International Peace Consultations

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How to become a Just Peace Church – Social Change and the Renewal of the Churches through the Spirit of a Just Peace

On a Pilgrimage towards a Just Peace Church in Ecumenical Diversity – Bringing Contexts Together and Networking Them

Dr Agnes Abuom, moderator of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Central Committee

1. We have a come a long way and will not stop.

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other” (Psalm 85:10)

Good afternoon and greetings of peace and blessings, distinguished participants, brothers and sisters.
I want to thank at the outset Rev. Renke Brahms and all organizers for the kind invitation to address this august gathering. It is an important opportunity for me to speak to people who want to explore the question: “How can we become a just peace church?” I am very glad to see that those who planned this conference underline very clearly: This question does not just imply a cognitive response of a few, but rather a transformation of a deeper kind, i.e. social change and the renewal of the churches.

It is indicative that this conference is no longer talking about a concept of just peace, its advantages and dis-advantages and its implications – often in comparison to the century’s old doctrine of just war. This conference dares to speak of the “spirit of just peace” that motivates and moves people with sacred power on their way of justice and peace. Therefore, I see this conference as a milestone on the pilgrimage of justice and peace the delegates of the 2013 Busan assembly of the WCC called for. Taking the spiritual dimension seriously and committing yourself to transformative practice, your conference is part of this larger process and contributes to it.
Let me just briefly recall important moments of this journey, before I come to the kind of intra- and inter-contextual exchange and networking for just peace in the ecumenical movement you asked me to concentrate on. However, remembering how the discourse on “just peace” unfolded reminds us already of the important interplay between impulses of individual churches and the international exchange and dialogue the WCC can facilitate.

We have, indeed, come a long way. It was in 1971 that Robert V. Moss, the second president of the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the USA challenged his church: “We now need to put as much effort into defining a just peace as we have done in the past in defining a just war.” He said this in the context of the protest-movement against the Vietnam War. His church, the UCC, was the first church in the USA and probably worldwide that affirmed in 1985 the UCC to be a just peace church – a model also for others today. Of course, the UCC could draw in their decision on the inspiration, experience and reflections of the historic peace churches and their often costly witness for peace.

Parallel to this process in the UCC, the Vancouver WCC assembly in 1983 declared: “Peace cannot be built on foundations of injustice. Peace requires a new international order based on justice for and within all nations, and respect for the God-given humanity and dignity of every person.” Seven years later the Justice Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) World-Convocation in Seoul affirmed unambiguously: “We are called to seek every possible means of establishing justice, achieving peace and solving conflicts by active non-violence. We will resist doctrines and systems of security based on the use of and deterrence by, all weapons of mass destruction, and military invasions, interventions and occupations….We commit ourselves to practice non-violence in all our personal relationships, to work for the banning of war as a legally recognized means of resolving conflicts and to press governments for the establishment of an international order of peace-making.”

These were the impulses together with the witness of the historic peace churches that led to the call for a Decade to Overcome Violence (DoV) at the 1998 Harare Assembly. Results of the decade were shared with the “Ecumenical Call to Just Peace” that was received by the Busan assembly in 2013. The assembly itself issued a “Statement on the Way to Just Peace”, which includes very concrete recommendations for action for the life of the churches and their advocacy in the public realm.

In the meantime “just peace” has become a topic for research in universities and peace institutes with ever-widening circles involved in the discussion. More recently “just peace” was embraced by the Catholic Pax Christi movement that received inspiring greetings from Pope Francis. We
have come a long way and I can assure you: we will not stop! We will rather broaden participation in the pilgrimage beyond the member churches of the WCC. We will embrace all people of faith and men and women of good will with the resolve to pray and work for just peace.

The Busan assembly made clear that we are no longer discussing concepts and theories, but we are moving forward together, working for just peace through social change and renewal of the churches. On our common journey, the global fellowship of churches needs the contributions of the churches in Germany as much as you need the accompaniment of churches in other regions in shared solidarity and mutual accountability for the enormous task we are up to.

Let us not be naïve or idealistic: Working for just peace, we are confronting strong powers with their self-interests and the readiness to resort to violence when it fits them; we are confronting the reality of sin and evil that sustains unjust structures, undermines solidarity and destroys communities. The Pope recently affirmed the power of evil and sin while addressing new bishops to mission territories, when he said: “the devil has two weapons: but the main one is division, the other is money.” Our common journey for just peace must continue in close contact with each other, in mutual support and accompaniment on the way if we are to make a difference.

