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**The Commitment of the Church to the Quest of a Just Peace  
An African Perspective**

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How should the church in Africa view the conflict in the Middle East? What contribution can it offer to transform the conflict into a lasting peace that comes with human dignity and integrity?

I should start by defining the two key words in this paper. According to *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, the church is primarily understood as a worshipping assembly called forth by God.<sup>1</sup> The *New Bible Dictionary* understands peace as deriving from the Old Testament Hebrew word *shalom*, which means completeness, soundness and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Peace is a state of healing and wholeness that brings human beings to completeness spiritually, mentally and physically. From this we may derive the following understanding.

**The church is a caring, nurturing and worshipping place**

According to the Christian faith, the church starts at home. It is important for the family to uphold its core responsibility of being a church for its family members before they gather with the larger community. It is when the family becomes a church that it is empowered through faith to overcome the trying moments of conflict and lack of peace and act accordingly.

“The church lives in the world as a human enterprise, but it is also a called and redeemed people of God. It is a people of God who are created by the Spirit to live as a missionary community. As such, the church is both a social organization and a spiritual community.”<sup>3</sup> The church as a caring community is rooted in God’s care for us: “Human care and community are made possible because of our being held in God’s memory; therefore, as members of a caring community we express our caring analogically with the caring of God by also hearing and remembering.”<sup>4</sup>

The church is unique. As church, people of God are called by the Spirit and guided to be in relationship with other people and the whole creation. The church is a community on earth representing the presence of God in tending and caring for creation. This is the basic responsibility of each church member; and it begins in the family, then in the community.

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<sup>1</sup> “Church”, in Allan Richardson and John Bowden, *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> “Peace”, in J.D. Douglas et al., *New Bible Dictionary*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit*, Baker Book House Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> John Patton, *Pastoral Care in Context: An Introduction to Pastoral Care*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1999, p. 6.

The first responsibility is to nurture the faith through prayer, reading the word of God, worship, service and witness. The Christian family as a group of believers has a role to play in transforming society. It has to look for the ways it can be helpful and supportive to its members. This is the love Jesus Christ gave the church: “I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another” (John 15:17).

### **The church is a learning place**

When the worshipping community comes together, there is a lot to be learned through sharing stories and life experiences in faith. Teaching and learning are important parts of the great commission where Jesus speaks to the church “Go therefore make disciples...baptize and teach them...”(Mt. 28:16-20)

What is to be taught or learned? The church ought to teach the basic meaning of the Christian faith and how Christians are to live it out daily in the world from which they have been called out and to which they are sent back for mission. Teaching about God’s abundant love and life (John 10:10) should be geared towards bringing the good news to the poor and contrite in heart (Luke 4:18). Through an empathetic heart, the church should help the people to wrestle with the question, “Where is God in this difficult situation?” How can the good news make real sense to them at difficult times?

Education concerning health, economic and social questions is important. This includes the right interpretation of scripture, socio-economic and political questions, and the associated effects of anger, conflict, depression and lack of peace. Dialogue and education are needed about the harmful practices perpetrated and justified by an appeal to tradition, culture, and power dynamics. Careful attention needs to be given to the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of each one. This is what it means to be a church called to witness to the world, advocate for peace and justice, and work for transformation.

### **Transforming human relationships**

In relational theology, we believe that God has entered into time and space for the sake of a dynamic relationship with human beings and with the whole creation. Humanity is a vital partner with God in caring for creation. The growth and continuity of family, community, church and the whole world is entrusted into the hands of human beings who are created in God’s image and as such called to be co-creators with God. To be in relationship with God demands that we be in good relationship with other human beings and the rest of creation.

The being of God is a relational being. Therefore, humanity is created in the image of God who has mutually chosen to relate and share the power with that which is not God. God of creation narrative is imaged as one who is creating and chooses to share power in relationship.<sup>5</sup>

This relationship creates an awareness of human beings created with dignity and integrity—a character that is exclusively human. Evil and shameful actions in the name of system, culture, tradition, power or powerlessness diminish one’s sense of human personality, and thus the person loses his or her dignity and integrity.

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<sup>5</sup> Terence Freitheim, *God and the World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 2005, p. 17.

