



Brief: Churches Building Peace – Between Expectations and Experiences

On 24 September, Felm together with Church in Helsinki organised the seminar *Churches Building Peace – Between Expectations and Experiences*. The objective of the seminar was to gain a deeper understanding of the roles, possibilities and limitations of churches in conflicts and peacebuilding.

Churches' role and efforts in peacebuilding

How can we assess whether churches are peace-makers or peace-breakers? An example from Northern Uganda

Henni Alava, Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Jyväskylä

In her presentation, Henni Alava pondered whether churches are peace-makers or peace-breakers based on her research in Northern Uganda, where the government is fighting against the insurgent Lord's Resistance Army. The starting point to the question is the definition of the term church. As Alava points out, churches have multiple functions in communities and variety of structures through which they operate in societies. It is necessary to recognize that the church is people forming networks and institutions.

She suggests that churches are socially, materially, politically and cosmologically embedded institutions and communities and arenas for narrative imagination. Here the embeddedness is the key to understand churches' role in relation to their surroundings, meaning that they are part of the context they inhabit, whether it is their societal or cultural context, the building that they inhabit, the politics in their country or their own administration or the cosmological ideas about Christian religion, be they universal or local teachings of it.

Based in these forms of embeddedness, they can influence their surroundings by creating narratives that create unity and by advocating peace in legislative processes or mediations. Embeddedness sets limits for how effective churches can be, but it can also be counterproductive for peacebuilding efforts since, for example, they can create lines of division by enforcing narratives of unity. Embeddedness ultimately differentiates local

churches from international actors that often just come and go without a profound link to the society or the culture. In Northern Uganda churches cut through all the same divisions than the rest of the society, and they are deeply involved in the conflict. An assessment of churches potential and risks in peacebuilding in such a context must factor all this in.

Churches living through transitions – reflections from Southern Africa

Rev. Dr. Kenneth Mtata, General Secretary, Zimbabwe Council of Churches

In the second presentation, Kenneth Mtata delivered an outlook on churches' peacebuilding efforts from the perspective of Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC). ZCC is a cluster of mainly Protestant churches, but it has recently come together with the Catholic Church as well. ZCC played an important informal role in the Lancaster House Agreement, and have been present ever since with its resources stemming from its legitimacy and apolitical nature. They also have a dark past since after the independence from colonial rule, ZCC thought they no longer had responsibility to act in times of distress since the majority group was in power, even though ethnic conflict was ravaging in the country. After this, ZCC has engaged in nation-building and reconciliation.

Mtata introduced a framework for National Holistic Agenda for Renewal and Empowerment (NHARE) that is proposed to form the core of the future peacebuilding work of ZCC. It consists of restoration of relationships, (re)building constitutional democracy and just economic recovery. A five-point reconciliation process is needed to start the whole process by restoring said relationships.

- Safe spaces are needed so that people can tell their own narrative.
- Responsibilities of different parties need to be acknowledged. It should be noted that victimhood and the role of mediators can be complex as people can be at the same time a victim and a perpetrator.
- The perpetrator should go through a process of repentance in front of the victim and the community.
- Participants go through a reparation process.
- The nation should re-imagine its future and mobilize behind the common vision.

Panel discussion on experiences from Zimbabwe, Colombia and Palestine

Churches have an important role in peacebuilding efforts even though they are not always considered professional in those efforts *per se*. This is because professional and secular peacebuilders often turn blind eye to much of the reality on the ground, which in turn creates a natural working ground for churches to operate in. Churches themselves are indeed enterprises but in many ways very different ones compared to secular ones. Christianity can create unity between people, and therefore they can contribute substantially to reconciliation processes. It can provide symbols, reparations and empathetic narratives in the high tables as well as in the everyday life. Also, churches as politically imbedded institutions give more ethical and moral background to political aspects of life.

However, the pathways that churches' go through are not always so rosy, and this should be acknowledged so that the next steps would be better thought of. In Palestine, even though churches do a lot of good in terms of peacebuilding, they have imposed too indispensably their own understandings of theology, which can be very unhelpful in peace brokering processes. Frankly, fundamentality causes problems in the region. In Colombia churches were unsuccessful to advocate for the peace agreement in the referendum, they let themselves to be manipulated by politics and businesses and they have effectually participated in the civil war. In Zimbabwe, churches have taken incompetence as an excuse, they have failed to communicate outside of church and they have showed creed in their actions and created division.