2. Just Peace in the Margins: Two case studies of South Sudan and Colombia

“We stayed because we are committed to the ordinary people who are suffering so much” (La Sallian Christian Bill Firman – Australian Brother – 29-08-2016).

I would like to draw your attention to two different regions in the world as case studies for the churches’ action for just peace. I want to look at the churches’ involvement in the search for peace in South Sudan and ecumenical cooperation for peace in Colombia as ongoing tasks.

2.1 South Sudan

While we are meeting here in Berlin, the WCC together with the Lutheran World Federation, Finn Church Aid and the Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative is convening in Geneva a conference on Peace building from below and the role of local civil society in South Sudan. Sudan has been at war with itself since its independence in 1956. The first civil war ended in 1972 with a ceasefire agreement that was brokered with the help of the WCC and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). The parties at war trusted the WCC because of its
involvement in the Programme to Combat Racism. But the different reasons for conflict remained such as foreign interests in oil reserves, diversion of water flows in favour of the North or religious and ethnic differences that could be politically exploited. A second civil war broke out in 1983 that lasted until 2005 when a comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) was signed between the SPLM/SPLA and the Government of Sudan. The CPA provided for a transition period and a referendum by the people of South Sudan to decide whether to become independent or remain as part of Sudan.

During all those years, the churches in the North and South continued to cooperate and to work for unity among the different groups in the South. The Sudan Council of Churches in the North and the New Sudan Council of Churches in the South were supported by the churches and specialized ministries worldwide through the Sudan Ecumenical Forum (SEF) that was founded in 1994 in close cooperation of WCC and All Africa Conference of Churches. Reaching out to all different groups and being able to mobilize international advocacy through the partners, the churches were an important factor pushing for negotiations and peace. You but also the German churches and church-based organizations, have been actively involved in the SEF and the role of the Europe Focal Point Marina Peter is recognized. Through SEF annual conferences are held at Hammensburg, bringing civil society, churches and political actors to share experiences, inform advocacy initiatives and enhance solidarity for peace.

The Sudan Ecumenical Forum and the WCC/AACC Ecumenical Special Envoy to Sudan, Rev. Dr Sam Kobia, continued their international advocacy in the coming years. A moment of hope was the successful independence referendum in the South in 2011. A new government was formed with great expectations for the future. But the tragic reasons for conflict continued to exist. In December 2013 began a civil war in South Sudan that continues until today, despite the Compromise Peace Agreement that was signed in 2015 in the presence of the churches. All parties recognized the churches as factor of reconciliation and unity. It was the churches that constantly advocated for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. The church moved with the people into the bushes and provided basic social services and humanitarian assistance with the support of specialized ministries and caritas related organizations. The churches advocated for corridors of tranquillity to allow for access to humanitarian support and hence the creation of UN Operation Lifeline.

During all those years, the churches stood with the people in solidarity with each other. They developed important initiatives for reconciliation and trauma counselling that no other actor could deliver in the same comprehensive way. If there is hope for overcoming fragmentation and hatred, it is with these initiatives of churches and civil society and the international network of
their partners that accompany and support them. Indeed *peace-building from below with the vision of just peace* is the beacon of hope in the context of competing foreign powers and local politicians that exploit the tensions in their own interests. It is the churches once again that are looked to mediate between the conflicting parties. Churches are engaged both in humanitarian interventions as well as advocacy for peace, dialogue through neutral forums and reconciliation.

### 2.2 Colombia

The context in Colombia is very different. We are witnessing a decisive moment in the peace process. The Central Committee (CC) of the World Council of Churches welcomed the historic bilateral ceasefire agreement concluded by the government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) in Havana on 23 June 2016. The (CC) declared: “As one of the last steps before a full peace agreement is achieved, the conclusion of the Bilateral Ceasefire and Final Cessation of Hostilities agreement is a major landmark on the path to peace in Colombia and the region, after more than a half century of conflict in which an estimated 220,000 people lost their lives and almost 7 million were displaced. In offering the prospect of an end to the longest-running insurgency in the western hemisphere, it is a sign of hope to the whole world.”