### **Building human relationships: echoes from Africa (ubunthu or umunthu)**

“I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>6</sup> This common saying in Africa serves as a tool for understanding African ontology, anthropology, philosophy, religion and relational theology. Although these principles are employed mostly to explain kinship and community philosophy, religion, and culture, they could be extended to the historical and cosmic interrelatedness of human beings. This interrelatedness is elaborated by Musopole as “ontological/life relationally, that is foundational to personal, communal, historical, and cosmic consciousness of African people.”<sup>7</sup>

Africans look at the universe in a religious way because they believe it is created and sustained by God. Hence they explain and interpret their life’s experience from this standpoint. This also helps to explain the relationship between God and God’s creation on one hand, and among creatures themselves on the other. Since they are all interrelated, the African universe is a wholeness, a living unity of both spiritual and material world.<sup>8</sup>

The life relationship is expressed in a holistic way of knowing, as life cognition. This includes rationality, feelings, faith, doubt, imagination, consciousness, wisdom, and all experiences and aims at the totality of impressions and expressions. In this life cognition, more than one type of logic operates. There are multiple logical systems operating relationally in different ways and at different levels. This logical multiplicity is made meaningful only by viewing human consciousness in a cultural context.<sup>9</sup>

The multiplicity of knowledge and experience is important because life is always dynamic and not static, it is complex and in the state of becoming. So becoming fully human is an ongoing process throughout an individual’s life (life cycle), rooted in a multidimensional relationship among individuals, community and with the creator.

In any community, each individual becomes a centre of integration, communicating the experiences and gifts each owns for the sake of the whole community. This does not apply only to individuals. The whole community is supposed to act humanely and move towards the goal of realizing a good family, village and community. The whole process aims at achieving harmony, mutuality, and relationship among individuals and communities working together to fight the powers of evil that threaten this harmony.

An African doctrine of Christian anthropology takes into account the cultural, social-economic, political, and historical understanding of humanity in addition to the biblical narrative stories in order to formulate a relevant doctrine that will shape the psycho-spiritual, religious and socio-political-economic attitudes and practice of African Christians in particular, and the African public in general, presently and in the immediate future.<sup>10</sup>

Most African Christians affirm that by virtue of being created by God, all human beings are children of God. That is to say, a human being has a double relationship with God: being a creature and a child. This is basically the biblical concept of the human being created by and in the image of God (Genesis 1 and 2).

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<sup>6</sup> John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann Educational Publishers, Oxford, 1990, p. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine C. Musopole, *Being Human in Africa: Towards an African Christian Anthropology*, Peter Lang, New York, 1994, p. 173.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea M. Ng’weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human: The Quest for Christo-theological Anthropology in Africa*, Peter Lang, New York, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Musopole, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> Musopole, p. 176.

A human being is a person in community and within the community. “One is not human simply by birth. Rather, one becomes human through a progressive process of integration in society.”<sup>11</sup> Living responsibly out of the integration of one’s humanness in all spheres of life and thus contributing to the development and harmony in the cosmos is the desired goal.

“To be human is to accept one’s ethics, cultural, and historical identity as a gift from God and a communal contribution to the mosaic of ethnicities and cultures in the world in the spirit of openness, tolerance, and appreciation of what is different.”<sup>12</sup> While many societies tend to be ethnocentric, the gospel of the new humanity in Christ calls for removal of the dividing walls of hostility, conflict, violence and abuse and the creation of one human society. According to Christian ethics, the dividing walls bring about dehumanization, discrimination, and marginalization of the powerless, taking away their identity and making them landless, culturally uprooted and homeless.

Christian relational theology believes that God is the creator of everything that exists. God is the creator, owner, and sustainer of life. Life has to be understood as a gift from God and needs to be protected and cherished through maintaining equity and justice in order to live in harmony with all creation. “And the humanity is called as beneficiary of life to live in harmony with the creation by obeying the natural laws, moral and mystical forces.”<sup>13</sup> Promoting interrelationship is vital, starting from the family level.

This perspective encourages the belief that a true human being is the one who seeks to live in harmony with others and promotes justice, equality and respect for each member of the community.

### **Transforming the culture**

Culture tells us who we are, what we know and how we do things. Culture explains a people’s way of life. In every community there are culturally embedded beliefs and practices that mark identity and guard social norms. For a culture to serve the community, it needs to support and nurture its members.

Conflict remains unresolved when the parties in conflict fall back on their unchanged cultural identity where they feel secure and comfortable. When the cultural values and norms of one party are threatened by the other, the only way is then to eliminate the other person by force or by violent actions and practices. In Africa this is seen, for example, in gender inequality, power dynamics and related practices.