The panellists have been involved in their countries in different ways to help them get forward in all the hardship they have encountered. Rifat Kassis, coming from Palestine, represents the old tradition of original Christians, who have managed to exist for 2000 years in the birthplace of Christianity. Palestinian Christians have always participated and resisted their subordination, which in his view have resulted in their continued presence in Palestine. Kassis participated in writing of the Kairos Document, with which he and others introduced the message of their people to the larger audience. The document by Christian Palestinians urges churches and Christians to stand against injustice and apartheid, to work for a just peace. Andrés Alba has been part of everyday reconciliation of the communities in the conflict, advocated in the UN and church alliances, carried out monitoring processes of demobilization and fostered dialogue among people. Matata has engaged with the state and has mobilized the church for peacebuilding. For example, they organized 'I pray, I vote' campaign to activate people to go to polls and help people make up their minds of what they want from the elections.

What, then, would the panellists like us to understand better in their respective conflict backgrounds? Kassis views that creating the narrative is largely stripped from them, and therefore awareness raising is at the core of what they want to do. Given the possibility, they would like to advocate for positive participation and to portrait them just as humans, not as freedom fighters. Alba emphasizes the interconnectedness of different parts of the world, their past of colonialism and guaranteeing the change and transformation of the conflict. His main point is that their only home is their land, and that they have only one chance. Mtata highlighted that the power of the church in Zimbabwe does not lay only in its locality but also in international organizations. Partners abroad gives them legitimacy, authority and ecumenical advantage, but they are also a demonstration of solidarity and interconnectedness, as Alba also mentioned.

The panel also had some advice and critique for their international ecumenical partners in terms of being helpful in peacebuilding processes. In Kassis' view, international partners are naïve most of the time, since they do not give themselves enough time to understand the complexities in the region. Therefore, local churches have to use a lot of time to explain to their partners why certain policies are unrealistic and how power structures affect the process. They have introduced a 'come and see' programme because Western visitors often close their eyes on what is in reality happening in Palestine and, further, censor themselves

on human rights violations. Also, Alava's presentation noted that churches often need to comply with donors, and this may result in insensitivity for the peace process. Alba acknowledges that they have all sorts of assets in Colombia, so they must ask, what type of an enterprise they want to be? A vision for future and legitimacy are necessary part of achieving any goal we agree on. Furthermore, Alba stresses the need for advocacy for peace and for a clear position in all other pressing problems in the world, such as global warming. Mtata would look at two things. First, the relationship between the global north and the south has not been healthy, because it has been governed with insincere politeness and post-colonial mindset. Honesty is therefore needed in the interaction so that the truth can be told without a fear of consequences. Second, the founding model of peacebuilding is wrong because it is based on project cycles. Peacebuilding cannot be rapid nor linear activity, and this must be taken under account.

Theological perspectives on churches' role in peacebuilding

Elina Vuola, Professor of Global Christianity and Dialogue of Religions at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki

In her presentation, Elina Vuola explored the theological foundation for churches' endeavours in peacebuilding. She emphasized the lack of research and the need for focus on gender in conflict and peace-making. Theology have two ways of looking at this. It can approach it from a more academic perspective, where comprehensive and critical research of religion through scientific methods can illuminate the subject. On the other hand, theology can be truth claims about religion, ethics etc. – and therefore a form of self-reflection. From this perspective theology can reflect how people think or how the truth claims came about. Including the sacred texts in peacebuilding processes is important because they are imbedded in the religion, and therefore it may be difficult to understand such peacebuilding processes that embody strong religious qualities.

Women's relation to peacebuilding and theology can be difficult, because so much of that relation has to do with power. Without reference to power the understanding of the whole issue is too narrow. There are undeniable barriers for women to participate in peacebuilding work and religious actors can exclude women from power, which accounts more to theology than to secular power dynamics. It should be noted, though, that religion and religious communities can also empower women as well as suppress them. Women's role is a rather sensitive question in religious communities, but such issues should nevertheless be critically analysed and religious teachings should be submitted to development.

There are two concrete benefits in exploring relationship between religion and conflict resolution. First, there is a large reservoir of sacred texts that give insight into peace making. Second, religion plays a central role in millions of peoples' daily lives. Religious language and symbols are pathways in which people can interpret reality, thus also providing a touching point to peoples' lives. By studying connection between politics and religion we can assess whether religious actors relate to tradition or use scriptures to their own benefit. Religion should be considered as interplay of continuity and change, and we ought to concentrate on those aspects of the tradition and change that foster peace and equality and

reject fundamentalist interpretations, that reduce religion to truth claims or practices that are considered in absolute terms.

Religious communities can form critical force in societies. This has often been accused of secularization with no proper basis. It is a form of new theological liberation and represents communities' own critical self-reflection. This contributes to practical work as well as to theological considerations. There are at least three levels of interaction in this: among religious communities alone, inter-religious engagement and religious-secular engagement. All the levels of engagement should take place simultaneously in order to truly be critical with own self. Traditionalists' reluctance to critical self-reflection worsens the division between secular and religious spheres.