The WCC joins the people and churches of Colombia in celebrating this agreement between the government and the largest of the armed opposition groups in Colombia, and in calling for its full and effective implementation. Together with them, we pray and hope that it will create an environment in which the longstanding injustices and unresolved grievances which have fed this conflict can be addressed peacefully and sustainably, and that it will bring to an end the massacres, attacks and threats against human rights defenders and social justice activists, kidnappings, disappearances, torture and other human rights violations that have so marked the country’s history. May God lead the people to repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

During the long civil war, the population has suffered massive oppression, destruction and killings. The Roman Catholic Church, which is the majority church, has sought to mediate in often-dangerous conflict situations. An intervention of Pope Francis came at a critical time of the peace negotiations in Havana. Several churches and organizations formed an ecumenical network, to accompany communities that are victims of social and political violence. The WCC supports and cooperates with churches and civil society representatives, including women peacemakers, in the processes of disarmament monitoring, peace building and reconciliation, and in the construction of a just peace in the country. The general secretary met with Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos on 7 September 2015, who asked for the effective participation of
churches, faith-based organizations and civil society in the remaining phases of the talks between the government and the FARC-EP and the opening of talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), and to accompany the post-agreement process of approval, implementation and verification of compliance.

3. Just peace-making

We could also discuss the Korean Peninsula where the role of the church and German churches are involved. But these two case studies demonstrate the indispensable role of the local churches. The ecumenical commitment to unity among the churches in a conflict situation anticipates the possibility for dialogue and cooperation of deeply divided communities and camps. The capacity to move beyond the dividing lines requires the commitment for just peace as common vision and value base by the local churches and the readiness to recognize the human dignity of the other. Non-violent approaches give the different actors the necessary space to repent and to change in the interest of life and survival of all. Trauma counselling that the churches can undertake is a critical first step for any process of reconciliation and the healing of memories.

Crossing boundaries between communities that see each other as enemies, naming the obstacles to peace, speaking truth to power, confronting those who fuel conflicts in their self-interests, and advocacy for just peace often involve risks. Church leaders are easily accused of lack of loyalty to the community, collaboration with the enemy etc., if they are working together across the conflict lines. Sometimes they have to face imprisonment or are even killed. Despite such threats, those who are ready to take such risks or are just not willing to compromise their own humanity in the conflict are often women or people at the margins of the society – with very important exceptions of outstanding leaders.

The risks people take calls for accompaniment and solidarity by the churches worldwide. But there are also other reasons for ecumenical presence. It is often easier for churches who find the communities they belong to on different sides of the conflict to ask a trusted third party for facilitating dialogue and cooperation for peace. The WCC has played this role of a facilitator in both of the cases. Setting up an ecumenical forum comprised of representatives of local churches, civil society and representatives of accompanying partners as a common and participatory table of all actors involved has proven to be a very helpful tool. The forum functions as a safe space for shared analysis of the situation, dialogue and shared strategizing on how best to advocate for peace. Dialogue and advocacy is required with:

- the broader church membership as the basis of the churches’ credibility and legitimacy,
- civil society in the country and abroad,
- leadership of fighting parties, and
- governments of foreign countries that have a stake in the conflict or support negotiations.

As a basis for faith based and people’s diplomacy, networking among the various faith based peace movements and peace services is indispensable. Visiting programmes of ecumenical accompaniers can be very significant tools (as demonstrated by the EAPPI initiative).

Such processes require the kind of networking and presence in national and international contexts, the WCC can muster as a fellowship of churches worldwide. At times it is important to approach members of the UN Security Council. The WCC has also access to relevant UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council, the High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Health Organization, UNICEF or others who are involved in many ways in humanitarian aid and other measures to address the often destructive and deadly consequences of a crises or a war.

Researchers have shared important insights in the processes of de-escalation, communication, mediation and reconciliation between parties in conflict with each other and we have learned from them. Very popular are the “ten ways of peace-making” proposed by the late Glen H. Stassen and other scholars. They reflect – also with their Biblical basis in the Gospel - in many ways ecumenical practice although they still show a pre-dominantly Northern context of the discourse:

- support nonviolent direct action;
- take independent initiatives to reduce threat;
- use cooperative conflict resolution;
- acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice, and seek repentance and forgiveness;
- advance democracy, human rights, and interdependence;
- foster just and sustainable economic development;
- work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system;
- strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights;
- reduce offensive weapons and weapons trade; and
- encourage grassroots peace-making groups and voluntary association.
Of course, there is no way for applying generalized recipes. Imposing concepts, ideas and values from another context will not be appreciated and will not help on the ground because every local context follows its own dynamics, has its own stories and wounds, but also promises and opportunities that need to be identified and shared as resources for peace-making. But sharing best practices may facilitate an inquiry into an appropriate migration of these lessons into other contexts.