In contextualizing the gospel into any culture, the church will also transform the culture. Appropriate contextualization demands that the church address cultural and traditional questions by including the voices of the marginalized. In an intercultural context such as Africa or the Middle East, counselling and care has to include all four traditional pastoral functions: healing, sustaining, guiding and reconciling.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Lartey lists nurturing, liberating and empowering. Nurturing is a continuous process for human beings in every stage of life; liberating raises awareness of injustice persisting in our systems; and empowering calls for community action.

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<sup>11</sup> Ng’weshemi, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Musopole, p. 181.

<sup>13</sup> Christine Mbeya Mabonzo, *A Liberation Theology of Being Muntu from an African Woman’s Perspective: A Comparative Study of Thomas Aquinas’ Theology of Being and African Worldview*, PhD Dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, CA, 2003, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2003).

## **Transformation through advocacy for justice and equality**

Justice is a key point in peacemaking and reconciliation. The world's political and socioeconomic systems have done many injustices to many people, especially to women, children and the marginalized. Conflicts in many parts of the world, including the Middle East, are the result of cultural, political or socioeconomic systems where the most powerful act unjustly.

Justice brings peace. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6: 8). God wants the people to remember the saving acts through which God has shown fidelity to the covenant. God does not need sacrifices, especially when they pretend to substitute for more basic social and religious duties. External rites are valid only when they are expressions of internal convictions, and not empty and meaningless rituals. God is served through an inner religious life made manifest through humility before God and mercy towards one's neighbour. Justice involves judging one's self. God wants self-sacrifice through a life of justice, so that no person is victimized. This is one of the basic teachings of the Christian church.

In Galatians, Paul speaks of the unity and equality that can be attained only if we are in Christ. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). This implies that Christ's death as a means of salvation excludes all discrimination. Faith in Christ creates one community that is not divided by ethnicity or gender or social traditions such as circumcision. Baptism and faith in Christ constitute the unity. This has to begin in the family and then move to the community setting.

Unless injustice is corrected, ways to resolve or transform conflict in our world are illusions. Doing justice involves holding the unjust systems and those who support them accountable to the violation of God's image and the violation of social, moral and ecological values. The church needs to ensure that justice is done.

## **Transformation through forgiveness and healing**

Christian love means that Christians hold forgiveness and healing as core religious values. The teachings of Jesus epitomize the importance of self-giving love, reaching out to others in care and compassion. This is to manifest itself even in loving one's enemies and forgiving other people, just as God forgives each of us for our mistakes and wrongdoing.

Conflict and lack of peace inflict many wounds on communities and individuals in the community. Some wounds are deep and form scars in the hearts of many. There is a need to bring healing through reconciliation and forgiveness and working for the future of the generations to come.

"Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with a real situation helps to bring real healing."<sup>15</sup>

Through the pain and suffering brought on by the conflict, there are laments, cursing, frustration, broken and wounded hearts. Worship is a living reminder that God is at the centre of healing, and those who are wounded are healed and reconciled. In the celebration of the eucharistic meal,

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<sup>15</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Image Doubleday, New York, 1999, p. 16.

members are empowered to forgive each other and renew their vision in ministry. As the church brings the community together for a common purpose through corporate worship, music and scripture, there comes a transformation to a resurrected life.

In worship also each member is regarded as a sinner in God's eyes and needs forgiveness. It is in this spirit that members are able to face and embrace one another. A biblical example is the Genesis story of Esau and Jacob forgiving and reconciling and being able to face one another.

Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming... He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept... Jacob said, "...truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God..." (Gen. 33: 1,3-4,10)

In worship people are also encouraged to share their blessings and gifts as the Spirit has blessed them. These gifts include sharing the empowering stories and experiences of their lives. These stories become narratives about the healing God in the community of faith, and the power of faith in the healing God is affirmed. Healing occurs because people who had lost hope are validated and helped to see God again. Once they meet the triune God, they are healed and forgiven and are able to forgive themselves and their loved ones and face the future with hope. The problem of their hearts is solved by Jesus' powerful words "Your sins are forgiven."

Grassroots communities need assistance in understanding themselves, empowerment for action, and adjustment to the demands of their relationships as they transit from injustice to peace and harmony. This will create new opportunities to address conflict and advocate for a just peace from a personal, relational, structural and cultural-contextual perspective.

Biblical hope is grounded in the knowledge of God's justice. It is the confident expectation of a better future, living faithfully in harmony and peace in a diverse but unified world in Christ. God is the source of justice and peace, and we are called to be in partnership with God by advocating for justice and peace in the world. This is our vocation in mission, our commitment as the church to the quest of a just peace.