Though women's participation in churches and peace processes is often regarded as of utmost importance, some attention should also be given to the concept of "new masculinity", as noted in one of the comments to Vuola's presentation. One should not over-generalize men or women, because not all men are in a hegemonic position and not all women are repressed. Therefore intersectional perspective, that takes under consideration all sorts of factors, such as age and wealth. It should be noted, however, that research institutes working on gender studies do, in fact, study both genders, not just women.

Panel Discussion: Does the church hear the prophetic voice for just peace?

Is the church hearing its prophetic voice? The Executive Director of Felm, Rolf Steffansson, thinks that the church as a community is hearing very well, but it is another question to talk about the church as an institution. For example, when the church operates as an excluding hierarchy, is it working according to Jesus Christ's teachings? In the Finnish Church, he views, peace and justice is no longer as central a topic as it once has been. As to what it means to hear, Kassis understands it in terms of unity, as if one part of the body asks another. Hearing is not just listening, but answering as well and hearing one's pain. Nigussu Legesse sees a problem in discrepancy between high level and ground level. We will not necessarily see any change, because there is no hearing of the voices of the churches. Thus, churches should be vocal in order to influence their respective countries. Outi Hänninen wonders why some church leaders are not focusing in participating but recognizes that they might very well be participating in less direct ways, such as building communities.

Where, then, are the panellists coming from and how have their church taken a prophetic stance in a practical level? Kassis views that Palestinian church has very little room to take a stance. First, the low number of Christians in Palestine is a pivotal problem for them, since there are simply too few people to participate effectively. Another challenge is the fact that they have to operate with three authorities: the Palestinian authority, the Israeli government and the church. Threading between them – especially with Israel – makes the work less and less prophetic. However, the prophetic stance can still occur among the believers themselves, as the church amounts to its individual members in the end. Legesse's experience from South Sudan tells a bit different story. There the Protestants and the Catholics are working closely with the grass roots, where many authorities are using tribal relations to their own benefit. Churches are working to bring people together instead.

Steffansson raises Finland's own history of civil war, where the church has had both a negative and positive role. However, as a mission, Felm's basic principle is to base on local level. Felm can facilitate and help the local actors, but the ownership and the activity itself should be with locals. Adding to this, Hänninen emphasized that the Finnish Church can enforce the voices of those, who cannot shout for themselves, and let their narratives become known in all levels.

What are the roles of churches in peace processes? According to Legesse, churches in South Sudan have taken very different paths. The Catholic Church has supported the opposition and the Protestant church has aligned itself with the ruling party in order to further their own position. This polarizes the conflict and asserts an obstacle to peace. Kassis asserts that it is very important that the church should be with the people. Another central aspect is that Palestinians and Israelis do not come together very well. This trace back to actions of the international community after the Second World War, and the international community should also act today to pressure parties towards peace. He urges churches to pressure Israel to comply with international law, since it is the strongest party in the conflict. Steffansson notes that not all contexts are similar, and therefore one should not suppose that one size fits all. Actors in peace processes should be sensitive to the dynamics on the ground. It should also be recognized that peace processes ought to be inclusive and that they take time. In terms of churches' negative role in conflict, the panellists viewed that neutrality should be upheld and hateful and populist voices should be rigorously opposed.

Lastly, the panellists pictured a roadmap for just peace answering questions such as what should be done and what should be taken under consideration so that the international church can do its work. Steffansson would pin context sensitivity as the starting point. Listening to people and siding with the weak are the leading principles in the action. Kassis would prioritize advocating and informing Western churches about the Palestinian issue, since so many have strong preconceptions about the situation. Palestinian Christians are advancing this goal with the *Come and See* project, which welcomes all peoples to visit also the Palestinian side, not just Israel. Also, Kairos Palestine movement has already succeeded to carry message to other churches leading to more toleration for some topics, such as boycotts and the Israeli colonization, as well as concrete positions against the colonization. Legesse regards the Churches' Action Plan for Peace in South Sudan to be the driving initiative in the country. However, problems arise from the fact that security situation in the country is so weak so that people are unable to move around in fear of getting caught in a cross-fire. Another problem is the aforementioned divide between Catholics and Protestants. These issues should be addressed in order to Action Plan for Peace to thrive.

Conclusion

It is important to ask what the role of churches and church members is in promoting peace. Churches, due to their embeddedness in societies, can have a significant role to play in peacebuilding. Churches can create narrative that build unity, but on the other hand these very same narratives may create or enforce exclusion as well. It is important that churches and church members listen and take action for justice and human rights.

As the panellist raised up, there is also a need for reimagining the roles that churches can play, and how they define themselves as actors for peace so that the church can better hear the prophetic voice for just peace.