In addition to the ten ways of peace-making, the need for the presence of UN or African Union or sub regional IGAD or ECOWAS peace-keeping forces for monitoring and supporting ceasefire agreements and peace accords cannot be denied in many cases. At best, such presence anticipates the task of “just-policing”. At worst, it can be a cover for powerful foreign interests. Both were extensively discussed in the ecumenical movement in the context of the debate on the “responsibility to protect”, a debate which must continue within the churches and to input to UN, regional and national governmental bodies.

The closer we come to the specific root causes of conflict, we notice the interplay between the impact of foreign powers and changing global realities such as economic globalization, migration and climate change with local dynamics, which are often marked by the unresolved trauma and poisoned memories of previous conflicts in the area. Healing of memories is perhaps what all human beings share across the regions because individuals, communities, nations and regions carry with them a wounded history. Just peace making calls us to acknowledge, accept and address our wounded histories within our specific contexts. Because in most parts of the world people have deep spiritual roots, churches with their rituals and symbols have specific ways to address and influence the interplay of unreconciled memories, prejudices, enemy images and the actual conflict for power, economic influence and control of resources often coupled with unequal access to political, economic and surely military power. International solidarity has played time and again a critical role in supporting the weaker parties in a conflict in their quest for a reliable basis for negotiations.

Such positive assessment of the role of religion is seriously called into question by religious extremism and terrorism using religious motives to justify destructive violence. When speaking to church representatives in the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, the UN special rapporteur for the freedom of religion, Prof. Heiner Bielefeldt, urged the churches to make a clear distinction between reductionist religion that lends itself to support totalitarian ideologies of religious extremism and terrorism, and the rich potential of religion with a strong commitment to the flourishing of life in justice and peace.
In the face of terrorist violence it is very important that we expose the first and stand unambiguously for the second. The history of terrorism in the 20th century shows that similar totalitarian ideologies can be constructed on the basis of ethnic identities, political convictions or reductionist religions. It makes little difference for the concrete development of the conflicts and terrorist actions taken whether violent attacks are pursued in the name of religion, ideology or ethnicity. The German scholar Andreas Hasenclever makes this point very convincingly in his publications.

4. Joining a pilgrimage of justice and peace

In view of the root causes of conflict and war and the complex ways towards peace, it is necessary to broaden the scope beyond the 10 steps of just peace-making I have quoted before. The Ecumenical Call to Just Peace and the Statement on the Way of Just Peace offer a more holistic and inclusive vision of just peace in community, with the earth, in the marketplace, and among the nations. The ecumenical movement must work with such a broader vision of just peace. This was at the heart of the discussion on “just peace” or “peace with justice” before and during the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in 2011 in Kingston, Jamaica.

I think people in Germany and in fact all over Europe and North America do understand the sensitivity and resistance of others against hegemonic political, economic and military power in the world, which is aggravated by the fact that in many cases the reconciliation of memories concerning the colonial past and racism was not pursued in decisive ways. Similar dynamics complicate the human rights discourse and practice. The more important it is, that the pilgrimage of justice and peace offers a new framework to renew and broaden dialogue and cooperation among churches, faith-based organizations and others.

The WCC published recently a brochure as: An invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace. Let me conclude with a couple of paragraphs from this publication:

Seeking peace with justice – a “just peace” – extends the historic ecumenical quest for Christian unity. “The unity of the church in its koinonia may have something to offer to a world that is rapidly disintegrating...It should never have been a question of either unity or justice. It should have been a case of ‘both...and’. It was God who indeed loved the world [and] set the agenda for the church...”

The latter is a quote from the former Archbishop of Cape Town and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Desmond Tutu – one of the outstanding leaders I referred to earlier. The brochure continues:
Biblically grounded, just peace envisions a state of authentic and sustainable relationships with God and in the word: just peace in communities, among nations and peoples, in economic relations and with nature itself. “Just peace is a journey into God’s purpose for humanity and all creation, trusting that God will ‘guide our feet into way of peace’ (Luke 1:79)” (“Ecumenical Call to Just Peace”)

It is good to be with you and so many others on the ways of justice and peace, discovering God’s own pilgrimage of justice and peace for the fullness of life of all. Each generation has its challenges and its chances. Ours is to work to become just peace churches remembering that peace cannot be bought, neither is it a standalone event. It is a process. Healing of memories is perhaps what we all as human beings share across the regions because individuals, communities, nations and regions carry with them a wounded history. Just peace making calls us to acknowledge, accept and address our wounded histories within their specific contexts.

Thank you very much for your attention.