation of Civil Wars, Approaches and Strategies.
[4] Abel Alier: Southern Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonoured (Sudan Studies) Jan 1, 1999.

One of the major specific outcomes of the 'Good Neighbourliness' seminars was the establishment of localized platforms that would meet on a monthly basis to analyze the local peace situation and to plan an appropriate strategic response. They also constantly monitored incidences of violence within their locality and co-ordinated other local activities with NCCK and other stakeholders. Good Neighbourliness seminars have since become platforms where communities dialogue and reflect on their experiences. This is a very effective peace-building method.

Challenges

There are three main challenges to the church's mission in conflict resolution, reconciliation, healing and peace-building: to live and act in faith, hope and love; to overcome the fear of speaking truth to power; the capacity to bring about hope to those living lives of hopelessness and despair.

The churches could address these by embracing a ministry of presence where violence, poverty, suffering and pain is found; developing and adopting an integral and holistic approach to healing and reconciliation based on the realization that the consequences of conflict are not only vertical but also horizontal; regaining basic biblical principles and understanding reconciliation and forgiveness; and giving content, sharpness and clarity to reconciliation.

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